

Call for proposals

Government policy interventions for leveraging digital economies for inclusive and sustainable development in Asia and the Pacific

(deadline for application: 25 May 2021)

1. Objective

The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) is implementing a China-funded project on science, technology and innovation (STI) for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). As part of the implementation of the project, ESCAP is seeking a research consultant¹ to carry out a study on government policy interventions for leveraging digital economies for inclusive and sustainable development in Asia and the Pacific.

The outcome of the study will be a Guidebook for policymakers working on digital economy government policies, as well as other relevant stakeholders, in Asia and the Pacific. The Guidebook should include discussions and recommendations on what governments could do – in terms of policy – to ensure that digital economies are inclusive (e.g. engage the poor, rural communities, women and girls) and how government policies could shape the objectives of other stakeholders in digital economies (e.g. the private sector) to contribute to inclusive and sustainable digital economies.

A consultancy budget of **up to USD 15,000** is available for the study. Research proposals will be assessed based on value for money and appropriate budgeting standards based on the research objectives.

2. Background

The COVID-19 pandemic's devastating impact is reaching every corner of the world. Accelerated digital transformation has been one of the key features of the pandemic. For example, during the pandemic, digital technology solutions have been supporting governments to implement social protection schemes at pace and scale, and supporting businesses to continue to operate and trade.

¹ The candidate(s) to do the study can be a think tank, a group of experts, academia or private sector. Please consult with ESCAP project team on eligibility.

However, ensuring that the digital transformation happening all around us does not become yet another facet of the deep inequalities of the countries of Asia and the Pacific is now probably one of the greatest challenges we face as countries start to rebuild. Inclusion must be at the heart of digital economies and the accompanying digital policies if the promise to “leave no one behind” is to be met.

While the fight against the pandemic is still ongoing, countries in the region are also aiming to recover and build back better. Going forward, the SDGs must continue to be the compass. With this in mind, the key question is how to ensure that government policy interventions on digital economy pave the way to achieve the SDGs and be more inclusive to leave no one behind.

3. Expected structure of the guidebook

3.1 Scope of discussion

The research is primarily targeted at policymakers in charge of policy making on the topic of digital economy in Asia and the Pacific. Discussions should be relevant to the ESCAP member states (the list of ESCAP member states is available at <https://www.unescap.org/about/member-states>).

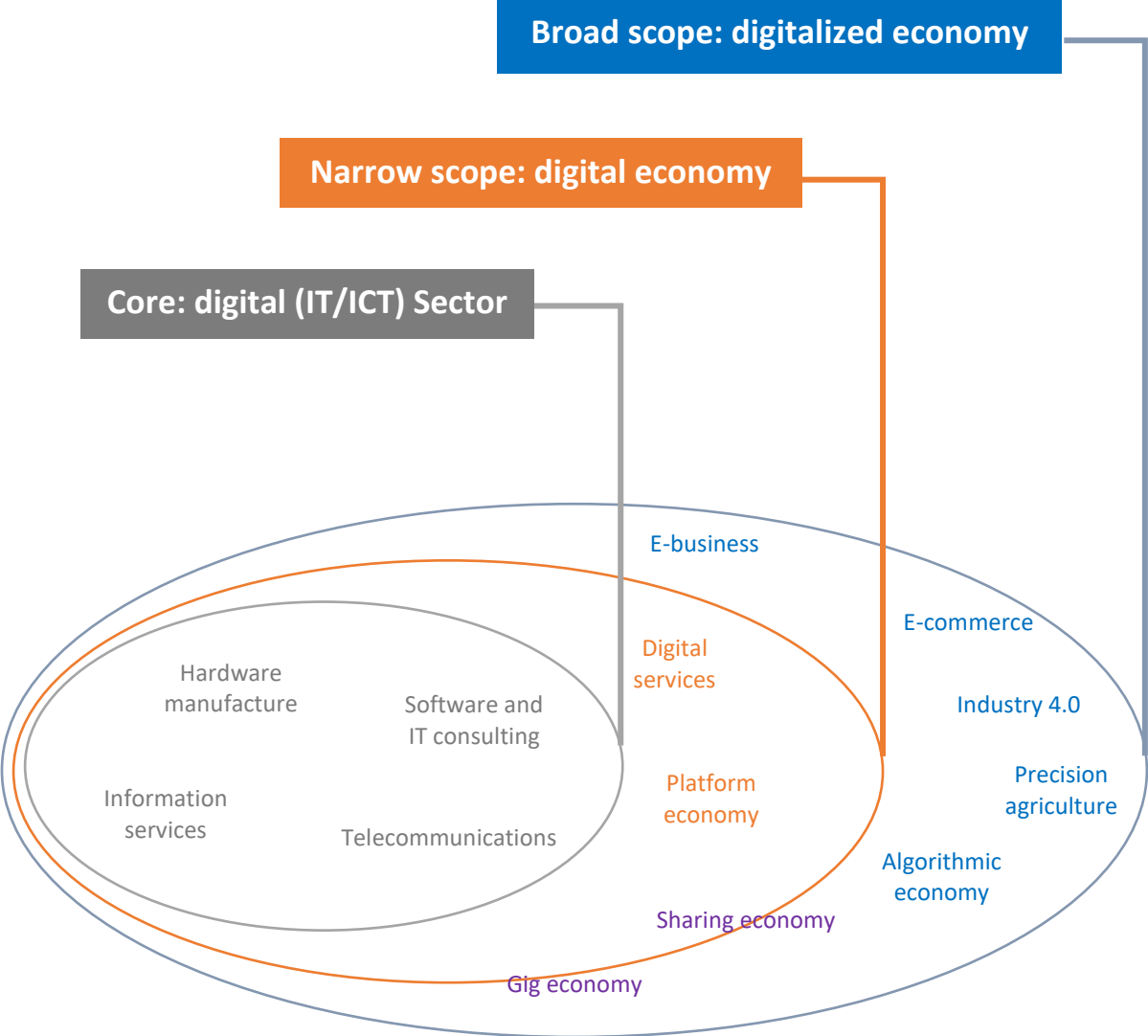
Given the broad coverage of the SDGs, it is envisaged that the study will be focused on inclusive development and provide policy options to engage groups of people such as the poor, women, and MSMEs in digital economies. In this connection, SDGs 1, 5, 8, 9 and 17 may be the focus of discussion. In particular, the following specific SDGs may be relevant.

