Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you very much Bart, for your introduction and the invitation to speak here on digitalization for development. One of the reasons I gladly accepted the opportunity to speak here today, is because we -government and civil society- need each other deeply in this digital age.

I realize that there is not one person or organization that can fully oversee all the opportunities and risks of what’s happening today and will happen tomorrow. And I find comfort in knowing that we, as a government and as a country, have a strong history of cooperation in broad coalitions to face challenges that are too big to address alone.

And digitalization is exactly such a challenge. When developing the Digital Agenda for Foreign Trade and International Development Cooperation, it became clear that no thematic area remains untouched when it comes to the rapid developments of technology. Many of you here have contributed to discussions in preparation of the agenda. And one thing came out of nearly every discussion that took place: technology is not an end in itself, but should serve our common goals for sustainable development.

It is the opportunities of digitalization for sustainable development that I want to address today, as well as some of its risks.

**Opportunities**

Digitalization is widely considered an opportunity for international development, because it has the potential of bringing about the disruption needed to achieve the SDGs in time.

The *World Bank* states that we face a ‘once in a generation’ chance to take advantage of the transformative potential of digital technologies. The *High Level Panel to the UN Secretary General on Digital Cooperation* too, emphasizes that the digital economy and digital finance have the potential to lift millions of people, especially in Africa, out of poverty.

The publication *IT 4 Development*, showcases thirty-three of our programs in which digitalization is a key element. Quite a number is run by Partos member organizations. One example I would like to mention here, is a program of which I have seen an early version in Northern-Mali in 2018.
The STAMP program by SNV uses satellite data to provide lifesaving information to pastoralists. Via telephone, the program provides information on where the grass is still green, where water is available and what the actual market prices for cattle are in the nearest cities. The scalability of digital solutions became evident when the overarching program Geodata for Agriculture and Water reached one million users last month. That is one million with a multiplier effect, because users share the information with others in their community.

**Risks**

But however exciting the promises and actual use cases, digitalization does not automatically translate into prosperity for all. Digitalization also brings significant risks. In fact, we are at an essential moment in time. Technologies and applications will continue to develop at incredible speed, and now is the time to decide on its terms. The broadest possible coalitions are needed to ensure that digitalization brings the SDGs closer, not further away.

Because yes, we want financial inclusion for all, making it possible for anyone, anywhere, to transfer money to their loved ones for free. But do we want to rely on Facebook to build this possibility? And if so, under which conditions? And indeed, we want to provide the highest attainable standard of care for refugees, but do we want - or even need - to store their biometrical data in the process? And if so, under which conditions? And yes, our decision-making can benefit from automated analyses of the unprecedented amounts of available data.

But how can we avoid that biases from the past are copied into our future? And if we want to make cities more safe by using smart technologies such as face recognition, what are the conditions to avoid violation of human rights?

The role of civil society as a watchdog is essential here. Organizations such as yourselves can hold both private companies and governments to account for their use of data. We depend on critical eyes, ears and voices to recognize harmful usage of digitalization. And to inform citizens on ways to protect themselves.

**Digital inclusion**

Our joint responsibility for digitalization for development does not end with finding and capitalizing on the opportunities, holding people and institutions to account and ensuring safety for all. There is one other essential element that I would like to call to your attention. Because if we are serious about utilizing digital technologies for achieving the
SDGs, we must ensure that everyone benefits. This means digital inclusion. Currently, only half the world population has affordable and meaningful access to internet. In Africa, this is around one-third.

Part of the problem is coverage. There are still vast spans of land -particularly in Africa- without basic IT infrastructure. Another part of the problem is skills. Too many people still lack basic skills that are needed to make use of digital technologies, such as reading and writing. A larger group, especially among youth, lacks the skills to assess the credibility of the information they access online.

But an even more fundamental barrier is the assumption that technology ‘is not for everyone’. The use of technology by women for example, is stigmatized in many societies today. This results in an assumption among many women and girls that technology would not have added value to them.

This, to me, is a fundamental problem, because it limits -in this case women’s- potential to benefit from opportunities such as the digital economy, distance learning and social movements. I believe it is our joint responsibility to actively ask ourselves about every program: Who cannot benefit from this solution?. Who lives too far away from the city to benefit? Who feels too old to adapt to our smart solutions? Who is told that our technology is not for them?

Within every program, we should deliberately widen the span of digital inclusion by giving more people the skills, knowledge and confidence to use technology to their advantage.

And this brings me back to my central reason for being here today. Digitalization is too big for any one of us to address alone. We must work together with local organizations and citizens to grasp the full potential of digitalization for worldwide prosperity. And I am confident that there are many tech savvy companies to help us in this regard, when I look at all the startups that are powered in part by millennials’ drive to contribute to a better world. It is only through our collective effort that we can ensure that technology truly benefits us humans: placing not just some people, but all people at the heart of what drives digitalization.

Thank you for your attention.