Innovation and Entrepreneurship
Alliance for Digital Development

Regional Initiative Accelerator

Report on the Workshop for Asia and the Pacific Regional Initiative titled "Enabling Policy and Regulatory Environments to Accelerate Digital Transformation"

Shenzhen, China | 27-29 April 2025

INTRODUCTION

The ITU Regional Initiatives 2023-2025, established in WTDC-22, address the specific digital transformation needs of each ITU region. Outlined in the Kigali Action Plan, these initiatives serve as pathways to accelerate digital development through targeted action and collaboration.

As Member States are preparing to adopt new regional initiatives in Baku, the BDT has been exploring innovative approaches to support developing countries in leveraging regional priorities to accelerate their digital development. This effort is in line with resolution 17 of WTDC and the BDT mandate to develop regional initiative through projects. To maximize their impact, Regional Initiatives need a structured, results-driven framework that aligns with key priorities, defines measurable outcomes, develops practical solutions, and strengthens execution. With the ITU- MIIT China collaboration fund, BDT benefited from funding a project to establish a Regional Initiative Accelerator pilot that can demonstrate new capabilities for enhancing the implementation of regional priorities.

The ITU Regional Initiative Accelerator (RIA) is a dedicated mechanism established under the WTDC-25 Kigali Action Plan to support the design and implementation of high-impact digital development projects. Housed within ITU's Digital Transformation Lab, the RIA aims to accelerate progress on ITU Regional Initiatives by offering an open platform where stakeholders can co-create, refine, and activate projects aligned with regional priorities. Leveraging agile methodologies, systems thinking, and ITU's suite of innovation tools, the RIA fosters collaboration across regional offices, partners, and policymakers. This integrated approach enhances synergies, strengthens policy-to-practice connections, and promotes scalable, measurable, and sustainable models for digital transformation—especially in support of developing countries.

In the Asia and the Pacific, the existing Regional Initiative 4 (ASP-RI #4), titled Enabling Policy and Regulatory Environments to Accelerate Digital Transformation", aims to help Member States in developing appropriate policy and regulatory frameworks, developing digital services across various sectors of the economy, fostering innovation, enhancing skills, increasing information sharing and strengthening regulatory cooperation, thereby contributing to a supportive regulatory environment for all stakeholders".

To foster environments that accelerate digital transformation in a world marked by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA), technology such as artificial intelligence (AI) is becoming increasingly mainstream. However, many developing countries are struggling to keep up with these advancements. This widening gap will affect various ecosystems and disrupt socio-economic inclusion. To navigate this change effectively, it is essential to implement the right policies and programmes, harness innovation to bridge the gap across sectors and across stakeholders. Achieving this objective can be achieved with the Regional Initiative Accelerator through its experimentation and systemic approach.

The development of the RIA, supported by the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT) in China, is a result of the efforts of the Digital Transformation Lab, which is one of the vehicles of the Innovation and Entrepreneurship Alliance for Digital Development launched by the BDT. This initiative aims to address the urgent unmet needs of its members in innovation. The Alliance includes two other key vehicles: the ITU Acceleration Centres and the Digital Innovation Board. Together, these three vehicles represent a new approach to supporting countries in their development agendas.

EVENT OVERVIEW

The second Regional Initiative Accelerator (RIA) pilot workshop was jointly organized by the Innovation team of the ITU Telecommunication Development Bureau (BDT), the ITU Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific (RO-ASP), the China Academy of Information and Communication Technology (CAICT), and the China Branch of the BRICS Institute of Future Networks (BIFNC), both of which are members of the ITU Acceleration Centres network. This workshop was supported by a voluntary contribution to ITU from the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT) of the People's Republic of China (PRC).

The RIA workshop was held from 27 to 29 April 2025 in Shenzhen, China, on the sidelines of the 6th BRICS Forum on Future Networks Innovation, co-hosted by China and Brazil under Brazil's BRICS Chairmanship. The workshop served as a strategic platform to pilot the Regional Initiative Accelerator (RIA) methodology in the Asia-Pacific region and assess its scalability across the broader network of Acceleration Centres. Leveraging the technical and institutional expertise of CAICT and BIFNC, the event aimed to identify regional priorities, foster collaboration, and support the development of inclusive, scalable AI-driven initiatives.

