

Pre-WTDC-17 Ministerial Roundtable on ICT④SDGs in Least Developed Countries (LDCs), Landlocked Developing Countries (LLDCs) and Small Island Developing States (SIDS)

8 October 2017

Final Report



The pre-WTDC-17 Ministerial Roundtable on ICT④SDGs in LDCs, LLDCs & SIDS took place on October 8, 2017. It was attended by about 90 participants and organized as an interactive debate/discussion. Mr Cosmas Zavazava, Chief, Projects and Knowledge Management Department, Telecommunication Development Bureau, International Telecommunication Union (ITU) moderated the event.

The Roundtable highlighted how ICTs are accelerating the attainment of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and discussed national initiatives on how to address and overcome barriers to ICT affordability, connectivity, access, and use. It identified ICT strategies and policies, innovative technologies, investment opportunities and regional cooperation to drive ICT developments in LDCs, LLDCs and SIDS.

In his opening remarks, the Director of the Telecommunication Development Bureau (BDT), Mr Brahim Sanou, highlighted that through its work, BDT creates ICT opportunities to leapfrog development challenges that LDCs, LLDCs and SIDS face. He further noted that BDT is taking concrete actions to accelerate the pace of telecommunication and ICT developments in LDCs, LLDCs and SIDS and mainstreams their needs in all ITU-D activities, programmes and projects, including in the areas of universal access, human and institutional capacity building, and policies and regulation. The Director also stated that the outcomes of the Roundtable would provide important input to the WTDC-17 discussions.

The event included the presentation of a special ITU report on *ICTs, LDCs and the SDGs - Achieving universal and affordable Internet in the least developed countries*, which has been prepared by ITU, jointly with the UN Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States (UN-OHRLLS). The report highlights the important role of ICTs in the world's most vulnerable countries and assesses the progress that has been made in terms of achieving Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Target 9C, to "significantly increase access to information and communications technology and strive to provide universal and affordable access to the Internet in least developed countries by 2020" (SDG Target 9C)." The report highlights that great progress has been made in terms of ICT access and affordability in LDCs. By 2016, all LDCs had launched 3G services and 61% of the LDC population was covered by a 3G network. LDCs are on track to reach over 90% mobile broadband coverage and making Internet prices relatively affordable by 2020. At the same time, 800 million people in the LDCs remain offline and in 2020, less than 1 out of 4 people in the LDCs are expected to be using the Internet. The lack of digital literacy and skills remains one of the key barriers.

During the Ministerial Roundtable, several interventions were made regarding the use of ICTs for development. Specific national policies and initiatives to drive access to and use of the Internet were presented.

The Minister of Information and Communications of Nepal, H.E. Mr Mohan Bahadur Basnet indicated that Nepal has made ICTs a priority and a key driver for the achievement of the SDGs. He addressed the specific development challenges of Nepal, including bringing affordable and widespread access to the Internet to all regions of the country. The country's difficult topography and its landlockedness make it more difficult to provide backbone infrastructure, and to provide affordable international connectivity, which remain a main barrier in the country. Nepal has initiated a number of programmes to deliver e-government and e-health services, bridge the digital divide, and to bring broadband Internet access to all public offices, schools and communities. This includes the development of a fibre optic backbone network and increased access to international connectivity, which remain a key challenge in Nepal, and an area where ITU's support is required.

Samoa's Minister of Communications and Information Technology, H.E. Mr Afamasaga Lepuia'i Rico Tupa'i underscored the importance of privatization, market disruption, and competition for the growth of the ICT sector in Samoa, which was able to graduate from the list of LDCs in 2014. His Excellency also indicated that Samoa has been able to drive ICT uptake, in particular in terms of mobile services, and reduce prices by connecting to a submarine cable in 2009. To drive prices down further and to increase the quality of services, the country is planning to connect to several other submarine cables over the next years. As part of the 'One Pacific' project, a number of countries are planning share the cost of the cable for better connectivity in the region. Samoa also expects to become a regional hub, and host a data centre to provide services to its neighbouring islands. The Minister thanked ITU for its support in using satellite services to connect remote areas and 'blind spots', but pointed to the fact that satellite services remain relatively

expensive. He further called upon ITU to provide support in the area of digital literacy, including coding, and capacity building, two areas that are critical for the development of information society in SIDS. While digital literacy remains low in Samoa, there are plans to integrate digital literacy courses into the country's syllabus.

