



Remarks

by

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**High Representative
and
Under-Secretary-General**

**for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries
and Small Island Developing States
at the**

**Policy Forum, Mobile Learning Week
“Skills for a Connected World”**

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Room 2, UNESCO HQs, Paris

***Speech to be delivered from 09:15 to 09:30**

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen, dear Friends, Colleagues

It is my great pleasure to be with you.

Over the past few days, I witnessed the high energy this meeting generates. Without any doubt, the revolution of our times is a technological one and a revolution where we may not yet have fully understood or measured both its potential and also its dangers.

This has many implications for policy and decision-makers and a forum like this forum is very timely.

As the High Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General for the globe's most vulnerable, I stand as a voice for the more than one billion people living in the so-called Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing countries, and Small Island Developing States - the 91 countries OHRLLS serves.

What you discuss not only shapes the lives of our generations but possibly even more so those of future generations.

What you discuss has strong bearing on the how and when we achieve the globally agreed on Agenda 2030 and if indeed we do so by leaving no one behind.

Today, I wish to share a few thoughts on why I believe we must quickly scale up action to support the LDC, LLDC and SIDS communities so they are not left behind in this ever accelerating technology driven world of ours.

The challenge before us is twofold.

Let me call it a challenge of “hardware” and a challenge of “software”.

Access to information and communication technology (ICT) is no longer a question of “if” but one of must if you do not wish to be left behind.

The good news is that even some of the globe's most vulnerable countries have not entirely been left behind in some aspects of ICT.

You all have seen the data we have:

mobile cellular subscriptions leapfrogged in all three groups of vulnerable countries OHRLLS serves. In LDCs, subscription rates increased exponentially from almost zero in 2000 to 68 per cent in 2016. In LLDCs, the rates increased from about 1 per cent in 2000 to 74 per cent in 2016. In the SIDS, it rose from almost 10 per cent in 2000 to 81 per cent in 2016.

Behind these data we find a development reality. ICT has helped in many countries to bring urban and rural areas closer together.

As a Pacific islander, I recognise that overcoming geographical distances and fragmentation is a challenge and I am sure you all aware how ICT has fundamentally impacted on every day

life - no more long lines and hours of waiting to reach a distant relative! Some aspects of ICT are as basic as that.

Indeed, fairly basic, low-bandwidth mobile cellular technologies have served as a platform for various applications to improve health services, increase financial inclusion and advance livelihoods in the vulnerable countries.

For example, mobile money such as the famous M-Pesa has spread to many LDCs.

Mobile money services are based on a simple text system that allows users without bank accounts to make and receive payments. A basic-feature phone is sufficient for accessing this service. This service is now available in a number of vulnerable countries including Tanzania, Mozambique, Lesotho and the Democratic Republic of Congo. It brings with it not just financial inclusion but also efficiency and innovation.

Another example is m-Diabetes, a programme which Senegal is implementing with support from the World Health Organization (WHO) and International Telecommunication Union (ITU). It uses an SMS platform to send text messages to diabetics with diet reminders. In early 2017, there were about 50,000 people registered to use the system out of some 123,000 with diabetes in Senegal.

What we indeed see is widespread mobile use. Internet access as such also increased but the usage is not as widespread as that of mobile phones.

In 2016, about 15 per cent of the population were using the internet, relative to just about 1 per cent, ten years earlier. The rate was higher in LLDCs at 23 per cent and almost 40 per cent in the SIDS.

While Internet penetration is rising, it is very unlikely that universal and affordable access to the Internet will be achieved in LDCs by 2020, as agreed by the United Nations Member States in SDG 9.c. In many vulnerable countries, very few of those who use the Internet have high-speed services. It is basically an infrastructure and cost issue.

Yet, it is clear that high-speed broadband Internet has greater potential in harnessing development outcomes than mobile-based narrowband. This is especially true in vulnerable countries.

High-speed broadband is a pre-requisite for increased innovation and productivity including for employment creation especially in sectors that are likely to be ICT-users such as finance and services industries. High-speed broadband also drives education and healthcare service provision.

Globally, close to 50 per cent of people - and 90 per cent in the developed countries - have mobile broadband access.

Compare this to mobile-broadband access in LDCs standing at just above one fifth of the population in 2017!

This for what I call the “hardware” issue and I have not even touched on the “software” issues ranging from appropriate legal frameworks to user education to efficient application of all that modern technology has the potential to offer us.

