Summary

Third Preparatory Webinar for the SIDS Global Business Network Forum 2024

Thursday 29 February, 12-1pm

Virtual

Opening

- Ms. Rabab Fatima, Under-Secretary-General and High Representative of OHRLLS, extended a warm welcome to participants at the preparatory webinar for the 2024 SIDS Global Business Network Forum. She expressed gratitude to the Permanent Mission of Singapore, the International Telecommunication Union, the Government of Denmark and the Government of Ireland for their invaluable support in organizing the event.
- Ms. Fatima emphasized the critical role of digitalization, innovation, and technology in driving economic growth and societal transformation globally. She highlighted the significant digital divides in vulnerable countries, particularly in Small Island Developing States (SIDS), where universal connectivity remains a distant goal, with only 67 percent of the population online.
- Ms. Fatima underscored the affordability barrier to internet access in SIDS, with mobile-broadband packages being four times less affordable compared to high-income economies. She emphasized the urgent need for digital transformation, which is a high priority in the new programme of action to be adopted at the upcoming SIDS Conference in Antigua.
- The potential of the digital economy for economic growth and the empowerment of local communities, including youth and women, was highlighted. Ms. Fatima discussed the opportunities presented by the new era of industrial revolution and stressed the importance of stronger partnerships between governments and businesses.
- She emphasized the need for a robust science-policy interface involving various stakeholders and announced an expert panel to delve deeper into these issues. The panel would explore how SIDS can leverage technology, digitization, and innovation to overcome challenges and drive structural transformation for the benefit of their people.
- Ms. Fatima concluded by inviting reflections on how the private sector can contribute to the SIDS agenda for digital transformation, ensuring a brighter future for the 65 million people living in 39 SIDS.

Moderator

- Mr. Jason Tan, First Secretary for Sustainable Development at the Permanent Mission of Singapore to the United Nations in New York, served as the moderator for the third webinar session.

Expressing his deep commitment to overseeing sustainable development issues, Mr. Tan emphasized the importance of supporting the sustainable development aspirations of SIDS. He acknowledged the unique challenges faced by SIDS and the necessity for innovative solutions to address them, especially in the midst of the ongoing digital revolution.

- Mr. Tan highlighted the opportunities presented by technological advancements in various fields to bolster sustainability efforts, citing Singapore's utilization of digital solutions to enhance water, energy, and food security, along with efforts to improve data infrastructure and connectivity. He underscored the crucial role of the private sector and public-private partnerships in developing innovative sustainability solutions, spurring investments, and advancing research and development.
- Mr. Tan introduced the speakers for the webinar, Ms. Aishath Adnan, Co-Founder of Women in Tech Maldives; Mr. Mark Pereira, Founder of Zed Labs; Mr. Bob Perpall, Executive Vice President of New Satellite Systems; and Ms. Julia Jasinska, Head of International Relations & Trade Policy.

Private Sector Discussion

- Ms. Aishath Adnan, Co-Founder of Women in Tech Maldives, commenced her discussion by highlighting the Maldives' digitalization journey, primarily driven by the private sector. She emphasized the significant progress achieved, particularly in the telecom sector, with high mobile penetration and widespread fiber broadband adoption. Ms. Adnan mentioned the incorporation of cutting-edge technologies like Starlink and investments in new submarine cables.
- Since 2018, Women in Tech Maldives has focused on advocating for women's participation in the tech field, collaborating with both the private sector and government to develop strategies and initiatives targeting women, especially those in island communities. Various areas of concern were identified, including cybersecurity. Ms. Adnan stressed the private sector's role in fostering innovation through partnerships with the government, citing initiatives like hackathons and innovation events that have nurtured startups and prompted government engagement in emerging areas.
- She highlighted the growth of startups in cybersecurity, eCommerce, and transport logistics, despite initial regulatory challenges, and anticipated positive outcomes from initiatives like the Maldives Monetary Authority's regulatory sandbox. However, Ms. Adnan noted challenges faced by small island nations in receiving international payments from major FinTech providers, suggesting collaborative efforts as a solution. She emphasized the need for legal frameworks that support digitalization without hindering innovation and addressed the shortage of local talent, stressing the importance of gender equality in the tech sector.
- Ms. Adnan expressed hope that government initiatives to invest in human capital development would facilitate broader accessibility to services, and she affirmed the private sector's commitment to supporting these efforts.
- Mr. Mark Pereira, Founder of Zed Labs, provided insight into the company's background as a technology startup based in the Caribbean. Initially established in Sydney, Australia, Mr. Pereira shifted the company's focus to the Caribbean with the goal of bringing advanced technology expertise from First World countries to the region to propel technological advancements. He highlighted the potential of FinTech to address challenges faced by Micro, Small, and Medium-sized Enterprises (MSMEs) in accessing foreign capital, particularly in regions like the Caribbean with complex forex systems.

