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Request for the inclusion of an item in the provisional agenda of the seventy-seventh session

Observer Status for the Digital Cooperation Organization in the General Assembly

Letter dated 8 June 2022 from the Permanent Representatives of Bahrain, Jordan, Morocco, Nigeria, Oman, Pakistan and Rwanda and the Chargés d'affaires of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

Pursuant to rule 13 of the rules of procedure of the General Assembly, we have the honour to request the inclusion of an item entitled “Observer status for the Digital Cooperation Organization in the General Assembly” in the provisional agenda of the seventy-seventh session of the General Assembly.

The Digital Cooperation Organization (DCO) is an intergovernmental organization founded by seven Member States – Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Nigeria, Oman, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia – in November 2020. Since then, two countries have joined the organization, Morocco and Rwanda.

The Digital Cooperation Organization aims to realize a digital future for all, by empowering youth, women and entrepreneurs to accelerate growth across the digital economy, and to achieve greater economic and social prosperity.

In accordance with rule 20 of the rules of procedures of the General Assembly, an explanatory memorandum (annex I) is attached in support of the aforementioned request, as is a draft resolution (annex II).

We have the honour to request that the present letter and its annexes be circulated as a document of the General Assembly.

(Signed) Jamal Fares **Alrowaiei**

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Annex I

Explanatory memorandum

I. Historical background

1. The Digital Cooperation Organization (DCO) is an intergovernmental organization established by seven founding member States – Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Nigeria, Oman, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia – to drive greater digital cooperation across entrepreneurship, innovation, business growth and employment in a shared digital economy. DCO brings together nations, business, civil society, academics and research and development institutions to promote social prosperity through more inclusive participation and growth across the digital economy.

2. Since its creation, two other countries have joined the organization: Morocco and Rwanda. Together, Member States share the ambition of realizing a digital future for all, by empowering youth, women and entrepreneurs to accelerate growth across the digital economy, and leap-frogging with innovation, to achieve greater economic and social prosperity. Since its establishment, the Organization's collaborative actions have been guided by the following shared values: unity, collaboration, aspiration, ambition, inclusiveness and empowerment.

II. Establishment of the Digital Cooperation Organization

3. The founding Members deliberated and approved the framework agreement on the establishment of the organization, its institutional framework and its General Secretariat. The Foundation Charter was signed in Riyadh on 26 November 2020 and entered into force on 3 March 2021 in accordance with provision (1) of article (15) of the Charter.

4. The first council meeting of DCO, held on 12 April 2021, saw the agreement on the strategic road map, in which the parties reaffirmed their commitment to achieve social prosperity and growth of the digital economy by unifying efforts to advance digital transformation, the organizational structure and the governance model of DCO. The Foundation Charter provides that the headquarters of DCO shall be in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The organization Headquarters Agreement will be signed with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which provides DCO with the legal capacity, diplomatic privileges and immunities necessary to achieve its goals, consistent with article (5) of the Foundation Charter.

5. On 23 September 2021, DCO convened Ministers and delegates from United Nations Member States at a side event at the seventy-sixth session of the General Assembly to discuss "Shaping an inclusive digital age". During this event, the Assistant Secretary-General welcomed the Organization's efforts to create an inclusive digital future for all and noted that the goals of DCO are consistent with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and can help support the implementation of the United Nations Secretary-General's Road Map for Digital Cooperation, aimed at ensuring a more open, free and secure digital future for all. On 30 November 2021, at the 45th annual meeting of Ministers for Foreign Affairs of the Group of 77, the Ministers emphasized that digital cooperation could contribute to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals and, in that regard, welcomed the establishment of DCO.

III. Institutional and organizational structure

Bodies

6. The organization consists of the following bodies:
 - The Council is considered as its supreme authority. Its chairmanship shall be periodic among the representatives of the members. The Council determines the duration of each session.
 - The General Secretariat.
 - Any other body created in the future.
7. The organization can establish, as needed, committees or task forces affiliated with its bodies, where a decision is issued by the Council.

