

**Annual Ministerial Meeting of Foreign Ministers of Landlocked Developing Countries**  
*“Partnering for accelerated implementation of the Vienna Programme of Action  
and achieving sustainable development in LLDCs in the COVID-19 Era”*

ITU Secretary-General Houlin Zhao  
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OPENING REMARKS

Excellencies, Ministers, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honor to address this year’s Annual Ministerial Meeting of Foreign Ministers of Landlocked Developing Countries. My thanks to you and His Excellency Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Mr. Mukhtar Tileuberdi, for making ITU part of your discussions.

We meet at a moment of deep concern over the special challenges facing LLDCs. The pandemic is threatening to reverse our countries’ progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals.

As the UN specialized agency for information and communication technologies, ITU remains committed to leveraging ICTs to accelerate the implementation of the Vienna Programme of Action and the SDGs. Essential to this effort is improving international connectivity conditions, in line with the revised resolution on special measures for LLDCs and other vulnerable countries.

I am pleased that the Midterm Review of the Vienna Programme of Action held at the UN General Assembly last December identified ICT infrastructure connectivity as critical. And I join the call to action for greater investments and better domestic investment environments in ICT outlined in the UN Roadmap for Accelerated Implementation of the Vienna Programme of Action for LLDCs in the Remaining Five Years.

Digital infrastructure is not just a convenience, but an essential requirement to take an active part in society and the economy. And that is why, through newly launched initiatives such as Connect2Recover, ITU will help expand access to affordable and reliable connectivity in some of the least well-connected countries.

Excellencies,

We stand at a pivotal moment where the improvement of connectivity is slowing down, where broadband services can still be too expensive for the poorest consumers – and where, as shown by ITU’s new Connecting Humanity study, levels of financing needed to extend networks to unserved communities are unprecedented.

Creating environments conducive to investment in ICTs for private sector investors has never been more important. This question was at the heart of ITU’s Global Symposium for Regulators earlier this month, an event that has fostered a dynamic industry regulators dialogue between regulators, policy makers, industry leaders, and other key ICT stakeholders since 2000.

As I told the BRICS Communications Ministers and the G20 Finance and Health Ministers just last week, when ICT investments are fragmented among different Ministries and not well coordinated within the same country, we risk causing capacity inefficiencies and resource shortfalls at precisely the time when more investments in ICTs are needed.

As Foreign Ministers, you play a key role in catalyzing private-sector investment in ICT in LLDCs and ensuring that these investments fit within a sound whole-of-government ICT investment strategy.

Ladies and gentlemen,

**As we discuss how ICT can help us fight COVID-19**, let us remember that more than 40 per cent of the population of LLDCs still lacks access to the digital infrastructure, technologies, and services that have been so essential during this crisis.

I believe **that** neither the Vienna Programme of Action nor the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development will be achieved until everyone, everywhere is connected.

I am here today to reaffirm ITU's strong support to LLDCs in this Decade of Action.

More than ever before, leaving no one behind means leaving no one offline.

Landlocked Developing Countries may by nature feel a sense of isolation. Rest assured that ITU will continue to work by your side to address the pandemic, prepare for recovery, and help accelerate the implementation of the Vienna Programme of Action and the SDGs. Our wish is for landlocked countries to become land-connected countries and **for** all people **to be** connected!

Thank you.