- Mr. Pereira emphasized blockchain technology's role in bridging this gap and facilitating financial inclusivity through solutions that enable easier access to primary currencies such as the US dollar and euro. Zed Labs is currently piloting such a solution aimed at making financial systems more inclusive.
- Mr. Pereira discussed collaborations with institutions like the Central Bank, IMF, and United Nations on digital strategy, stressing the importance of public-private partnerships in overcoming challenges unique to small countries. He highlighted the need for greater collaboration and sharing of ideas within the Caribbean's technology ecosystem. Zed Labs has initiated local projects, including coworking spaces, software development boot camps to onboard youth and underprivileged individuals into the tech sector, and a mobile payments application aimed at enhancing financial inclusion and empowering MSMEs.
- Mr. Pereira viewed innovation as a means for the Caribbean region to leapfrog, despite potential disruption to established systems. He expressed Zed Labs' commitment to being at the forefront of technological development to improve the lives of individuals in the region.
- Mr. Bob Perpall, Executive Vice President of New Satellite Systems, shared insights into the company's journey as a satellite network operator in the Asia Pacific region. Established in 2013 as a business license in Singapore, the company successfully launched its satellite, Kacific One, in December 2019 and commenced services in February 2020. With a focus on providing managed bandwidth services, Mr. Perpall explained that users can connect to the internet via a small dish terminal and modem, accessing one of their three gateway hubs.
- The service primarily targets rural and unconnected areas across 25 countries in the Asia Pacific region, serving a population of approximately 600 million. New Satellite Systems provides community-based broadband, catering to organizations and small businesses, including schools, clinics, governments, hospitals, NGOs, telcos, churches, and clubs. They offer enterprise and gig starter service plans tailored to larger organizations and small entities, respectively.
- Mr. Perpall highlighted the company's initiatives in fostering local economies, such as providing resilience solutions and partnering with governments under Universal Service Obligations (USO) to prioritize connectivity for schools and clinics. He cited successful partnerships with the Indonesian and Philippine governments, emphasizing the impact on rural communities.
- He discussed ongoing projects to expand services in Central Asia and Southeast Asia, including Malaysia and Afghanistan. New Satellite Systems aims to replicate its successful business model in these regions, leveraging flexible satellite technology to tailor capacity placement according to local needs.
- Ms. Julia Jasinska, Head of International Relations & Trade Policy at Nokia, expressed gratitude to the OHRLLS for inviting her to participate in the virtual discussion. She commended the previous discussion on connecting hard-to-reach areas, aligning with Nokia's commitment to digital connectivity. Nokia offers a wide range of digital infrastructure solutions, including international connectivity through subsea cables, fiber optics, mobile solutions, fixed wireless, and satellite services.
- Ms. Jasinska emphasized the immense opportunity presented by digitalization for sustainability, productivity, and accessibility worldwide. However, she acknowledged that not all regions are on the same page, with small island developing states facing specific challenges due to their remoteness and low population density. As a result, many inhabitants in these regions lack internet access.

- She highlighted initiatives from Nokia to address these challenges, such as the Smart Cable project connecting Vanuatu and New Caledonia, which aims to improve connectivity quality and reduce costs. Additionally, Nokia is upgrading mobile solutions for several Pacific countries, including Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Samoa, Tonga, Vanuatu, and Nauru, moving towards 5G deployment in collaboration with Digicel Pacific.
- Ms. Jasinska stressed the importance of collaboration between the private and public sectors to improve the investment climate and bridge the digital divide. Governments can play a crucial role by removing deployment barriers, making spectrum affordable, maintaining transparent regulatory environments, and adopting global standards. She suggested interventions like working as anchor tenants, facilitating public-private partnerships, implementing neutral host models, and creating demand through initiatives like vouchers or tax breaks for broadband access.
- Ms. Jasinska concluded by expressing hope for continued discussions to develop solutions that ensure digital inclusion for all.