OBJECTIVES AND THEMATIC FOCUS OF THE WORKSHOP

The workshop brought together 10 representatives from 5 countries (Cambodia, Fiji, Mongolia, Malaysia and Papua New Guinea), along with three subject-matter experts from the region, and supported by representatives from the host organizations CAICT and BIFNC.

Facilitated by representatives of ITU, the workshop successfully achieved the following objectives:

- Identified and analyzed emerging signals, trends, blind spots, and opportunities critical to ASP-RI #4.

- Developed regional blueprint projects that considered the changing environment, foster collaboration across countries, and aimed to drive collective progress.
- Ideated an actionable partnership framework that united stakeholders with a common goal and project vision.
- Initiated discussions on how the regional blueprint could be tailored to each country's unique needs and capabilities, ensuring effective implementation at the national level.

This workshop provided a valuable platform for stakeholders to collaborate, exchange insights, and co-develop customizable projects aimed at delivering meaningful results and strengthening their capacity to accelerate digital transformation.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) was selected as the thematic focus of the Regional Initiative Accelerator, reflecting both its strategic relevance to regional priorities and the strong interest expressed by the two Acceleration Centres. As a powerful driver of digital transformation, AI offers unmatched opportunities to improve productivity, stimulate economic growth, and enhance public services. However, its rapid advancement has outpaced many existing policy and regulatory frameworks, leading to challenges in governance, ethics, and cross-border collaboration. Across the Asia-Pacific region and globally, there is a growing need to develop adaptive and forward-looking policy environments to ensure AI deployment remains safe, inclusive, and aligned with sustainable development goals.

WORKSHOP APPROACH AND SUMMARY

ITU's RIA methodology utilizes a practical, tool-based framework rooted in futures thinking and ecosystem thinking. It consists of five phases that help design, refine, and implement high-impact projects. This approach ensures that digital transformation initiatives are thoroughly researched, designed with a human-centric approach, validated, and scalable, incorporating expert insights at every stage.

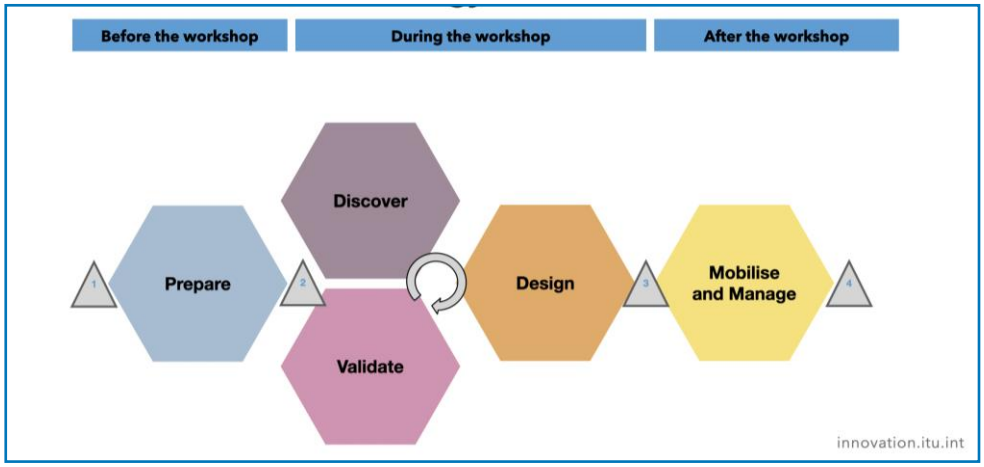


Image 1: ITU's methodology for Regional Initiative Accelerator

- Prepare: Uses strategic foresight tools to align with regional priorities and future needs.
- Discover: Identifies and prioritizes opportunities while defining the key challenges that require intervention.
- Design: Creates structured project blueprints by integrating expert insights and best practices.

- Validate: Refines project ideas by utilizing impact optimization tools to ensure feasibility and align with stakeholders.

- Mobilise and Manage: Facilitates project activation by utilizing mobilization tools and engaging stakeholders to create a validated and scalable project plan for execution.

The workshop applied this clear, structured methodology to ensure digital transformation efforts are practical, scalable, and aligned with regional needs. It began by exploring future priorities, moved through identifying core challenges and designing collaborative solutions, and ended with the creation of concrete, action-oriented project blueprints to drive long-term impact.

