Opening Remarks

by

Ms. Fekitamoeloa Katoa ‘Utoikamanu

High Representative
and
Under-Secretary-General
Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries
and Small Island Developing States

Annual Meeting of Paris21
Opening address: The emergence of data-driven societies – is the Global South left out?

Paris, France
2 April 2019
Colleagues and friends
Ladies and Gentlemen

I am pleased to join you today and to do so in my capacity as PARIS21’s Data Champion for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries & Small Island Developing States.

More than ever, accurate, timely and relevant data are needed in these times of rapid changes but also times where people question what is true and what is not.

It certainly is encouraging that over the last several years, and in the context of the SDG discussions, data and data needs have come much more to the forefront.

It is equally good to see that what used to be much an "insiders" group has opened up interactions to involve new actors.

And it is just so important that the statistical community is looking at how to bring data closer to people.

So, I am happy to see that PARIS21 is leading this discussion to bridge the vast distance, the big gap between data and society.

Data is indeed all around us.

What is really critical is though to have a timely understanding of how societies move, change and what the impact of policies is.

in so many, in too many instances it remains a challenge.

We have seen how some countries are using digitalisation and new technologies to deliver essential services, generate economic activity and improve decision making. However, within this evolving “data world”, are all countries leveraging this data and information at the same pace? I am excited to see that today’s conference is not only focusing on identifying the ways data is impacting society at large, but also specifically ensuring that no one is left behind in this evolving space.

For many LDCs, LLDCs and SIDS, developing digitalization strategies and integrating new technologies are important elements that can contribute to their making sustainable development a reality for their citizens.

Being able both to fully participate in and to compete in the digital economy requires that vulnerable countries are equipped with such basics as access to fast internet and also train, reach out to people to build a critical mass of digital-literacy, to develop relevant local content and applications.

When we really drill down to what it will take to "leave nobody behind", these are issues we must squarely address.

As a member of the Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development, I chaired a Working Group on leveraging investments in broadband in vulnerable countries.
A key issue concerns to understand much better - or as some say "produce the knowledge" - on how LDCs, LLDCs and SIDS are leveraging investment in broadband connectivity.

To gain that better insight, my Office asked for four case studies in Rwanda, Senegal, Cambodia and Vanuatu.

Naturally, the study highlights lessons from these countries and shows common threads such as the need to expand digital training and awareness. At the same time, more supportive legislation, better coordination among actors of the broadband industry, and improved monitoring and evaluation are also needed.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Not a day goes by where in any given country, issues surface around data privacy or fraudulent data use or even creation!

New technology coupled with the dare I say extreme speed of data transmission, data use - or abuse - has placed great urgency on the need for protecting user information and data privacy.

The limited capacities of the LDCs, LLDCs and SIDS mean we have added a data vulnerability, indeed a new dimension to their vulnerability. Protecting information of citizens and critical infrastructure calls for enhancement of their resilience in the cyber ecosystem.

In the area of data privacy, the studies clearly showed that governments need to ensure both the existence of enabling legislation and the capacity to enact that legislation to build and maintain trust in the digital economy. This includes of course laws governing electronic transactions, consumer protection, data privacy and information security.

All this needs to be in place so that the potential of technology can result in consumers and businesses having greater confidence in using and developing online services.

So we have challenges of digital-literacy and issues of information and data privacy, but we also have some much more fundamental issues here!

And that is reliable access to electricity and connectivity. Of course, sitting in our well equipped surroundings this may seem far- fetched to some but these do remain a considerable constraint across LDCs, LLDCs and SIDS.

Together, these three groups account for a total population of about 1.1 billion.

Only

44.8% of LDC,

53.1% of LLDCs and
76.3% of SIDS had access to reliable electricity in 2016.

This data hides huge disparities within and across countries.

Overall, the high cost of rolling out internet services in remote rural areas where roads are scarce, grid electricity rare and incomes low, is not just yet another challenge but often just impossible.

This poses a major barrier to meaningful technological advancement in countries that are left furthest behind.

Ladies and Gentlemen

Mildly put, the LDCs, LLDCs and SIDS in 2019 continue to face challenges in developing critical and basic infrastructure that could act as the backbone for them to also be included in the digital economy - and NOT to be left behind!

Cloud computing are another mantra we often hear about.

This offers opportunities to government, civil society and the private sector to deploy highly scalable solutions at a fraction of the cost and without the high maintenance overheads of past decades.

Here again, the gap the LDCs, LLDCs and SIDS experience as against other developing and developed countries is high.

My final point concerns institutional capacity. The Global South faces capacity bottlenecks that greatly impact data – financial unpredictability to insecurity, outdated statistical laws and policies no longer relevant in today’s world (e.g., digitalisation, use of technology, online transactions, etc.), inflexible organisational structures and processes and lack of skilled human resources.

Going forward, the global south must address these issues and governments must take measures in developing a data and statistics culture.

What will this take? Policy makers must be encouraged to use the data available to them from national statistical offices. At the same time, citizens and the public need to have a healthy relationship and basic understanding of the role of data in their well-being. By building up this culture, data and statistics can be fully leveraged.

Leaving no one behind not only is a tall order but also one where we must get concrete. I look forward to listening to all of you.

As your PARIS21’s Data Champion, I certainly will continue to strongly advocate for improved national statistical systems in LDCs, LLDCs and SIDS.

Thank you.