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STATEMENT BY MR CHONG KWEK BIN, PANELIST FOR ROUNTABLE 2: "DIGITAL ACCESSIBILITY FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES" AT THE 16TH CONFERENCE OF STATE PARTIES TO THE CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES 14 JUNE 2023

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Mr / Mdm Chair,

1   I am honoured to share my views today on this important topic of digital accessibility.

Laying groundwork for full digital accessibility

2   As our world becomes a more digital one, we need to make concerted efforts to ensure that no one, including persons with disabilities, gets left behind. The UN CRPD makes clear the critical role that digital accessibility plays in empowering persons with disabilities. It emphasises that all of us must play our part in creating an accessible digital space that enables the full participation and inclusion of persons with disabilities.

3   To put the CRPD into action, Singapore developed Enabling Masterplans, which are our national roadmaps that chart how we as a society can enable persons with disabilities to participate fully as integral and contributing members of society. For example, in the latest Enabling Masterplan 2030, Singapore set a target to ensure that 100% of high-traffic government websites are accessible by 2030.

4   Additionally, policies and programmes that help persons with disabilities to access assistive technologies or other support services are also essential. Based on the Global Report on Assistive Technology published by the WHO and UNICEF last year, the most frequently reported barrier to assistive technology was affordability. National policies that support persons with disabilities to purchase assistive technology devices therefore play a key role. Singapore's Assistive Technology Fund, for example, which SG Enable administers, provide subsidies for persons with disabilities to purchase assistive technology devices, enabling their

independent living in this digital world.

Barriers to full digital accessibility

5   While we have made considerable strides towards digital accessibility, many barriers remain. In 2021, SG Enable, as the focal agency for disability and inclusion in Singapore, began engaging stakeholders across the public and private sectors to raise awareness and increase the adoption of e-accessibility practices. We focused particularly on reaching out to the healthcare, transport, banking and government sectors. At the same time, we also built the capabilities of persons with disabilities to perform e-accessibility audits and user testing of websites and mobile applications.

6   Through the process of creating this e-accessibility ecosystem however, we encountered three key barriers that prevent persons with disabilities from full digital accessibility. First, we have found that there is a general lack of awareness and lack of interest in achieving digital accessibility. Much effort is needed to move key sectors to adopt digital accessibility measures. It is important to convince businesses and organisations of the business case for digital accessibility, and the benefits of doing so.

7   Second, we have found that while frontline staff such as developers may be interested and willing to improve the digital accessibility of their services, they can sometimes be constrained by the systems in which they work in. Limited by time and resources, digital accessibility could end up taking a back seat among the company's list of priorities. They may also be limited by a lack of know-how – they might know that something is inaccessible but not possess the requisite training to rectify or adjust it. These same issues were raised in the 2021 State of Digital Accessibility Report by Level Access, G3ict and IAAP, which found that time and training were the top two challenges faced by accessibility programmes.

8   Third, with e-accessibility being a growing but still nascent industry, we have had challenges expanding the talent pool of persons with disabilities who are able to perform e-accessibility audits. There are a few reasons for this, such as lack of interest or the relatively technical nature of the work, and we will do more to improve the situation.

Importance of key partners to drive accessibility

9   It is therefore important to have key partners to drive accessibility. In 2019, a small group of software developers from GovTech, Singapore's government agency overseeing the government's digital services, banded together to find ways to make their individual projects more accessible. That ground-up initiative has since

evolved into the Accessibility Enabling Team, which is a key partner of SG Enable in our e-accessibility efforts. They ensure that the government's digital services are designed inclusively, and that the unique perspectives and usage patterns of persons with disabilities are meaningfully reflected in the product development process. The team provides Singapore's public service with consultancy services, open-source tooling, policies and standards, and education and outreach activities. They also developed their own open-sourced, automated testing tool, Purple Hats, which was listed on the UN's Digital Public Goods Registry in 2022.

10   From our experience of implementing these digital accessibility initiatives, we see that the road is long but once we start, we will make progress, and find partners. I urge CRPD Member States to take the lead by encouraging the adoption and promotion of accessibility in government digital services, and consider how best to work with civil society, the private sector, and persons with disabilities to make the digital space an accessible one.

11   Thank you.

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