- Goal 1.4 By 2030, ensure that all men and women, in particular the poor and the vulnerable, have equal rights to economic resources, as well as [...], appropriate new technology and financial services, including microfinance.
- Goal 1.b Create sound policy frameworks at the national, regional and international levels, based on pro-poor and gender-sensitive development strategies, to support accelerated investment in poverty eradication actions.
- Goal 5.b Enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology, to promote the empowerment of women.
- Goal 8.3 Promote development-oriented policies that support productive activities, decent job creation, entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation, and encourage the formalization and growth of micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises, including through access to financial services.
- Goal 9.b Support domestic technology development, research and innovation in developing countries, including by ensuring a conducive policy environment for, inter alia, industrial diversification and value addition to commodities.
- Goal 17.6 Enhance North-South, South-south and triangular regional and international cooperation on and access to science, technology and innovation and enhance knowledge sharing on mutually agreed terms, including through improved coordination among existing mechanisms, in particular at the United Nations level, and through a global technology facilitation mechanism.

Note that the study report does not have to cover all these SDGs.

With regards to the scope of digital economy policy, while there is no widely accepted definition, a useful approach may be to distinguish between core, narrow and broad scopes of the digital economy (see Figure 1). The core and narrow scopes relate to the ICT producing sector and encompass various digital services and platform economy services, respectively. The broad scope includes the use of various digital technologies for performing activities such as electronic business, electronic commerce, automation and artificial intelligence, the sharing economy and online labour platforms.

Figure 1. A representation of the digital economy



Source: R. Bukht and R. Heeks, "Defining, conceptualizing and measuring the digital economy", Development Informatics Working Paper No. 68 (Centre for Development Informatics, University of Manchester, Manchester, 2017).

It is envisaged that this Guidebook will be focused on one of a few selected elements on digital economy **including e-commerce, digital financing, gig economy or sharing economy**. However, if several elements on digital economy can be discussed in a coherent way, this Guidebook can also cover discussions on how

to coherently leverage a few core elements of digital economy for achieving the SDGs. Furthermore, the consultant/applicant may propose other elements of the digital economy for the study - which are not covered in Figure 1 - if there is justification that the elements are important for inclusive and sustainable development.

The Guidebook may include the following chapters.

Chapter 1. An overview of the selected digital economy policy agendas in the region

This chapter needs to justify why the selected digital economy policy agendas (e.g. e-commerce and digital finance) are important for achieving the SDGs. It also needs to provide an overview of development and key trends of the selected digital economy agendas in the Asia-Pacific region.

Chapter 2. A discussion on the rationale for policy intervention

This chapter needs to justify why it is essential for government to intervene through policy making or policy reform. A key question, for example, can be whether such policy intervention/s are used to correct a market failure or serve as a mission-oriented solution, and how such interventions can be more inclusive.