It is clear that digital transformation has not yet fully taken root in LDCs, LLDCs and SIDS and that we have a risk that they may be left behind.

I will therefore mention a few points that require our collective attention.

These points are based on findings contained in the latest joint report between OHRLLS and ITU on “ICTs, LDCs and the SDGs”.

I will also draw on four extensive case studies we conducted with support from several commissioners and under the auspices of the Broadband Commission. These concern Cambodia, Rwanda, Senegal and Vanuatu.

I have two key points to share.

First, it is important to focus on the “hardware” supply side factors.

This means accelerating investing in broadband infrastructure, especially in rural and underserved areas. In addition, it is important to make the Internet affordable. The high cost of Internet services in some countries affects the amount of data that existing users can consume. In addition, device prices remain a key obstacle to affordability for non-users and the price of internet services also simply excludes people from access.

Second and just as importantly, in order for broadband to have a wider impact and for vulnerable countries to be able to harness the emerging technologies, there is a need to invest in user capacity building.

What do I mean by this?

To put this into very simple language, if you buy yourself a new appliance for your house but you cannot read the instructions on how to use it because it is not in your language, well that appliance will not be of much use to you!

So, the provision of an enabling user environment is a must and here a lot of capacity-building is needed.

It truly is critical to ensure that ALL people and businesses have the capability to use the internet.

In the reports I just mentioned, we found that digital literacy is increasingly emerging as a leading barrier to Internet use in many vulnerable countries. Low levels of literacy are the major barrier to knowledge and usage of the Internet.

The ITU and OHRLLS report specifically found that secondary school enrolment has a significant impact and is a major driver in Internet use in LDCs.

Enhancing digital skills must also include rollout of comprehensive digital literacy programs for all.

We found that this requires some of the following to now move our talk to action:

- Larger deployment and integration of broadband in schools;
- Introduction of digital literacy in school curriculums to boost usage. This will imply stocking the schools with the right equipment, including adequate quantity of computers;
- Broadband awareness for small and medium-scale enterprises and high-level skills development opportunities.

These are basics we must put in place for harnessing the many opportunities ICT affords per se for development including for notching up ICT sector employment. We cannot leave the LDCs, LLDCs and SIDS behind in an era that is technology driven and where technology evolves continuously. We do not need now a further gap - the gap of the technology haves and have nots.

Several vulnerable countries are already implementing a few of these actions and we ought to also pay attention to some rather innovative actions.

In early 2017, the Government of Rwanda launched the Digital Ambassador Program in the spirit of training of trainers. The program will train 5 000 young people and post them to all the country's 30 districts in order to provide digital skills training for 5 million Rwandans over a four-year period.

If successful, the program has the potential to boost Rwanda's digital literacy to 85 per cent of the population and give Internet coverage in the country a strong boost. We need to see more of such examples across other vulnerable countries.

I have a final point to make.

So far I have alerted to the need to notch up our investment into ICT infrastructure and that for capacity-building.

There is a third dimension and that is the one of leveraging ICT on a cross-sectoral and cross-country basis to speed up R&D for the LDCs. After all, ICT as such is not an end in itself but it is a means for accelerating development as recognised in the SDGs.

OHRLLS has supported the establishment of a new UN entity, the Technology Bank for LDCs.

The Technology Bank broadly aims to enhance Science, Technology and Innovation capacity, a long-standing priority of the LDCs.

Admittedly, the Bank has a large mandate.

Admittedly, it is access to broadband Internet in LDCs which will condition to a major extent how the Bank can make quick headways in meeting its objectives.

In the coming year, the Technology Bank will focus on facilitating and increasing online access and in turn, provide improved access for scientists and researchers to data, publications, and STI initiatives. It is expected to enhance intra-LDC and international collaboration between research centers and universities.

The key concern here is for the Bank to help ensure that LDCs are not left behind in the rapidly evolving global knowledge economy.

It is my hope that many of you, especially the Internet companies, will take an active interest and partner with the Bank. We must give LDCs a chance to actively participate in the fast-changing knowledge economy.

Let us leave no one behind!

I now look forward to learning and hearing more about the various pathways being used by governments, the private sector, development partners and all other stakeholders in support of developing digital skills required in the digital economy for the benefit of achieving sustainable and inclusive development paths.

I thank you.