

ITU Regional Development Forum for Europe (RDF-EUR)

Information and Communication Technologies for Attaining Sustainable Development Goals

Tuesday 26 May 2020 | Virtual Meeting

<https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Regional-Presence/Europe/Pages/Events/2020/RDF/Remote.aspx>

Transcript of Speeches from Opening Ceremony Speakers

Ms. DOREEN BOGDAN-MARTIN, Director, Telecommunication Development Bureau, International Telecommunication Union (ITU):

“Thank you. Thank you very much. So good morning, ladies and gentlemen and welcome to this first virtual RDF, our Regional Development Forum for Europe. It seems like yesterday when we all gathered in Rome last year. I am really happy to see so many of our BDT partners and our supporters of the Regional Initiatives for Europe on today's call. I want to thank you all for your unwavering commitment to the ITU's Telecommunication Development Bureau and also most importantly, for your support to our activities that are working towards advancing digital transformation across the 46 countries of this European region. I am pleased that so many of you were also able to join us for the TDAG web dialogue series as well as other virtual meetings we have been holding over the last 11 long weeks since we started our remote working arrangements. Since we met last year for the RDF in Rome the world has changed beyond all recognition. Right now, I think no one is sure what our post-COVID new normal will look like. That post-COVID world seems to be so far away, a long way off, but in these uncertain times, I believe that one thing remains more certain than ever and that's the vital importance of connectivity. The importance of our mission here at the ITU to connect the world.

As we know, the European region is very diverse in terms of ICT development; embracing countries that lead the world in broadband connectivity and countries that are still treading a long road. The COVID pandemic will undoubtedly prioritize and accelerate the region's digital transformation process while also highlighting gaps in areas where greater regional and international cooperation will be key and where national support and technical assistance can play a critical role. At an organizational level, I'm very pleased to be working very constructively with many of you to advance our own internal digital transformation aiming to make BDT a more agile, fit for purpose organization better to offer value to its partners to deliver concrete, measurable results and to generate maximum impact on the ground advancing national regional and global agendas. All of this with of course the goal of accelerating the implementation of the WSIS Action Lines and advancing progress towards the achievement of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. In today's complex and challenging environment it is clearer than ever this this work cannot be done alone. Real progress is going to depend on broad, multi-stakeholder, digital cooperation. Every single actor in the digital ecosystem is going to have an important role to play and it came across clearly at our joint ITU webinar series on digital cooperation during COVID. I know a number of you on this call actually joined us for that series.



I also want to highlight here the UN Sustainable Development Reform and what this has meant for the ITU. Our role in the reforms has meant strengthening our coordination with the UN Development Coordination Office in New York, with the UN country teams at the national level and with the UN system for Europe and Central Asia at the regional level. And that's why I am particularly pleased to be joined today by the regional director of the UN Development Coordination Office for Europe and Central Asia. The recently established UN Digital Transformation Group for Europe and Central Asia will provide great benefit in fostering the delivery of concrete projects that advanced our shared Development Agenda. I would also like to thank our UN partners, many of whom are joining us today, for the trust that you have placed in ITU. We have over the past several months developed fruitful partnerships with many of you from WHO, to FAO, UN Women, UNICEF and others. As we all know, the five Regional Initiatives that were adopted by the World Telecommunication Conference in 2017 remain our roadmap for delivering on the priorities of the region and these are, of course, in the fields of ICT infrastructure, digitization, digital inclusion, cybersecurity and innovation. If you followed our RBM-TDAG webinar series, you have seen that we have connected those initiatives to our global programs, to our Study Group work as well as to initiatives from other regions, and in an effort to synergize, maximize impact, and drive forward a results-based framework. We have a number of activities that we are already advancing in our agenda for Europe and I want to highlight a few of them. We launched earlier this year the ITU-WHO-EC project to establish a European mHealth Knowledge and Innovation Hub which serves as a repository of national experiences to help support countries and regions in setting up large scale mHealth programs. So far we have some 20 institutions from across Europe that have joined us in this exciting initiative.

