LDC IV - Pre-Conference Event

Digital Inclusion for LDCs:
Innovation - Growth - Sustainability

Tuesday 8 March 2011
Geneva, Switzerland

Opening Speech

Houlin Zhao

Deputy Secretary-General,
International Telecommunication Union

Excellencies,
Distinguished colleagues,
Ladies and gentlemen,

- It is a great pleasure to be with you here in Geneva this morning. I am honoured to be representing Dr Hamadoun Touré, the ITU Secretary-General, who is unfortunately travelling on mission and cannot be with us for this event.

- I am sure that you are all aware of ITU's passionate commitment to the world's Least Developed Countries.

- Since the Third United Nations Conference for LDCs in 2001, ITU World Telecommunication Development Conferences and ITU Plenipotentiary Conferences have adopted specific resolutions in favour of LDCs, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States.

- With a mandate to 'Connect the World', we also launched a series of 'ITU Connect' events, with the first one taking place in Rwanda in 2007. 'Connect Africa' and I am pleased to report that an impressive US$ 21 billion was spent on ICT infrastructure investment in Africa in 2008 and 2009. We now confidently expect the final total, over a seven year period, to exceed US$ 70 billion, demonstrating the true power of partnership and business-friendly initiatives which serve real people – especially in LDCs.

- And just at the end of last month, we launched WiMAX projects in Burundi as part of the Connect Africa programme, which will bring increased connectivity to that country.

- Back in 2001, at LDC III, the Brussels Programme of Action set specific targets for increasing access to ICTs in LDCs, in order to help meet many of the other development targets and goals.

- As we all know, ICTs are essential in helping us accelerate progress towards meeting the Millennium Development Goals, and this was also clearly recognized by the World Summit for the Information Society, WSIS, which in 2005 set tangible development targets and policy objectives for the decade ahead.

Distinguished colleagues,

- LDC III's Brussels Programme of Action called for average telephone density in LDCs to be increased to 5 main lines per 100 inhabitants, and for Internet connections to be increased to 10 users per 100 inhabitants.

- Let me put these targets into context if I may.

- At the time of LDC III, in 2001, combined teledensity – fixed plus mobile – in LDCs as a whole had reached 1.17%. Combined teledensity across all developing countries – including of course powerhouses such as China – had meanwhile reached almost 17%.

- The picture was very similar concerning Internet user penetration, which in 2001 stood at 0.3% in LDCs – meaning just 3 Internet users for every 1,000 inhabitants. In developing countries as a whole, the figure was almost ten times higher, at 2.8%, or 28 users per 1,000 population.

- So how did we do?

- Extraordinarily well, concerning teledensity, and less well than we had hoped, concerning Internet penetration.

- While the number of main lines stagnated in LDCs over the past decade – as it did around the world – mobile access mushroomed, and by the beginning of last year mobile cellular teledensity in LDCs had already surpassed 25%, and was continuing to grow fast.

- In only four LDCs – out of the total of 49 – was mobile penetration below 5%, the LDC III target for 2010.

- Extraordinary progress has also been made in getting people in LDCs online over the past decade. So much so, in fact, that the percentage of Internet users in LDCs at the end of 2009 – at 2.5% – had almost reached the percentage of Internet users in developing countries as a whole in 2001.

- It will certainly have surpassed this number over the past year, but we will have to wait until LDC IV itself to see the final figures for 2010. That said, we must recognize the reality that we missed the LDC III target of 10% of people in LDCs being online by 2010.

- But is low Internet penetration really such a high priority, when people in LDCs might arguably be a great deal more preoccupied by the daily lack of safe drinking water, rising food prices, and a chronic shortage of healthcare?

- It certainly is!

- Because the Internet – and especially broadband – is the most extraordinary enabler. Particularly in the developing world, and particularly in countries with large rural and remote populations.

- And most particularly of all in LDCs.

- The Internet – especially the always-on, high-speed Internet – has the potential to massively expand the effective delivery of vital services, such as healthcare and education, to distributed populations which could never be properly served by traditional, centralized models.

- Expanded access to ICTs is already bringing services such as mobile banking to tens of millions of people in the developing world, giving them the kind of financial power to manage their lives which they have never before had.

- As this decade progresses we are seeing a remarkable surge in the developing world in national and international bandwidth – with new submarine cables being landed, new advanced mobile networks springing up all around the world, and new national broadband networks being rolled out.

- The need to highlight the importance of broadband, particularly at the national level, is the main reason why ITU set up the *Broadband Commission for Digital Development* last year, with UNESCO.

- And we will be holding a Global Broadband Summit in Geneva in October, in conjunction with the ITU Telecom 40th anniversary edition. If you haven't already done so, please mark 24 to 27 October in your diaries.

- We will be able to continue this dialogue at this landmark event, and I particularly look forward to discussing the benefits of public-private partnerships with reference to spurring on ICT development in LDCs.

Ladies and gentlemen,

- It may be true that we missed the LDC III targets for Internet connectivity in LDCs. But I am absolutely confident that we can achieve much, much more progress in this regard in the next decade than we were able to achieve in the past decade.

- Why am I so confident?

- I can give you the answer in one word: mobile.

- Over the past ten years, LDCs have made enormous progress, but they have been hampered by the difficulty and expense of rolling out physical wired network infrastructure.

- The mobile boom, however, changes everything.

- As we see the continued rapid proliferation of advanced mobile technologies, I firmly believe that this will be the decade when we see connectivity reach everyone across the LDCs.

- And that we will see Internet connectivity – largely delivered to end-users on mobile devices – spreading fast across the LDCs.

- It is surely no coincidence that of the two LDCs with the highest Internet penetration, one (the Maldives) recently became the third LDC to graduate to developing country status, while the other (Tuvalu) is expected to be among the next countries to graduate.

- I am confident therefore that we will continue to see the number of LDCs shrink – as more countries join Botswana, Cape Verde and the Maldives, and give up their 'Least Developed' status.

Distinguished colleagues,

- At ITU we are so fortunate not just to be working in a sector that is right at the heart of everything that happens in the modern world, but in a sector that has the potential to make real and lasting improvements to the lives of all the world's people.

- I am convinced that the world in 2020 will be a much better, fairer – and more environmentally friendly – place than the world at LDC IV in Istanbul in 2011.

- And that ICTs will play an absolutely pivotal part in the sustainable economic and social development of LDCs over the next decade.

Thank you.

1,200 words