Council

8. The Council of DCO, which was established under article (8) of the Foundation Charter, consists of representatives from the ministries of communications and information technology (or persons of equivalent status) of Member States and heads of dedicated entities. The Council holds a regular annual meeting in the country of the current rotational presidency, unless agreed otherwise, and has the authority to hold special meetings as needed, subject to the approval of two thirds of the members. The regular and special meeting is valid if two thirds of the members attend.

- The Council of Organization meeting (Council meeting) serves as the supreme event for the member States to make critical strategic decisions and provide general guidance for the operational direction of the organization.
 - The ministers of the Member States and their delegations should attend or send a representative with the full delegated authorities to act on the decisions required of the Council impacting the organization and members' obligations to it.
 - DCO offers membership to States and either premium observer or basic observer status to non-Government entities, with different obligations highlighted by its governance mechanism.
 - The meeting should take place in the country of the current rotational presidency unless agreed otherwise.
 - The meeting should be held once a year, in the second quarter of the calendar year, unless agreed otherwise.
 - The output of the meeting is the ministerial declaration, which includes endorsed policy, regulatory and project reports and outcomes.
 - The Council has the authority to hold special meetings as needed, subject to the approval of two thirds of the members.
 - The meetings are valid if attended by more than half of the members.
 - The unanimous consent of the meeting attendees should be reached for approval.
9. During the Riyadh Conference of 12 April 2021, Members States adopted several significant decisions: the inaugural presidency of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia until 31 December 2022, the appointment of the Secretary-General, the initial organizational structure and the organization's collaboration categories. The next Council will be held in November 2022. Participants will review progress in implementing the organization's initiatives and assess their early impact on the achievement of the organization's goals.

General Secretariat

10. The General Secretariat, established pursuant to article (11) of the Foundation Charter, consists of employees and workers to fulfil the functions of the organization, its meetings and work in the light of the tasks entrusted to it under article (12) of the Charter. The General Secretariat undertakes the following functions:

- Prepare periodic reports on the work of the organization and submit them to the Council for review.
- Prepare studies and propose projects that contribute to the progress of the digital transformation and the technology market in member countries and accelerate the adoption and development of emerging technologies therein.
- Prepare the draft budget and the final account of the organization and submit them to the Council for approval.
- Circulate decisions and documents issued by the organization and its subsidiary bodies.

11. The Secretary-General is responsible for the work of the General Secretariat. The term of service of the Secretary-General (and their deputy, if any) shall be four years, renewable once only.

Deputies meetings

12. Participants at the Deputies meeting discuss critical issues, advise on decisions required of the Ministers and makes decisions on behalf of Ministers based on delegated authorities in between meetings of the Council of Organization.

- Deputies shall attend with their delegation teams.
- The Secretary-General, or delegate of the Secretary-General, coordinates the meetings.
- The staff of the Secretariat can also attend at the discretion of the Secretary-General.
- The meetings are held as frequently as needed, at least quarterly, either at the DCO headquarters or virtually, at the discretion of the Secretary-General.
- The various outputs of the meeting include decisions on critical tasks, updating of reports and recommending the holding of a meeting of the Council to resolve essential issues beyond the scope of authority of the deputies.

IV. Membership

13. Only States are eligible for full membership, while non-Government entities can apply only for premium observing or observing status. The Secretariat will define and adjust the observers' roles and benefits, with the approval of the Council where required.

14. DCO Member States realize the critical value of multi-stakeholder collaboration. Therefore, DCO engages inclusively with a diverse range of digital economy actors including, but not limited to:

- Private sector entities
- International organizations
- Non-governmental organizations
- Think tanks

- Academia
- Multilateral development banks
- Sovereign wealth funds
- Foundations

Members

Governments only

15. The cross-border partnership leverages the nature of diversity, including, but not limited to, various cultures, ethnicities and religions worldwide, to promote digital development and preserve the values of the societies. Following the engagement of candidates in accession negotiations, discussions occur between the candidates and the membership representative. Member States should raise the level of cooperation and understanding among themselves in a way that serves the mutual scientific, health, educational, commercial, social, economic, investment and security interests in the regional and international context so as to avoid threatening or endangering the States or affecting the safety of their citizens or residents. Member States should integrate and coordinate among themselves and non-Government observers to raise their collective capabilities in digital development through the formation of legislation and laws that regulate related matters, as well as developing policies that contribute to the progression of digital transformation and the expansion of the technology market and the homogeneity of its regulations.

