High-Level Panel on Digital Cooperation

Project Connect: A data-driven approach to identify gaps in access to connectivity and promote collaboration to reduce the gaps

Digital technologies have the potential to create opportunities to accelerate sustainable development and provide financial, educational, and health resources to the world's most vulnerable populations. However, at the moment, there are deep inequalities in access to technology and digital products, the lack of which further deepens inequalities. According to the World Economic Forum, nearly 4 billion people remain unconnected from technology and digital products that could dramatically improve - or even save - their lives.

This inequality of opportunity and choice is an impediment to improving the lives of many but is in particular harmful for children who run the risk of being left behind in comparison to their peers. **UNICEF sees here an opportunity for the international community, academia and the private sector to make a concerted effort to connect those without access to technology** and provide the rapidly growing global population of adolescents and young people - which will reach 2 billion by 2030 - with the information and skills needed for the workforce and empower them to shape the future they want.

Digital connectivity is a fundamental component necessary to make digital goods globally available and accessible. There are multiple initiatives, strategies and policies that bring together stakeholders from the public and private sector, non-profit and international organizations to join efforts to reduce the digital divide. **To facilitate and coordinate these multi-stakeholder partnerships and promote digital collaboration, UNICEF proposes "Project Connect", a data-driven approach to identify gaps in access to connectivity and promote investments to reduce the gaps and increase coverage**. Using schools as a proxy for communities, Project Connect is a platform that shows community-level connectivity globally (https://www.projectconnect.world/). The platform:

- **Allows governments and other partners to map school connectivity in their countries**
- **Enables a set of commitments from partners to eliminate the digital divide**
- **Facilitates governments and other partners access to funding mechanisms and other resources necessary to provide connectivity**

The platform has already shown the ability to connect data to action. As an example, in Kyrgyzstan, UNICEF and the government worked together to create a countrywide map of educational facilities. As of March 2017, only 30% of schools in Kyrgyzstan were connected to the Internet. **Thanks to Project Connect, the government has committed to connect the remaining schools by the end of the**

2018-2019 school year. Internet connectivity will not only support children's access to education and 21st-century skills, but it will also support the government's programme aimed at the digital transformation of the Kyrgyz Republic towards a sustainable economy, smart society, and more transparent governance.

UNICEF has worked with a diverse range of partners, including governments, MNOs and technology companies to create the initial mapping in 9 countries, collecting data for more than 500,000 schools - with connectivity data for more than 125,000 of them. However, **widening the reach of Project Connect to other countries requires further collaboration between different UN entities, industries and sectors. UNICEF is therefore looking for partners to help us scale the work to understand connectivity gaps at a global scale and use the platform as a mechanism to increase the access to digital goods** that have the potential to accelerate sustainable development goals.