

High-Level Dialogue on LLDCs

Connectivity as a Catalyst: Delivering the Awaza Programme of Action through Digital Transformation



The High-Level Dialogue on Landlocked Developing Countries (LLDCs), convened as part of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) Forum 2026 on 9 July 2026. The speakers examined how digital connectivity can help address the structural challenges faced by LLDCs and accelerate their progress toward sustainable development.

The dialogue was anchored in the Awaza Programme of Action for LLDCs (2024–2034), which identifies digital transformation, innovation, and resilient infrastructure as critical enablers for overcoming the constraints associated with geographic remoteness.

The dialogue was anchored in the Awaza Programme of Action for LLDCs (2024–2034), which highlights digital transformation, innovation, and resilient infrastructure as essential enablers for overcoming the structural challenges associated with geographic remoteness.

The discussion also aligned with the WSIS Action Lines and informed the WSIS+20 Review Process, reaffirming the critical role of inclusive digital development, strengthened international cooperation, and strategic partnerships in closing the digital divide and fostering sustainable and equitable growth.

Opening Segment



Ms. Amanda Khozi Mukwashi, UN Resident Coordinator in Angola moderated the opening segment and stressed that in the digital era, connectivity offers an opportunity to redefine what it means to be landlocked.

Digital infrastructure, affordable broadband, trusted digital ecosystems and digital skills are essential for inclusive growth, resilient economies, better public services and participation in the global digital economy.

Ms. Mukwashi also highlighted the importance of digital connectivity for healthcare, education, food systems and economic opportunity, noting that the Awaza Programme of Action places digital transformation and resilient infrastructure at the centre of sustainable development efforts for LLDCs.



In his opening remarks, **Dr. Cosmas Luckyson Zavazava, Director of the ITU Telecommunication Development Bureau**, underscored that digital transformation should not be viewed simply as a technology agenda.

He described connectivity as the "engine" of digital transformation and outlined three priorities:

- Expanding digital access through broadband, satellite coverage and resilient last-mile infrastructure;
- Investing in digital literacy and skills development for all segments of society;
- Building trust through data privacy, cybersecurity and inclusive digital governance.

Using examples from agriculture, education and healthcare, he highlighted how connectivity can improve livelihoods and service delivery. Dr. Zavazava emphasized that infrastructure alone is not sufficient. Connectivity must be linked to practical development outcomes and supported through partnerships among governments, the private sector, international organizations and civil society.

He also highlighted the potential role of the proposed Infrastructure Investment Financing Facility (IIFF) for LLDCs in mobilizing investment and suggested that a dedicated partnership platform could help connect projects with financing, expertise and implementation partners.



In a recorded message, **Ms. Rabab Fatima, Under-Secretary-General And High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States (UN-OHRLLS)** stressed the importance of ambition in implementing the Awaza Programme of Action. Her message emphasized moving beyond efforts to close the connectivity gap and ensuring that connectivity contributes to sustainable development and economic transformation.



Speaking on behalf of the LLDC Group, **Mr. Mirzo Khurshed, Director of the Agency for Innovation and Digital Technologies under the President of the Republic of Tajikistan and Coordinator of the LLDC Group in Geneva** highlighted the practical challenges associated with landlocked status. He noted that LLDCs often face: Long distances from seaports; Multiple border crossings; Higher transport and trade costs; Difficult terrain, including mountainous conditions in many countries; Challenges in building digital and physical infrastructure.

Ministerial & High-Level Segment



H.E. Ms. Tatenda Annastacia Mavetera, Minister of ICT, Postal and Courier Services of Zimbabwe, described resource constraints as the principal challenge facing Zimbabwe's digital transformation agenda. Referring to Zimbabwe's National Artificial Intelligence Strategy, she noted that its four pillars include: Capacity development; Infrastructure; Computational sovereignty and; AI adoption.

She argued that all of these priorities require substantial investment and stressed the importance of collaboration among countries. Furthermore, she called for shared regional approaches, suggesting that countries could benefit from accessing infrastructure and computing resources located elsewhere in the region. She emphasized that connectivity remains the foundation upon which digital transformation efforts depend.