In the following section of this report, we will deep dive into each of these phases to elaborate on the process undertaken and outputs created towards the larger goal of creating a regional-level initiative blueprint to support RI-ASP #4.

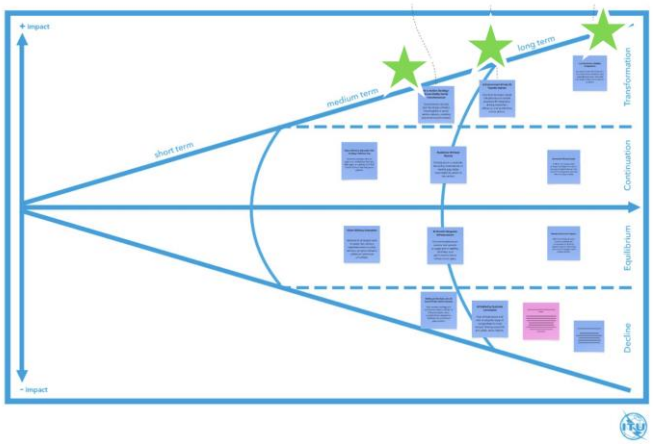
Stage 1: Prepare

The Prepare play area of the Regional Initiative Accelerator (RIA) methodology represents the critical pre-workshop stage, designed to lay the foundation for effective stakeholder engagement. During this phase, a preparatory foresight study was undertaken to map emerging signals and trends, identify key drivers shaping the future, and develop a range of plausible scenarios. The process culminated in the prioritisation of one or more desirable scenarios to guide dialogue and co-creation efforts during the workshop.

To inform this process, stakeholders were engaged in a comprehensive horizon-scanning survey prior to the workshop. This exercise gathered national-level insights on the impact of AI across key sectors, visible signs and trends in the national context, and the primary challenges encountered in enabling policy and regulatory environments that support digital transformation. It also surfaced regional and global best practices that promote the safe, inclusive, and innovative use of AI. Insights from this survey, complemented by targeted research, informed the identification of critical drivers—key forces likely to shape the region's AI-enabled future.

The dynamic interplay between these drivers gave rise to a variety of plausible future scenarios, ranging from transformational to business-as-usual and even those reflecting decline.

Image 3: A variety of scenarios envisioned



From this broader set, three desired priority scenarios were prioritised for their alignment with the overarching goals of advancing policy, partnership, and exchange in the Asia-Pacific region.

Image 4: Desired transformational scenarios

Building on the strategic direction embedded in the prioritised scenarios, stakeholders reached a consensus that broader, collective action at the regional level is essential to equitably realise these preferred futures.

To support this vision and enrich the dialogue with practical experience, four subject-matter experts were invited to present case studies, showcasing diverse regional approaches and emerging best practices.

- Mr Kun Zhang from [CU1]BIFNC, China, showcased Shenzhen's innovative approach to supporting AI development, particularly for startups and SMEs. It highlighted a range of targeted financial instruments—including computing, model, and corpus vouchers—totalling over USD 90 million annually, aimed at addressing the imbalance in AI computing resources, promoting data sharing, and accelerating the adoption of AI technologies across the ecosystem.

- Mr Pan Tong from CAICT, China, highlighted the country's National AI Innovation and Application Pilot Zones, a national initiative implemented to accelerate AI development through designated innovation hubs across the country. It showcased how regulatory sandboxes, policy experimentation, and concentrated resources in cities like Wuhan are enabling AI integration across industries, fostering collaboration, and addressing challenges such as regional disparities, data availability, and responsible governance. The presentation also outlined measurable impacts, including rapid advancements in domestic AI capabilities and global leadership in industrial AI deployment.

- Dr Serge Stinckwich from the United Nations University Institute, in Macau, presented on the use of synthetic data to train AI models, highlighting both its opportunities and risks for sustainable development. The presentation explored how synthetic data can help bridge the global data divide, especially for the Global South, by offering scalable, privacy-preserving alternatives where real-world data is scarce or sensitive. It also shared global policy recommendations and real-world case studies—such as synthetic census and medical datasets—to illustrate the potential of synthetic data in advancing the SDGs.

- Dr Makarand Tapaswi from Wadhwani AI, in India, presented the institute's mission of using applied AI to address complex development challenges in sectors like healthcare, education, and agriculture. He shared impactful case studies, including an AI-powered oral reading fluency assessment tool that has reached over

2.6 million students and trained 120,000 teachers across India. The presentation emphasised the need for multi-stakeholder collaboration, long-term commitment, and context-specific AI innovation to serve underserved communities and advance the SDGs.

