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COVID-19 Pushing More Government Activities Online Despite Persistent Digital Divide, Annual E-Government Survey Finds

NEW YORK, 10 July (Department of Economic and Social Affairs) — As the COVID-19 pandemic forces lockdowns, most countries and municipalities are pursuing digital government strategies — many with innovative initiatives — but vast numbers of people still do not have access to online services, according to the 2020 edition of the United Nations E-Government Survey, released today.

Leading the 2020 ranking of the 193 United Nations Member States in terms of digital Government — which captures the scope and quality of online services, status of telecommunication infrastructure and existing human capacity — are Denmark, the Republic of Korea and Estonia, followed by Finland, Australia, Sweden, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, the United States, the Netherlands, Singapore, Iceland, Norway and Japan.

Among the world's least developed countries, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Cambodia have become leaders in digital government development, advancing from the middle to the high E-Government Development Index (EGDI) group in 2020. Mauritius, the Seychelles and South Africa are leading the e-government ranking in Africa. Overall, 65 per cent of Member States are at the high or very high EGDI level.

"The pandemic has renewed and anchored the role of digital government — both in its conventional delivery of digital services as well as new innovative efforts in managing the crisis," said Liu Zhenmin, United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs.

In responding to the current health emergency, Governments have put in place new tools, such as dedicated COVID-19 information portals, hackathons, e-services for supply of medical goods, virtual medical appointments, self-diagnosis apps and e-permits for curfews. Many countries were quick to deploy tracking and tracing apps, and apps for working and learning from home.

Innovative digital government responses to COVID-19 include online dashboards in Canada and Australia to share information and track emergency responses. In China, chatbots are used to assess patients' risk of being infected. A community engagement app in Estonia allowed local governments to directly interact with their constituents, including by sharing COVID-19 information, posting photos and videos and even organizing virtual events. In Croatia, a "virtual doctor" is powered by artificial intelligence and developed by technology firms in cooperation with epidemiologists. In London, the use of cameras, sensors and artificial intelligence algorithms — normally intended to control traffic — now measures distance between pedestrians to control social distance.

E-Government progress still hindered by digital divide

As a development tool, the E-Government Survey examines countries' strengths, challenges and opportunities, and informs policies and strategies. The 2020 edition found that progress has been made across all regions, even in the least developed countries. Over 22 per cent of countries were promoted to higher levels of e-government development.

"While e-government rankings tend to correlate with the income level of a country, financial resources are not the only critical factor in advancing digital government," said Mr. Zhenmin. "A country's political will, strategic leadership and commitment to advance digital services can improve its comparative ranking."

Yet, despite the gains and major investments in e-government by many countries, the digital divide persists. Seven out of eight countries with low scores are in Africa and belong to the least developed countries group. The regional average index scores for countries in Africa are almost one third lower (at 0.3914) than the world average EGDI of 0.60.

Alongside these trends, the COVID-19 pandemic has not only reinvigorated the role of digital Government in its conventional delivery of public services and in ensuring business continuity, but has also brought about innovative ways of managing the crisis, such as in contact tracing, e-health, online learning, and remote working.

About the United Nations E-Government Survey

The United Nations E-Government Survey, published by the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, is prepared over a two-year period following an established methodology. It looks at how digital government can facilitate integrated policies and services across 193 United Nations Member States. The Survey supports countries' efforts to provide effective, accountable and inclusive digital services to all and to bridge the digital divide and leave no one behind.

In the report of the Secretary-General's High-level Panel on Digital Cooperation, the E-Government Survey is recognized as a key ranking, mapping and measuring tool, supporting the digital transformation of countries.

Following the global launch of the 2020 Survey on 10 July, technical webinars are scheduled to share further insights and key findings at the global, regional and local levels, including on thematic areas such as e-participation, data governance and capacities for digital transformation. Regional information sessions will be held in the following months in collaboration with United Nations Regional Commissions.

In addition to the English edition, the Survey will also be made available in Arabic, Chinese, Russian and Spanish, thanks to the collaboration with external partners.

Additional information on the United Nations E-Government Survey and the schedule of its launch activities can be found at: bit.ly/EGovernmentSurvey (https://bit.ly/EGovernmentSurvey), #EGovernmentSurvey.

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