



**United Nations Office of the High Representative for the
Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries
and Small Island Developing States (UN-OHRLS)**

**Remarks by Ms. Rabab Fatima
Under-Secretary-General and High Representative**

**Side event: Accelerating universal meaningful connectivity in
SIDS: Partner 2 Connect Digital Coalition High-level segment**

**Monday, 27 April 2024
16:00-17:30**


***Conference Room 5
(American University of Antigua)***

5 Minutes

Excellencies,

Distinguished Colleagues,

I have the pleasure to welcome you all to this important side event, on *accessing universal meaningful connectivity in SIDS*.

Over the past decade, we've witnessed a significant rise in Internet usage across SIDS, surpassing the global average annual growth  rate. Starting at just one-third of the population online in 2014 with the inception of the SAMOA Pathway, by 2023, this figure had increased to 67 percent.

However, within SIDS, there exist glaring discrepancies. For instance, while Papua New Guinea struggles with a mere 3 percent online penetration, in Singapore, there is near-universal digital connectivity.

In addition, SIDS still lag behind developed nations, where almost everyone is online.

It is imperative to achieve universal connectivity in SIDS to foster economic development, spur innovation, and enhance competitiveness.

Furthermore, in terms of gender parity in Internet usage, SIDS are surpassing the global average, with a female-to-male ratio of 0.97, nearing the threshold for gender parity.

In addition, SIDS have bigger ambitions over the next decade.

Looking ahead, SIDS have ambitious goals for the next decade. As we convene here in Antigua, it's imperative that we focus on the needs and aspirations of SIDS and identify concrete steps to support their journey.

The ABAS document outlines SIDS' aspirations, including investing in high-productivity sectors and bridging the digital divide through robust e-government and digital solutions.

Together with ITU, my Office, OHRLLS, has been working on advancing meaningful connectivity in vulnerable countries,

including SIDS. This has been through among others, publishing of joint reports and closely collaborating in various ventures including the Partner2Connect (P2C) Digital Coalition, which I will talk about shortly.

Over time, we have understood that despite progress, challenges persist.

One of these challenges is affordability. Broadband and mobile data costs in SIDS far exceeding the global median. The price of an entry-level fixed-broadband basket was about 46 per cent more expensive in a typical SIDS than the world's median price, while the price of the data-only mobile broadband was almost twice that of the world's median.

This is largely due to structural factors like high cost of imports and limited economies of scale. These challenges in turn deter new entrants and thus limit competition.

Another challenge is related to limited digital skills. While the digital access and use has been achieved in SIDS, we will need to understand whether parity has also been achieved at the level of

- a) digital skills and engagement and,**
- b) meaningful outcomes**

In general, the persistent digital skills gap between women and men globally is a concern. This is largely because women are significantly underrepresented in science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

In the private sector, recent evidence shows that the level of digital skills has a positive impact on firm-level productivity in the service sector, which is a significantly important sector for SIDS.

The Partner2Connect initiative has emerged as a game-changer, garnering nearly 900 pledges since its inception in 2022, with 132 pledges specifically targeting SIDS, totaling around USD 24.9 billion. These pledges encompass diverse areas such as infrastructure, digital economy, skills, and inclusion, underscoring the commitment of stakeholders to support SIDS' digital transformation.

As SIDS seek to leverage this momentum to forge new partnerships and mobilize resources, the P2C initiative can

serve as a catalyst by fostering collaboration, resource mobilization, and collective action.

Moving forward, my Office remains committed to collaborating with ITU and other partners to advance this shared goal.

I extend my sincere gratitude to each of you for your participation and dedication to this cause.

Thank you.