This set the stage for co-creating regional goals and aspirations, and the discovery of critical challenges to address towards the realisation of these goals.

Stage 2: Discover

The Discover play area of the RIA methodology focuses on setting a clear vision and defining goals for the initiative to be co-designed. It involves a systematic scan of the ecosystem to identify key challenges and uncover their root causes, providing a shared understanding of the problems that need to be addressed collaboratively.

Image 4: Desired transformational scenarios

ASP4: Enabling policy and regulatory environments to accelerate digital transformation

Objective: To assist Member States in developing appropriate policy and regulatory frameworks, developing digital services across various sectors of the economy, fostering innovation, enhancing skills, increasing information sharing and strengthening regulatory cooperation, thereby contributing to a supportive regulatory environment for all stakeholders.

Expected results

1) Sharing of information on developments in policy, legal and regulatory frameworks as well as market developments in the information and communication technology (ICT) sector and the digital economies it enables.

2) Development, implementation and review of strategies, policies and legal and regulatory frameworks, including for next-generation universal service obligation, consumer protection, transformation of small and medium enterprises to digital enterprises, and innovation and entrepreneurship.

3) Encouraging of inclusive dialogues and strengthening cooperation among national and regional regulators, policy-makers and other telecommunication/ ICT stakeholders, as well as with other sectors of the economy, on topical policy, legal, regulatory and market issues.

4) Strengthening of institutional, human and technical capacity on topical policy, legal and regulatory issues, as well as on economic and financial issues and market developments.

5) Improved awareness of policy and regulatory frameworks relating to data privacy and cross-border data.

6) Development of strategic frameworks to support research and development activities in ICT in developing countries.

At the outset of the co-creation workshop, participants reviewed the six expected results outlined under ITU ASP RI #4 that largely focused on Information and Knowledge Sharing; Policy and Regulatory Strategy Development; Multi-Stakeholder Engagement and Dialogue; Institutional and Human Capacity Building; Data Governance and Privacy; and Research and Innovation Policy Support. To enable a structured and outcome-oriented co-creation process, these areas were grouped into three overarching thematic affinity groups, which became the foundational focus areas for the workshop. Participants were divided into three teams, each tasked with designing a regional project blueprint aligned with the initiative's expected results and aimed at supporting the

responsible and inclusive advancement of AI across the Asia-Pacific region. The three thematic affinity groups were:

1. Policy, Frameworks, and Strategy Development
2. Collaboration, Stakeholder Engagement, and Partnerships
3. Information Sharing and Capacity Building.

Deep diving into the needs, goals, and aspirations associated with the thematic affinity groups—within the broader focus of AI shaping the future of the Asia-Pacific region—the groups articulated a vision and mission for each thematic cluster.

The articulation of vision and mission for each thematic cluster served as a strategic anchor, helping guide subsequent discussions with a clear sense of purpose and direction. Building on these visions, stakeholders collaboratively identified critical challenges and their underlying root causes, which led to the recognition of four to five key systemic issues that demand attention within the regional landscape. These root causes provided the foundation for designing regional project blueprints that address these systemic challenges in a phased and coordinated manner. These issues were then further prioritised and used as the foundation for designing project blueprints to be implemented in a phased manner.

These insights and priorities set the groundwork for co-designing scalable, future-ready project blueprints tailored to the needs and priorities of the Asia-Pacific region.

Stage 3: Design

The Design play area of the RIA methodology focuses on co-designing solutions that address the systemic gaps previously identified, while offering clear, actionable outcomes for both end users and the wider ecosystem.

This phase involved breaking down each challenge to brainstorm a range of solution pathways that could be offered to stakeholders to generate tangible user benefits and broader ecosystem impact.

- Under the Policy, Frameworks, and Strategy Development cluster, stakeholders focused on addressing three priority challenges: weak political commitment and shifting priorities, a slow and fragmented AI ecosystem, and persistent resource and investment gaps, and came up with 30 proposed solutions, covering a wide spectrum of actions.
- The Collaboration, Stakeholder Engagement, and Partnerships cluster addressed three key challenges: inadequate infrastructure, talent retention and brain drain, and fragmented regional priorities coupled with weak collaboration frameworks., and proposed 31 solutions.
- The Information Sharing and Capacity Building cluster tackled three interlinked challenges: limited policy and governance capacity, low public awareness of AI, and a shortage of appropriate talent; and came up with 28 solutions to tackle the issues.