16. The General Secretariat should focus its external engagement efforts towards ensuring diversity across crucial capability areas, building the overall Organization's presence and standing on its mandated focus areas among the international community.

17. The current membership of DCO represents \$2 trillion gross domestic product (GDP) in economic value, and a population of 521 million people, 70 per cent of whom are young. As at April 2022, the following States are members:

- Bahrain
- Jordan
- Kuwait
- Morocco
- Nigeria
- Oman
- Pakistan
- Rwanda
- Saudi Arabia

Observers

Private sector, non-governmental organizations and academic institutions

18. The Organization welcomes the accession of non-Government observers through a regular application and approval process. The non-Government entities are classified into large corporations and global tech companies, startups and unicorns, international organizations and think tanks, academia, multilateral development banks, funds and foundations.

19. The Secretariat may identify areas that require additional support or expand its network through partnerships within the guidelines and authorities vested in the Secretariat by the Council. The support may include:

- Contribution to single or multiple events of the Organization.
- Participation in the development and execution of specific projects and initiatives of the Organization through domain know-how and expertise.
- Provision of long-term support to the Organization with global best practices, leading research and studies through knowledge partnerships.

20. The Partnerships can be developed by invitation by the Council or by application to the Secretariat and are subject to the approval of the Council. If any of the partners request to withdraw from the Partnership, they must submit a written communication addressed to the Secretary-General and fulfil any terms specified in the original partnership agreement that the partner agreed upon.

V. Funding of the organization

21. To cover its expenses, DCO will rely on diversified sources of funding, which include mandatory and voluntary contributions by the Member States and observers, as well as revenues from services and products developed by DCO.

22. Article (14) of the Foundation Charter provides that the Organization shall have an annual budget presented to the Council to consider its approval before the start of each fiscal year. The Council unanimously determines the mandatory contributions that each Member is obligated to pay. Such amounts may be subject to reconsideration when necessary. Mandatory contributions from Member Countries will begin in 2023.

VI. Purpose and functions of the Digital Cooperation Organization

23. DCO has been established to enable social prosperity and growth for all through the development of the digital economy, by unifying efforts to advance digital transformation and promote common interests. Achieving more tangible outcomes requires the bringing together of a set of countries and other stakeholders with aligned interests, complementary capabilities, shared values and aspirations concerning the digital economy and the willingness to cooperate on a deep level in order to address the following challenges:

(a) Lack of interoperability of data flows across countries, burdening the private sector with the need to comply with fragmented regulations, hindering many micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises to expand their businesses across borders and to leverage the full potential of data for innovation;

(b) Digital and information and communications technology (ICT) skills gaps, as 60 per cent of the global population still lack standard digital skills, resulting in a lack of skilled people for businesses, as countries struggle to drive globally competitive levels of skills without access to economies of scale in educational investments;

(c) The mismatch between where digital value is created and where profits are currently taxed as a result of uncoordinated tax policies, the emergence of low or no-tax jurisdictions and a race to the bottom that fuels pervasive tax evasion and avoidance, creating an unfair competitive advantage for large companies that are more capable of avoiding taxes than micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises;

(d) Unrealized potential of data in their aggregated form, disadvantaging even the most prominent countries as opportunities to harness the full power of big data and artificial intelligence are lost;

(e) Increasing the consolidation of market power among a small number of digital economy players and the resulting intense, smothering pressure on national micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises and start-up ecosystems;

(f) Lack of trust in key emerging technologies, in large part as a result of inconsistent technology governance among even closely aligned countries;

(g) Unbalanced collaborative innovation policies across countries preventing potential pooling of resources in the research and development ecosystem;

(h) Lack of interoperability of digital IDs across countries, blocking citizens and businesses from seamless international collaboration;

(i) The fragmented and uncertain international regulatory environment concerning customs duties on digital goods and services, slowing the flow of trade and the expansion of businesses;

(j) A deepening digital divide is caused by a lack of high-quality Internet connectivity, particularly in remote and rural areas, as 46 per cent of the world's population remains without Internet connectivity.

