Statement by Dr. Mohammed Loutfy representing the Stakeholder Group of Persons with Disabilities for the in-person informal consultations on the Global Digital Compact with Member States and Observers
Monday, 12 February 2024

Excellencies and distinguished guests, I am Mohammed Loutfy, Director of Advocacy and Capacity Building for G3ict, the Global Initiative for Inclusive Information and Communication Technologies, and I am here today in my capacity as the co-chair of the Stakeholder Group of Persons with Disabilities.

The purpose of my communication is to answer the questions asked by the co-facilitators of the Global Digital Compact in light of the digital inclusion of persons with disabilities.

Question 1: How can a shared vision on global digital cooperation be reflected in the Compact?

More than one billion persons, or fifteen per cent of the world population, live with disabilities out of which two-third with severe disabilities. A demographic group that cuts across all segments of society, such as women, youth, and the fast-growing population of older persons. Persons with disabilities are disproportionally excluded from mainstream economic and social activities, with high unemployment among adults, lower education levels and poverty. Such situation will worsen if our digital world is inaccessible, affecting their rights and creating an irreducible obstacle to achieving the SDGs.

Let me explain: In our digital world, unless accessibility standards are respected with appropriate design, persons with disabilities are unable to access essential digital contents, online services, web sites, televisions, e-books, ATM machines, and everything digital. For instance, unintended barriers affect a large majority of web sites worldwide, limiting the digital interactions of users with disabilities in perceiving, understanding and interacting with their digital content. These barriers affect persons with visual disabilities, persons who are deaf or hard of hearing, persons with physical, dexterity, speech, intellectual, or neurologic disabilities.

To achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, safeguard human rights, and ensure an inclusive, open, safe, and secure digital future for 1.2 billion persons with disabilities, a shared vision on global digital cooperation must include digital accessibility and Universal Design. In doing so, the Global Digital Compact will fulfill the promises of Article 9 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) on "Accessibility" which explicitly sets obligations for the accessibility of information and communication technologies. We thus strongly recommend referencing the CRPD, the eight Human Rights Treaty, ratified today by 186 countries and its dispositions on Accessibility and Reasonable Accommodation in the Preamble of the Global Digital Compact.

Question 2: What are the principles for cooperation to include in the Global Digital Compact?

Regarding principles of cooperation, the good news is that solutions to make digital products and services accessible exist. The bad news is that they are not implemented systematically, most often due to the lack of awareness about digital accessibility barriers and existing solutions. Therefore, a key

principle of cooperation should be established to promote multi-stakeholder participation, where persons with disabilities should be involved in decision-making regarding digital accessibility policies, programs, guidelines, and standards on all levels.

Question 3: What themes should be addressed in a forward-looking Compact? How can the GDC advance cooperation on AI to harness opportunities and manage risks?

During previous consultations, my organization, G3ict, submitted the results of a recent survey that it conducted in 137 countries in collaboration with organizations of persons with disabilities. This survey identifies global gaps in countries' capacity to implement digital accessibility which can serve as a framework to prioritize themes.

Question 4: What commitments, actions and deliverables could the Global Digital Compact include to strengthen digital cooperation?

It is important to note that digital accessibility is proactively embraced by leading technology companies and a growing number of organizations offering digital products and services. Thus, promoting digital accessibility harmonization and standards to further global economies of scale and lower costs of solutions is highly desirable. Innovations by the technology sector over the past two decades have deeply transformed and helped improve the lives of persons with disabilities when economically available, particularly mobile technologies and AI based solutions such as speech recognition.

To maintain the momentum of supporting these efforts through multi-stakeholder cooperation is an opportunity that cannot be missed by the Global Digital Compact. Consensus based guidelines to mainstream digital accessibility in all sectors of society, referencing existing good practices, can be included in a section on digital accessibility addressing:

- awareness raising about digital accessibility in all sectors
- level playing rules for the implementation of digital accessibility by the private sector and civil society, government entities, and across the education sector
- public procurement accessibility policies for digital products and services
- processes to foster digital accessibility standardization and harmonization
- availability and promotion of assistive technologies
- support of innovation and education on digital accessibility

Question 5: What follow up is required to support Compact implementation and deliver on commitments? What mechanisms might be harnessed, including to avoid duplication, in support of follow up?

It is paramount importance to promote economies of scale as well as digital accessibility harmonization and standardization in cooperation with all stakeholders involved including standard development organizations. It would also be beneficial to foster multi-stakeholder cooperation in new areas of technology that can be scaled up such as Artificial Intelligence, mobile and wearable technologies, broadband and cloud-based solutions. To this end, and to avoid duplication of efforts, a global

consultative process involving existing stakeholders and initiatives may be setup post-Summit of the Future for the advancement of digital accessibility.

Our request today is for the opening of a dialogue between the co-facilitators of the Global Digital Compact and our stakeholder group to explore how to best contribute the above considerations to its zero draft.