Stage 4: Validate

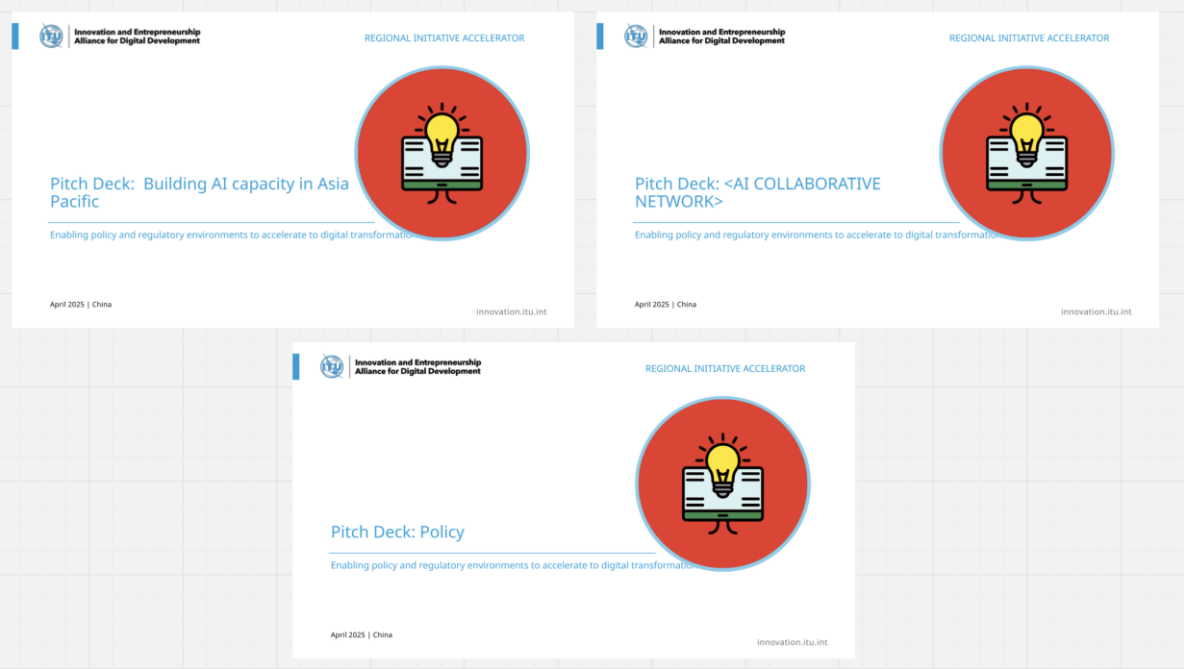
The Validate play area of the RIA methodology focuses on refining the proposed designs by prioritising feasible solutions, and co-developing an actionable roadmap, and identifying the stakeholder engagement needed for successful implementation.

This stage enabled participants to define a clear, phased pathway for implementing priority solutions. Each proposed solution was assessed against two key criteria: the level of effort required and the expected level of impact. This structured approach allowed each group to identify both quick-win solutions—those with high impact and low effort—as well as more ambitious, high-effort initiatives with transformative potential. By the end of the exercise, the three groups had narrowed down from a total of 89 solutions to 21 priority solutions to tackle the three larger buckets of issues.

- Policy, Frameworks and Strategy Development recommendations focused on fostering a coordinated and knowledge-driven AI ecosystem through regional collaboration, awareness-raising, talent development, and the creation of shared resources and platforms

- Collaboration, Stakeholder Engagement and Partnerships recommendations aimed to strengthen collaboration and partnerships by enhancing AI education, fostering talent networks, promoting cross-sector linkages, and leveraging digital connectivity to build a robust regional AI talent ecosystem.

- Information Sharing and Capacity Building recommendations focussed on enhancing information sharing and capacity building through targeted training, research collaboration, open access resources, and initiatives that engage both academic and early-stage talent.



Each of the proposed solutions targeted a wide range of stakeholders—from the public and private sectors and financial institutions to academic institutions, civil society organisations, and innovators—with clearly defined inputs, outputs, and expected outcomes. This comprehensive approach informed the design of the project blueprint pitch decks and provided a structured pathway to guide resource mobilisation, coordinate implementation efforts, and establish key performance indicators to ensure accountability and measurable impact for the proposed initiatives.