24. As stated in the organization's strategic road map, as an action-oriented organization, DCO has set four overarching objectives to fulfil its mission:

(a) Accelerate the growth of digital economy collectively across all DCO Member States;

(b) Advance DCO members' digital transformation, including promoting awareness about its benefits;

(c) Promote social prosperity and inclusion across the DCO digital environment;

(d) Strengthen the collective efforts of DCO members in the global digital economy.

25. To achieve these ambitious goals, DCO will focus on creating an optimal digital economic space for all its members and driving collaborative initiatives to accelerate progress and create opportunity within that space. The DCO digital economic space will be defined by mutually beneficial engagements that will enable citizens and private sector actors to flourish in a vast, consistently governed digital market.

26. The role of DCO is to be both an enabler of the flourishing cross-border digital economy and the executor of concrete, targeted, high-value multilateral digitalization projects. This translates into four core functions:

(a) Sharing of knowledge and experience, analysis and insight on best practices, critical gaps and critical opportunities towards the DCO strategic goals;

(b) Developing, aligning and advocating digital policies and regulations among DCO countries and at the global level;

(c) Initiating and executing joint projects with DCO members that lead towards the DCO strategic goals, including their monitoring and evaluation;

(d) The organization facilitates funding of high-impact projects, focusing on profitable projects currently not attractive to the private sector.

VII. Current initiatives and programmes

27. DCO has launched several initiatives to achieve its strategic goals, in the framework of the areas of collaboration. The following guiding principles apply to the selection and implementation of the organization's initiatives:

- (a) The initiative advances the strategic vision, goals, objectives, and terms of reference of DCO;
- (b) The initiative is aligned with the individual ICT and digital strategies of the founding members;
- (c) The initiative generates value for members that is possible primarily through international collaboration;
- (d) The initiative develops differentiating value relative to other multilateral organizations and initiatives;
- (e) The initiative generates increasing value to each member as additional members participate (benefits scale with membership);

28. The DCO-led initiatives will be highly focused efforts that generate mutual value through public-private collaboration to achieve specific outcomes that market forces by themselves would be unlikely to develop.

Digital Cooperation Organization Observatory for Digital Empowerment

29. The DCO Observatory for Digital Empowerment will provide research that contributes to policies that:

- Address 270 million "Generation Z" youth (born after 1995) with up-skilling and job creation policies.
- Raise the digital skills of women and female Internet adoption to 90 per cent.
- Nurture the ecosystem favourable to entrepreneurship for 6,300 innovation and digital business model-based startups.

Digital Cooperation Organization Center of Excellence for Data Flows

30. Cross-border data flows have become a critically important enabler of the digital economy. The rapid increase in the digitization of economic and social activity has resulted in an unprecedented expansion of data collection, usage and transfer across borders. Across sectors, global data flows are increasingly vital to businesses, including micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises, and are becoming key enablers of global value chains and the growth of digital commerce more broadly. However, despite this growing importance of cross-border data, there are many challenges to its free flow. In particular, national approaches to cross-border data flows and data protection vary widely across countries, increasing compliance costs for businesses and restrictions on data movement.

31. The DCO Center of Excellence for Data Flows is committed to addressing these challenges. In collaboration with data authorities and government bodies regulating data flows, the Center of Excellence will support the DCO member States' national agendas in developing optimal cross-border data flows policies and regulations. The DCO Center of Excellence for Data Flows will specifically focus on:

- (a) Research to analyse DCO countries' approaches to cross-border data flows, benchmark international best practices and identify key obstacles to the cross-border data flows and their associated impact on the economies of DCO member States;

(b) Collaborative policy development to advance aligned progress on policy and regulatory approaches;

(c) Training to improve the awareness and knowledge of policymakers, entrepreneurs and citizens of data-related regulations and facilitate cross-border business;

(d) Consultation services to Governments interested in revamping their domestic policies regarding cross-border data flows, and to private sector companies interested in navigating data regulatory frameworks.

