



First session of the Preparatory Committee for SIDS4

Statement by the

International Telecommunication Union (ITU)

Presented by

**Ursula Wynhoven, ITU Representative to the United Nations,
New York, UNHQ**

22 - 26 January 2024

Chair, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates,

Thank you for this opportunity to highlight the role of digital technologies and ITU's development priorities in Small Islands Developing States in this important conversation in the lead-up to the Fourth United Nations Conference.

Almost half-way through the Decade of Action, SIDS4 is a critical opportunity to accelerate the sustainable development agenda and lead SIDS towards an inclusive and sustainable future. We see responsible, inclusive and sustainable digital technologies as a driver for the transformation of economies and an enabler of the development of all economic sectors.

Digital technologies offer tremendous possibilities, but their full potential can only be realized when they are available to all. With 2.6 billion people still offline and many more without meaningful access, a disproportionate number of whom are in SIDS and other developing countries, new digital divides are emerging compounded by social and economic inequalities. These gaps will not close on their own. The COVID-19 pandemic and the rapid, disruptive technologies take-up over the past years has magnified the costs of digital exclusion and the disadvantages of being left behind.

SIDS face several unique challenges when it comes to digital technologies, which can have significant implications for their social, economic and environmental development. Their remoteness and geography, the small scale of their economies, and the high costs of connectivity, data and devices have meant that many SIDS are still yet to enjoy universal access to low cost, high bandwidth international connectivity.

ITU sees three critical areas to be addressed through the SIDS4 process and in the outcome document of the conference, laying the foundation for synergetic, impactful implementation.

The first is universal and meaningful connectivity.

Connecting everyone is a must and a priority, but is no longer enough. Championed by ITU, universal and meaningful connectivity is the possibility for everyone to enjoy a safe, satisfying, enriching, productive, and affordable online experience – also increasing the potential for digital entrepreneurship and job creation, and the diversification of national economies. Only by achieving universal and meaningful connectivity will SIDS fully realize the promise connectivity holds for digital transformation and for socio-economic development. To help focus on what needs to be done, ITU's Development Bureau will release, at the end of next month, a special edition of our flagship Facts and Figures devoted to SIDS.

The second area is building multi-dimensional resilience.

The limited infrastructure and acute climate vulnerability of SIDS require a holistic approach to sustainable development – including investments in resilient energy and digital infrastructure, the development of anticipatory policies, strengthening governance, building ecosystem initiatives, and facilitating international cooperation in key areas such as trade. Leveraged wisely, digital technologies can accelerate the achievement of SIDS social and economic goals.

Importantly, digital technologies unleash new channels to reach communities at risk, warn about imminent disasters and provide people with actionable advice during and in the aftermath of disasters. Launched by the UN Secretary-General in 2023, the Early Warning for All initiative aims to protect every person on Earth with advanced Early Warning Systems by 2027. As one of the lead implementing agencies of the initiative, ITU is committed to supporting SIDS in building resilient national capacities in the area of emergency telecommunications.

The third area is Science, Technology and Innovation. Through the creation of new industries, improving healthcare and education access through telemedicine and online learning, and enhancing environmental resilience through data-driven approaches and smart technologies, STI can foster sustainable economic growth and digital inclusion.

By embracing digital innovation, SIDS can harness the transformative power of technology to overcome their systemic limitations and enhance the resilience of their societies.

Committed to advancing universal meaningful connectivity and sustainable digital transformation globally, ITU launched the Partner2Connect Digital Coalition (P2C), a multistakeholder alliance, in close cooperation with the Office of the United Nations Secretary-General's Envoy on Technology, and in line with the United Nations Secretary-General's Roadmap for Digital Cooperation.

In the last two years, we have mobilized more than 860 pledges from some 420 public and private entities amounting to almost USD 37 billion in connectivity projects around the world.

As of today, there are 129 P2C pledges valued at USD 17.74 billion made by 79 entities, to be implemented in Small Island and Developing States.

Our objective to foster universal meaningful connectivity and sustainable digital transformation in the world's hardest-to-connect communities, and in particular in LDCs, LLDCs and SIDS.

Recently, we set ourselves a clear and ambitious target: USD 100 billion in pledges by 2026. We plan a dedicated drive for pledges for SIDS.

Partnership will be key to close digital divides and sustainably and inclusively leverage digital technologies for SIDS. One such collaboration we have been working on with and for SIDS is the Smart Villages and Smart Islands Initiative, a digital transformation project designed to provide affordable connectivity and sustainable digital services to remote communities in developing countries. It aims to improve quality of life and economic opportunities of rural and island communities by empowering them with digitally-enabled solutions and skills. The approach is focused on creating a shared cross-sector digital infrastructure that consists of common ICT building blocks that can simultaneously support a number of applications and services (such as health, agriculture, education, finance, early warning and disaster prevention). For more information see: <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/ICT-Applications/Pages/Initiatives/ASP/Smart-Islands/Smart-Islands-Initiative.aspx>

We look forward to working with you to build momentum towards the implementation of the outcomes of the conference and building sustainable, resilient economies in SIDS that leave no one behind.

Thank you.