We also recently signed the ITU-Broadband Foundation 'Supporting Investment Opportunity Mapping Systems in Broadband Infrastructure for South Eastern Europe' project. My first virtual signing ceremony, we did that a few weeks ago and that project is on broadband investment mapping for Southeastern Europe. It is going to assist Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Ukraine in mapping broadband infrastructure and services. I also wanted to highlight the ITU-European Commission Accessible Europe platform which is advancing the implementation of ICT accessibility, fostering innovation and supporting countries in establishing enabling an inclusive environments. None of these initiatives could have happened on our own. So we are very grateful to our many partners and I want to thank in particular our European regional telecommunication organization, CEPT, and other partners including the European Commission, BEREC, Eastern Partnership Electronic Communications Regulators Network, ENISA, Regional Cooperation Council, and many others for collaborations and contributions to ITU regional initiatives and to Europe's digital Development Agenda. Your partnership is a strong endorsement of ITU as a valuable platform for cross-regional partnership, for knowledge sharing, for impact generation and I would say most importantly for our efforts to meet the 17 Sustainable Development Goals which are now less than ten years away. Before I conclude I also wanted to take this opportunity to introduce two new faces in the BDT. I want to take the opportunity to introduce my deputy, Stephen Bereaux. Many of you know Stephen. He joined us some weeks ago just before we went in to lockdown and Stephen is here with us in Geneva. I also wanted to introduce our new regional director for the CIS, Natalia, based in Moscow and who is also joining us for this meeting. I just want to thank you all again for joining us and really appreciate all the work that you are doing with us to advance digital development throughout Europe and I wish you a very rich and productive discussion today. With that, Jaroslaw, I am going to stop and hand back over to you. Thank you very much."



Ms. CRISTIANA FLUTUR, Co-President of Conference of European Postal and Telecommunication Administration (CEPT):

“Thank you. It is a pleasure for me to participate in the opening session of the RDF. Unfortunately, I am not able to welcome you to Bucharest today. This would have been the case if not for this pandemic, but I am very grateful that we can still have a meeting, even if it is virtual. Who knows, maybe with more participants than we would have had; let's see the bright side of this. So I cannot tell you to go visit the city but I can encourage you to be engaged in our meeting and let's say you probably know what the CEPT does. The membership of the CEPT is across the entire continent of Europe; we have more than 40 countries members. We are preparing the regional proposals and positions that we have for WTDC and the ITU's activities. Normally, as we have very good cooperation and very good collaboration with the ITU, we engage in these meetings back to back with our Committee-ITU Policies meeting that I have the pleasure of chairing; and this is still the case this year. So, from home we start our CEPT-ITU Plenary meeting where we have plans to engage in the preparations for WTDC as the WTDC-21 is approaching next year. We will be starting with a project team that will be dedicated to preparing Europe for WTDC, so we are very happy to have this excellent collaboration with the ITU Office for Europe, with Jaroslaw and his team as well as the BDT director, with you Doreen. We are happy to have you intervening with our meeting tomorrow; this is very fruitful. Of course, I encourage all of you to participate tomorrow if you can.

Also, what I would like to say is that we all see that this pandemic has brought to our attention how technology is shaping the world. Actually, for us in this environment it was clearer before, but for many people it became very clear now. So we were able to do our jobs from our home. We were able to talk to our dear ones, to talk to our family, see them, even if we are apart in this difficult time. Now that the population of the world is affected by this pandemic and had to stay home, they clearly see now how technology is shaping the world; connectivity has become even more important in one month. At the beginning of the pandemic, we could see how connectivity is such a key issue and now we see technology as a need. Technology is not just something that aids in facilitating our day-to-day life; it is a need and it is this need that is shaping the ITU's activities. I'm very grateful that the ITU management team, the Secretary-General, the Deputy Secretary-General and the directors have been very much engaged in this as well as very proactively reshaping the activities of the Union very quickly. I think it actually felt natural to use technologies to continue the activities. I don't want to take too long of this session. Let's get more engaged in the actual discussions of the RDF. Good to see you all and looking forward to the discussions. Thank you.”

Ms. MAJLINDA BREGU, Secretary General, Regional Cooperation Council (RCC):

“Thank you very much. Thank you for inviting and thank you for this opportunity. I hardly heard all that you said but I am pretty confident that you said good words. So that's the problem with the digital and our technological shift this last month. I'm confident as well that our lives have never been as similar as during this lockdown and pandemic. We have been all crowding on video calls, zooming in, zooming out, or some of us even during the afternoon slumped in front of a



streaming TV. These social distancing rules have brought us to this new remote life experience, but everyone has this perplexity with himself or herself while leading a team working remotely. Nevertheless, by the end of the last year, in December and at beginning of January before the pandemic started, RCC conducted interviews for our annual environment survey which is the instrument by which we test -- we test the citizens perception in the Western Balkans. Internet was extensively used for communication purposes with the majority on social media. It was less popular on education at 30% and for online shopping at 22%. E-Government services are used by only 3% of the population. All of us here in the region face those difficulties with government services where for example once it was the case in Albania, we had to apply for the provision to go out for shopping. Less than 17% of the citizens are not using the Internet at all in Western Balkans. Mostly, these are the people over 65 years old. Again, from March the situation changed drastically. In all our region schooling became a daily routine, online schooling was a daily routine and our work became a routine as well and people were almost growing used to these new key words of zoom and now all the conferences, seminars, summit happened online. The New York Summit happened for the very first time virtual and this could not have been imaginable some months ago.