Lead Discussant

- Mr. Ashish Narayan, Programme Coordinator at the ITU Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, acknowledged the insightful discussions by Mr. Perpall and Ms. Jasinska, which paved the way for focusing on the Pacific region, an area of particular concern for the ITU. He noted the efforts made in countries like Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea, and Tonga to embark on digital transformation journeys, with strategic initiatives being developed to address the challenges.
- Mr. Narayan highlighted the importance of harmonizing efforts across various government departments to ensure a cohesive approach to digital transformation. He mentioned the STACK-based approach, which integrates different departments to optimize infrastructure reuse, addressing a key challenge faced by SIDS. Institutional and individual capacity building emerged as critical challenges at the national level.
- Drawing on experiences in Papua New Guinea, Mr. Narayan emphasized the significance of collaborative workshops and the establishment of digital transformation offices at both national and local levels to foster a shared vision and enhance capacity.
- Transitioning to the topic of extending benefits to rural and remote areas, Mr. Narayan introduced the concept of "smart islands," an integrated development approach encompassing broadband connectivity, affordability, digital skills, and services. He shared success stories from Vanuatu and highlighted the positive outcomes achieved through collaborative efforts and partnerships.
- Expanding on the smart island initiative, Mr. Narayan discussed its implementation across multiple Pacific Island countries, facilitated by partnerships with governments and international organizations. He illustrated the transformative impact of digital skills training on rural communities, citing examples of entrepreneurship and economic empowerment.
- In closing, Mr. Narayan emphasized the readiness of SIDS to embrace digital transformation, provided that the right platforms and partnerships are established to support their efforts. He expressed openness to further discussion and welcomed any questions or feedback from the audience.

Open Discussion

- A question was posed to Ms. Jasinska and Mr. Perpall regarding the efforts of Nokia and Kacific to ensure the resilience and reliability of digital infrastructure, particularly in disaster-prone areas. Ms.

Jasinska emphasized the need for redundancy in infrastructure to withstand unpredictable weather events, citing the increasing deployment of redundant systems in the Pacific region. Mr. Tan added to the discussion, stressing the importance of monitoring and early warning systems for disaster preparedness. Mr. Perpall highlighted Kacific's "Com's box" disaster relief system, designed to quickly restore communication after natural disasters.

- Shifting focus to community empowerment, Ms. Adnan expressed challenges in developing digital skills in the Maldives due to the lack of support and understanding from policymakers. She called for collaboration between the private sector and academia to address this issue. Mr. Tan emphasized the importance of aligning skill sets with job demands.

- The conversation then turned to regulatory challenges hindering innovation, with Mr. Pereira highlighting obstacles faced by startups in the Caribbean due to stringent regulatory frameworks and lack of support. He called for a more conducive environment for innovation, including the establishment of sandboxes. Ms. Jasinska echoed the need for aligned regulatory approaches across jurisdictions to facilitate large-scale deployments.

- In addressing questions about leveraging emerging technologies like Artificial Intelligence (AI) for sustainable development, Mr. Pereira emphasized the importance of creating enabling frameworks and providing capital support for innovation. Ms. Jasinska underscored the need for international collaboration to avoid fragmentation in regulatory frameworks.

- Mr. Tan expressed excitement about further discussions in the SIDS GBN forum and thanked all participants for their valuable insights, emphasizing the importance of collaboration for sustainable development in small island states. He encouraged continued engagement and assured participants that their questions would be addressed moving forward.

Closing

- Ms. Miniva Chibuye conveyed appreciation to the moderator, presenters, and participants. She echoed Mr. Tan's invitation for everyone to join them in Antigua in May. Encouraging all to register and participate in discussions prior to the conference, she concluded with a heartfelt thank you.