The Secretary-General of the Caribbean Telecommunication Union (CTU), Ms Bernadette Lewis, highlighted the challenges that SIDS in the Caribbean are facing, including their small (market and population) size, and their dependency on limited economic areas of activities (tourism and agriculture). Although the Caribbean has made ICTs a priority, more efforts must be made to ensure that the benefits of ICTs are fully used. To this end, it is important to harmonize policies across the regions, to encourage cooperation and investment, and to encourage a change in mindsets. At the same time, new processes must take into account traditional ways of working, for example in the area of indigenous funding mechanisms. The president of CTU also commented on the need to make sure that the gender gap in the region –with women ahead of men – is addressed, and that as many men as women graduate and take advantage of new opportunities in the ICT sector.

The Director of UN-OHRLLS, Ms Heidi Schroderus-Fox, addressed the specific development challenges of the 91 countries that make up the group of LDCs, LLDCs and SIDS. She highlighted the importance of taking advantage of ICTs to address their specific challenges since the achievement of the SDGs will in large part depend on the progress that these 91 most vulnerable countries in the world will be able to make. The UN-OHRLLS Director also spoke about the close cooperation between her office and ITU, and the need to work together to help countries use ICTs to structurally change their economies, and to eventually help them to graduate from the list of LDCs. The graduation process is lengthy and overseen by an independent body of experts who determine a country's status based on a clear list of criteria. UN-OHRLLS also highlighted that one of the SDG targets – to establish a Technology Bank to drive technology, innovation and capacity building in the LDCs – has already been achieved since the Technology Bank was set up this year. This new initiative will start to benefit countries by assessing their technology needs and providing them with access to digital research.

Several interventions were made from the floor, and a number of countries shared their experiences, lessons learned and best practices in using ICTs for development and the challenges they are facing.

Paraguay took the floor to draw the attention to the fact that landlocked developing countries face specific challenges in terms of international connectivity, and for providing affordable access to the Internet. In this regard, ITU's support in the area of LDCs, LLDCs and SIDS has been of great value. In particular, Paraguay thanked ITU for carrying out two case study on the America's LLDCs – Paraguay and Bolivia – to identify specific recommendations and policies, as well as investment opportunities.

Zimbabwe discussed its efforts to put in place an elaborate fibre infrastructure network as well as last mile connectivity to maximize the benefits of communication infrastructure, which is essential for development. The growth in mobile networks has allowed the country to connect previously unconnected areas and close cooperation with the mobile operators has allowed to set up a number of community information centres. These are often set up in postal offices to take advantage of existing infrastructure and to provide services, and to help communities acquire digital skills, to population groups that are otherwise not able to take advantage of ICTs.

The delegate from Zimbabwe also highlighted the importance of the Technology Bank for capacity-building and technology transfer.

Mozambique addressed the issue of electricity, which providing a key barrier to bringing more people online.

Nepal inquired about the possibility of providing certain services (including e-government services) available only online, to encourage the uptake of ICTs. In particular for the provision of public services this would seem difficult in countries where only parts of the population is connected, or do not have the necessary skills to use these services.

The Internet Society intervened to express its interest in working with the LDCs, LLDCs and SIDS, and to announce a number of studies on ICT developments in these countries. The ISOC representative highlighted the issue of high customs costs and barriers, which delay the delivery of critical ICT equipment, and remain a key challenge to ICT development. A number of countries are addressing this challenge by implementing specific regulation on import duties and delays.

The moderator closed the Ministerial Roundtable by highlighting some of the key conclusions of the discussions. The Roundtable confirmed the opportunities of ICTs to transform lives, and for development. ICTs play a critical role for social and economic development and are a cross-cutting tool for the achievement of the SDGs. They are of particular importance to the LDC, LLDCs and SIDS, the world's most vulnerable countries with specific development challenges, including in the area of disaster management and climate change.

Given the rapid transformation of technologies, it is critical that policy makers can take advantage of the latest technologies and tools. To this end, they must extend access to ICTs and build the necessary infrastructure, to make ICTs not only universally available, but also affordable. International Internet bandwidth, as well as a strong national fibre optic backbones are key components. The roundtable recognized that some countries, in particular landlocked developing countries, and small island developing states, face specific challenges in these areas, and require particular support. The meeting also highlighted the importance of skills and digital literacy, and the need for additional capacity building and support.

Additional resources:

- Pre-WTDC-17 Ministerial Roundtable on ICT④SDGs in LDCs, LLDCs and SIDS [website](#)
- Access the Executive Summary of the ITU Report on [ICTs, LDCs and SDS – Achieving universal and access Internet in the least developed countries](#)
- A [special report](#) on the Ministerial Roundtable as published by the ITU News.