Chapter 3. A discussion on available policy instruments

This chapter needs to review and discuss the available policy instruments – with case studies - which could be used by government policymakers to leverage the digital economy for inclusive and sustainable development. The chapter also needs to discuss what conducive environment need to be created to implement the policy instruments.

Chapter 4. A discussion on recommendations for government policymakers

This chapter needs to discuss the actions which can be taken by government policymakers to leverage the digital economy for inclusive and sustainable development, reflecting the diversity of countries in the Asia-Pacific region and their differing levels of digital economy development.

This chapter may also examine the role of international collaboration.

In chapters 2 and 3, the following questions should be answered:

- What policy interventions have been adopted by developing countries in Asia and the Pacific to achieve inclusive and sustainable development, before and during the COVID pandemic? Have these policies been effective in achieving their objectives? What evidence is there that these policies were effective or not?
- Have any countries adopted digital economy policies to achieve SDGs and to leave no one behind? What are the lessons learnt?

The specific tasks of the consultant: The consultant needs to substantialize the structure and propose how to improve the structure if necessary. The consultant needs to further define and narrow down the topics for discussion; and use case studies, data, and in-depth analysis to draft the Guidebook.

3.2 Data and research methodology

Analysis must be robust and evidence-based. While it is envisaged that key analysis will be based on secondary data (such as published reports and official documents), whenever possible and necessary, questionnaire surveys and interviews of key relevant stakeholders may need to be arranged to gather further information and feedback (e.g. on preliminary findings, conclusions or recommendations). The selected consultant(s) are requested to attend the expert group meeting(s) and other relevant meetings under the project.

3.3 Expected length

Quality matters the most, therefore, it is not the intention of the ESCAP project team to be too prescriptive about the length of the report. Nevertheless, the final report may be between 10,000 -15,000 words, excluding tables, figures, references and appendices.

3.4 Drafting and revisions

The consultant(s) must use her/his own language in drafting the report. Citation must be clearly indicated. Plagiarism is strictly forbidden. Recycling what is already known without new value-added in-depth analysis is not acceptable. Based on previous experience, it is expected the report would undergo several rounds of peer reviews, and the selected consultant(s) should be ready to address feedback in a timely manner.

The work of the consultant will be supervised by the ESCAP project staff.

4. Research implementation timeline and monitoring

Tentatively, the research will be completed by the end of October 2021. It is important to note that the consultant may still need to revise the input and attend relevant meetings, virtually or physically, beyond the time period specified here.

ESCAP expects to be engaged throughout the research process with mutually agreed dates to check-in, discuss progress and provide support as required. Given the short time to complete the research, ESCAP will monitor progress and request information/updates periodically.

The grantee is required to undertake ethical research practices. The grantee will be required to share data collected through the initiative, within the scope of privacy requirements (anonymization of data if required) and ethical standards.

5. Application process and inquiry

Applications can be made by a research consultant or a team of research consultants in the case that an applicant makes a study proposal with other applicants to maximize synergies. **However, only a lead researcher should submit the proposal on behalf of the team in this case.**

Applicants are invited to submit study proposals before the deadline specified below to wangt@un.org with copy to ngernlim.unescap@un.org, and include in the subject line: “Digital Economy for Inclusive and Sustainable Development Proposal”. Each applicant is requested to write no more than 1000 words to describe the proposed approach, scope of research and proposed budget/fee. Please also submit CV(s) of the applicant(s) and samples of past publications.

Only the selected candidate(s) would be contacted, tentatively by 31 May 2021. A contract between the consultant and ESCAP will be signed in line with relevant rules and regulations of the United Nations.

Deadline: The deadline for application is 25 May 2021.

Inquiry: For any informal inquiries, please contact Mr. Tengfei Wang, Economic Affairs Officer, UNESCAP, email: wangt@un.org and with copy to ngernlim.unescap@un.org before the deadline for application.

6. About United Nations ESCAP and ARTNET on STI

The Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) serves as the United Nations’ regional hub promoting cooperation among countries to achieve inclusive and sustainable development. Information on ESCAP is available from www.unescap.org.

This initiative is supported by the Asia-Pacific Research and Training Network on STI Policy (ARTNET on STI Policy). ARTNET on STI Policy is a knowledge platform on STI policies for inclusive and sustainable development. By means of research, information dissemination and capacity building, its aim is to provide guidance on STI policies to researchers and policymakers in the Asia-Pacific region. Information on ARTNET on STI Policy is available from <https://artnet.unescap.org/sti>.