Digital Cooperation Organization micro-, small and medium-sized enterprise community platform

32. DCO will unlock the digital economy growth potential of 46 million micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises across its members' economies through the DCO Scale-up trusted resources for innovation drive enterprises (STRIDE) initiative. The objective of STRIDE is to facilitate the expansion of small and medium-sized enterprises and innovation-driven enterprises through the DCO Common Market. The initiative will provide beneficiaries with the insights, tools and services needed to make evidence-based cross-border expansions decisions. Currently, DCO member States represent a total population of 521 million and \$2 trillion in GDP. According to the World Bank, formal small and medium-sized enterprises generate up to 40 per cent of GDP and provide 7 out of 10 jobs, but their participation in global value chains is limited and barely passes the 30 per cent mark for gross exports, even in the most advanced economies. This represents a great cooperation and enablement opportunity for DCO to tackle.

33. The DCO STRIDE initiative will enable and harness the untapped potential of innovation-driven enterprises through a digital entrepreneurial ecosystem (STRIDE) providing support, insights, networks, market opportunities, capability development and access to talents. The implementation of the initiative will be divided into phases, starting with comprehensive country guides for each of the organization's Member States. The guides will shed light on the macroeconomics, demographics, digital adoption rates, priority sectors and entrepreneurial support organizations, as well as provide a step-by-step guide to company registration in the respective countries. This preliminary phase will allow DCO to start building a database of innovation-driven enterprises and service providers in the member States. As the initiative develops, programmes, tools and services will be launched to address the needs of innovation-driven enterprises: this will include training programmes, discounted digital perks for software as a service (SaaS) licences, competitions, mentorship, coaching and eventually access to finance.

Digital Economy Maturity Index

34. Building on the body of academic research and multilateral work in the area of measurement of the digital economy, DCO is finalizing development of the Digital Economy Maturity Index, a policy impact measurement tool. At the heart of the Index is the 2018 seminal work of digital economy academic researchers Rumana Bukht and Richard Heeks of the University of Manchester, which has been iterated on by several Governments and international organizations, among them the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and more recently the Group of 20 (G20).

35. Given the connected nature of the digital economy, the index's statistical model measures direct and non-direct impact of policymaking using a wide variety of carefully selected base and composite indicators, weighted and correlated. It is this connected nature that is rarely addressed in policy impact performance measurement activities, and vitally needed by public policymakers, so that they have fact-based insights by which to engage all stakeholders across the digital economy ecosystem.

36. Given the rapidly evolving nature of the digital economy, DCO expects to iterate consecutively on the statistical model behind the index across the coming three years. In the interim, the Digital Economy Maturity Index gives policymakers a measurement tool, while also addressing measurement gaps and opening the conversation for further multilateral work in standardizing measurement and defining new globally agreed indicators to capture social interactions and economic activity within the digital economy sphere.

37. Across the long term, given that the Digital Economy Maturity Index uses globally accepted practices within the structure behind its statistical model, opportunities for cooperation and collaboration are endless.

38. For the organization's core mission of empowering women, youth and entrepreneurs to leverage the multiplier power of the digital economy towards economic growth through diversification, the index is critical – as “what get measured gets done.”

Digital Cooperation Organization Digital Prosperity Awards

39. The DCO Digital Prosperity Awards celebrate global contributions which empower Governments, businesses and communities to collaborate and accelerate digital economic advancement.

40. Impartial global leaders and innovators will assess the strongest nominees on their ability to promote digital inclusion and tackle a regional or global challenge by scaling the output of conventional economic sectors through digital transformation.

VIII. Observer status for the Digital Cooperation Organization in the General Assembly

41. The digital economy is of critical importance to humanity's future, constituting 16 per cent of global GDP. The world is shifting to digital at a pace never seen before. The digital economy is estimated to be growing 2.5 times faster than the traditional economy. While many challenges are rising with the digital era, people who lack access to digital technologies will be further marginalized.