Again we tried by the beginning of this pandemic to use the technology and the digital skills for good and improving the situation in the Western Balkans and I'm receiving to the services, and sometimes played even border police role. The digital innovation has as well been used to assist the health system in our region. However, the situation in the Western Balkans is not rosy when it comes to digital. There is still a long way to reach the digital transformation. Sometimes the road is even bumpier than we could even imagine. You are aware of data and studies and nearly half the households in the Western Balkans lack computer access at home with one-third lacking fixed broadband Internet connections; that is going to be a major challenge for the months and years to come. So we know that we are all aware that we need to adopt the new challenges of Digital Age but we need to adapt as well. And from adopting the technology as well to adapting, there is really a big and huge river in between.

What are we worried about? So the digital pillar is one of the main components that RCC works with. I would say that it is one of, if not the component that we are most proud of. Still, we know that two-thirds of individuals lack skills required to navigate in digital space and only one-fifth of individuals in the Western Balkans used Internet to connect with their authorities in 2019. We are aware that 90% of jobs require certain digital skills and these figures will start to increase even more in the years to come. So although the situation in the Western Balkans has improved in the last years in terms of digital transformation performance, the connectivity gaps are still quite high. The RCC is trying to assist the region to identify those connectivity gaps so as to support better use of the funds that are available through different instruments such as WPIF which is the Western Balkans instrument investment facility with advancing with digital infrastructure investment. However, if I have to spell out and mention one of the major problems that requires immediate action in the region it will be digital skills. Western Balkans ranks very badly when it comes to the digital skills. The best ranking so far is Montenegro which stands at 62. So education and competition policy as well has to be adopted. Schools and universities should provide common generation with the skills they need to work in these emerging economies. Societies as well, need to put a premium on retraining workers whose skills have been degraded. A big part of the problem as well is that of women's digital skills and women and labor market. More than 48%, I say approximately 50%, 50% of the women in the region are not officially part of the labor market. Since there are no big industry here for fabrics anymore, or the old schemes of employment, we need as well to identify those vulnerable groups that have to be immediately trained in order to



switch their -- the development of their region from one that is driven by the accumulation of physical capital to one that is driven by the accumulation of knowledge. So I think that these are going to be quite big challenges for us to think out of the box, to offer those possibilities to the region and digitally driven mindset to shape the regional digital agenda.

We are just looking forward together with our partners to be ready and prepare a more challenging and ambitious agenda on the digital transformation of the region that will be part of the new regional integration package that will be launched and endorsed by the Sofia Summit. In a nutshell, I would say that a lot of changes have happened, but we are all aware that we still have to concentrate a lot in helping our region to change dramatically from lagging in digital innovation to becoming a center of such innovation. I'm stopping here."

Ms. IRENA VOJACKOVA-SOLLORANO, Regional Director, UN Development Coordination Office for Europe and Central Asia:

"It's wonderful to see you. Big apologies I was not able to connect earlier. I had Wi-Fi problems here, and yeah, things were, got complicated. But that brings me straight to the topic that in today's world if we don't have functional IT, we are all pretty lost. So therefore, I'm grateful that you are having this discussion today, and especially that you are engaging all the young people who are now sharing their experiences, I was able to listen to a few, and it is really a great pleasure to be with you. In my role, I'm supporting the resident coordinators in Europe and Central Asia and with this also the UN country teams.

ITU, being a non-resident agency, is an agency that is always a little bit on the side-lines, but I think in this crisis we are now all living through has brought to our attention and also to the attention of governments that without functional IT, without international communication about ITU rules and regulations, we would have much harder time than we have now. We wouldn't be able to communicate, and we wouldn't be able also to deal with the crisis, and governments would be pretty much on their own.

I think the work of the ITU, definitely got not a new meaning, but a much more visible meaning through this crisis. Therefore, it is great that you are now reaching out, that you are able to connect, and also that the country teams are able now to work with you, because we really need the advice, we need the technical skills that are there, and also stressing that governments have to work together, because this is not a national issue. As was mentioned before, with Internet connections, all of us are equals, and governments have to learn not only how to use it and how to deal with it, but also how to regulate it so that it's not abused.

So I'm grateful that you are doing this. I will continue listening in, and thank you so much and my big apologies again that I was not able to be with you from the beginning. I see you have the SDGs in the background, there is not a single SDG that would not need ITU so there is a big job ahead of you. Thank you."