KEY OUTCOMES

The Regional Initiative Accelerator (RIA) workshop in Shenzhen successfully demonstrated a structured, participatory approach to advancing the Asia-Pacific Regional Initiative #4 on enabling policy and regulatory environments for digital transformation.

- **Multi-stakeholder dialogue**: The workshop fostered multi-country inclusive dialogue among stakeholders, supporting collective ownership and alignment with ASP RI #4.

- **Foresight insights**: A foresight brief was produced based on pre-workshop research and horizon scanning survey with participants, identifying key drivers, emerging trends, and plausible futures to inform project design under ASP RI #4.

- **Expert case study exchange**: Four expert presentations provided practical insights and international case studies, offering participants concrete examples of innovation, policy experimentation, and ecosystem development relevant to AI and digital transformation.

- **Regional blueprint development**: Three regional project blueprint pitch decks were co-developed by participants, each aligned with one of the thematic clusters—Policy and Strategy Development, Collaboration and Partnerships, and Information Sharing and Capacity Building around the larger topic focus on AI. These blueprints addressed systemic challenges and proposed phased, scalable interventions, and are designed with the flexibility to be adapted at the country level to account for differences in institutional capacity, infrastructure, and political will.

- **Initiative implementation validation tracker**: A dedicated validation tracker was developed for each of the three proposed initiatives to support the systematic validation of key elements within each blueprint, ensuring alignment with stakeholder priorities and implementation readiness.

- **Stakeholder ecosystem mapping**: Stakeholders conducted mapping exercises to identify key actors for partnership, resource mobilisation, and community engagement in future phases of project resource mobilisation and implementation management.

- **Human capacity building**: Participants engaged with ITU's innovation tools and foresight methodology, strengthening their capabilities in futures thinking, systemic problem-solving, and results-oriented project design.

LESSONS LEARNT

- The Prepare stage of the RIA methodology offers a future-focused lens to understand the evolving policy and innovation landscape. In Shenzhen, ITU developed a foresight brief in-house—without an external consultant—to test the effectiveness of the tool and maintain timeline agility. The brief was well received by participants and provided strategic direction for workshop discussions. While the engagement of a foresight consultant is ideal for this phase, the pilot demonstrated that internal delivery is feasible where time or resources are limited.

- The Co-Design phase enabled structured collaboration through an interactive, facilitated workshop that guided stakeholders in developing contextually grounded project blueprints. In the pilot, ITU managed this stage internally, again opting not to engage a consultant. While the methodology proved effective, the next step—packaging these blueprints into comprehensive, fundable design briefs—would benefit from the support of a consultant to strengthen resource mobilisation prospects and support future implementation.

- The Mobilise and Manage post-workshop phase relies on the completed design briefs to initiate fundraising and partnership development. It typically requires a dedicated expert to map funding opportunities, develop tailored pitches, and engage potential partners. Future implementation will benefit from allocating specialised human resources to lead mobilisation efforts and secure financing.

- The RIA methodology applied in Shenzhen was adapted to accommodate a smaller pool of stakeholders per country, demonstrating its flexibility and agility. This experience affirmed the importance of designing a toolkit that is both structured and adaptable—ensuring consistency in process while allowing for contextual tailoring based on stakeholder profiles, thematic focus, and regional dynamics.

NEXT STEPS

- **Develop Country-Customised Blueprints**: Participating countries will adapt the regional project blueprints to their specific national contexts, building on the outputs of the workshop and validating them through national-level consultations and stakeholder engagement.

- **Mobilise Resources and Formalise Partnerships**: The ITU Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, in collaboration with the Digital Innovation Alliance, will support countries in mobilising financial and technical resources. This includes coordination with ITU's project and resource mobilisation teams to explore opportunities for co-financing, in-kind contributions, and implementation partnerships.

- **Support National-Level Implementation**: Countries will receive targeted support to activate and manage implementation of validated blueprints, with continued engagement from ITU to ensure alignment with national priorities, scalability, and measurable outcomes.

These next steps aim to ensure that the momentum generated during the workshop transitions into concrete, measurable actions aligned with national development goals and the broader objectives of the Regional Initiative Accelerator.