42. The COVID-19 pandemic has stunningly accelerated the digital transition itself and its socioeconomic impacts. It has increased our reliance on digital technologies for core social and economic activities to a previously unfathomable degree: Internet traffic during the crisis reached peak levels 24 times higher than in pre-pandemic times.

43. While essential benefits of the digital economy can be achieved at the level of individual countries and even communities, its ultimate value can be realized only through international cooperation and collective action. As an engine of economic growth, innovation and social well-being, the digital economy is fuelled by connectivity to levels of diversity and scale that are only possible if the digital reach of citizens and organizations extends across borders. Thus, the ability of any given country to harness the full potential of the digital economy for its citizens relies fundamentally on its ability to cooperate with other countries.

44. DCO is an intergovernmental organization created to strengthen the collaboration towards the sustainable and inclusive growth of the global digital economy at a global level. Since its recent establishment, DCO has already produced cooperation between Governments and private sector actors, academia and civil society, to spur digital economy growth, advance digital transformation and address challenges related to a growing digital divide within and between countries, with the common goal of enabling prosperity for all.

45. We believe that DCO, with its human-centric approach for digital transition, will contribute positively to achieving universal connectivity towards safe and affordable Internet, and to unlock digital opportunities for all, in line with the United Nations Secretary-General's Road Map for Digital Cooperation.

46. The digital economy goes far beyond its economic contribution to economic and business growth. It is now the primary engine of societal transformation and plays a critical role in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. The work towards the realization of the organization's four strategic goals therefore aims to accelerate the advancement of the Sustainable Development Goals:

(a) Accelerating the growth of the digital economy collectively across all DCO members "promotes sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all" (Sustainable Development Goal 8);

(b) Advancing DCO members' digital transformation can only be achieved through "building resilient infrastructure, promoting inclusive and sustainable industrialization and fostering innovation" (Sustainable Development Goal 9);

(c) Strengthening social stability inclusively across the DCO digital environment is "reducing inequalities within and among countries" (Sustainable Development Goal 10);

(d) Strengthening the collective effort of DCO members in the global digital economy is directly implementing the goal of "revitalizing the global partnership for sustainable development" (Sustainable Development Goal 17).

47. The mission and objectives of DCO, as set out in its Charter, and its initiatives, as presented in the strategic road map, are relevant to the General Assembly, in particular, the DCO (micro-, small and medium-sized enterprise market expansion primers, the DCO Observatory for Digital Empowerment, the DCO Center of Excellence for Data Flows, the Digital Economy Maturity Index and the DCO Digital Prosperity Awards. Cooperation between the United Nations and DCO has the potential to support the progress of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the United Nations Secretary-General's Road Map for Digital Cooperation. Observer status will further strengthen the links between the organization's initiatives and the digital objectives of United Nations Members and agencies.

48. Granting observer status to DCO in the General Assembly would represent a global perspective for policymaking on digital matters. On the one hand, it would enable leverage of the international experience and rich knowledge of the United Nations to accelerate the development of the digital economy with targeted initiatives. On the other hand, DCO can provide insights on the policies and programmes that are needed to resolve the key challenges related to inclusive digital growth, thereby helping to shape the international policy debate with actionable outcomes for DCO members and beyond.

49. The status of observer would enable the organization to provide targeted inputs to current and future United Nations processes, based on grass-roots-level experiences from its country programmes, its public-private cooperation, its research and its global knowledge-sharing activities. The organization is also taking a big step towards addressing capabilities building, digital trust and even protection for human rights and more human-centric policies within Member States.

50. To ensure that digital technologies offer a net benefit to society, we must take a proactive and inclusive approach. Becoming an observer at the General Assembly would represent an immense step towards this goal as it would provide well-defined and durable cooperation between DCO and the United Nations.

Annex II**Draft resolution****Observer status for the Digital Cooperation Organization in the General Assembly**

The General Assembly,

Noting the aspiration of the Digital Cooperation Organization to promote cooperation with the United Nations,

1. *Decides* to invite the Digital Cooperation Organization to participate in the sessions and the work of the General Assembly in the capacity of observer;
 2. *Requests* the Secretary-General to take the action necessary to implement the present resolution.
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