H.E. Mr. David Tshere, Minister of Communications and Innovation of the Republic of Botswana outlined Botswana's digital progress, including extensive fibre deployment and high mobile penetration rates. Despite these achievements, he highlighted several challenges:

- Dependence on neighbouring countries for international connectivity;
- High transit and connectivity costs;
- The high cost of serving sparsely populated areas;
- Dependence on imported ICT equipment.

He noted that the Government of Botswana continues to play a major role in financing digital infrastructure and called for stronger partnerships and financing solutions that can support sustainable infrastructure development in LLDCs.



H.E. Ms. Emma Inamutla Theofelus, Minister of Information and Communication Technology of the Republic of Namibia highlighted Namibia's role as a coastal country with access to international submarine cable systems.

She suggested that transit and coastal countries can support LLDCs by providing: Connectivity gateways; Data centre infrastructure; Hosting services; and providing access to international connectivity routes.

She also pointed to practical examples of regional cooperation, including the removal of roaming charges between Namibia and Botswana.

H.E. Ms. Theofelus highlighted practical examples of regional cooperation already underway between Namibia and neighbouring countries. She noted that Namibia and Botswana have worked together to eliminate roaming charges between the two countries, demonstrating how regional collaboration can directly improve digital connectivity and affordability for citizens.

Furthermore, H.E. Ms Theofelus emphasized that Namibia's coastal access gives it a unique role in supporting LLDCs. She noted that Namibia hosts undersea cable landing stations, including the WACS and Equiano cable systems, and is investing heavily in energy and digital infrastructure.

She underscored growing port infrastructure at Walvis Bay, and significant potential for data centre development powered by emerging clean-energy investments. She invited LLDCs to consider Namibia as a regional digital corridor and a location for digital infrastructure, including data centres and "digital embassies."



H.E. Ambassador Deike Potzel, European Union Ambassador to the United Nations in Geneva, presented the Global Gateway initiative as a partnership-based approach to connectivity and digital infrastructure development

The Ambassador emphasized three main lessons:

1. Connectivity should be approached regionally through cross-border cooperation and shared infrastructure.
2. Investments in physical infrastructure should be accompanied by regulatory and institutional reforms.
3. More attention should be devoted to developing bankable investment projects.

She also highlighted the role of risk-reduction mechanisms in attracting private capital to digital infrastructure projects.



Mr. Sangbu Kim, Vice President for Digital & AI, World Bank highlighted the World Bank's work on a new Digital Access Fund under its digital strategy and implementation framework. The objective is to mobilize greater investment through public-private partnerships and blended financing approaches.

Mr. Kim emphasized that financing alone is insufficient. Investors require supportive policy and regulatory frameworks that create confidence and predictability. He stressed the importance of governments establishing enabling conditions that encourage long-term investment in digital infrastructure and services.

He emphasized that stronger public policies are necessary to attract private capital and ensure investments can scale sustainably. He called for comprehensive "country compact"-style approaches that bring together planning, implementation and investment under a single national vision.

Rather than funding isolated digital infrastructure projects, he argued for coordinated national strategies that connect infrastructure development with broader economic and development goals.

Mr. Kim cautioned against focusing solely on the supply side of digital development, such as data centres, fibre networks and computing capacity, noting that equal attention must be given to practical applications that directly improve people's lives.



Ms. Lele Modise, Group Chief Legal and Regulatory Affairs Officer of MTN Group, argued that digital infrastructure should be regarded as an essential component of economic development alongside transport, energy and logistics infrastructure.

Drawing on MTN's experience across Africa, she emphasized the need for:

- Regulatory certainty;
- Transparent licensing frameworks;
- Predictable investment environments;
- Project preparation support;
- Risk mitigation mechanisms.

She supported the proposed IIFF and argued that financing challenges often stem from the difficulty of moving projects from concept to investment readiness. She also emphasized the importance of developing regional digital corridors.

Ms. Lele Modise, Group Chief Legal and Regulatory Affairs Officer of MTN Group, argued that digital infrastructure should be recognised as a cornerstone of economic development, on par with traditional infrastructure sectors such as transport, energy, and logistics. Drawing on MTN's extensive experience across African markets, she highlighted that sustainable investment in digital infrastructure depends on the availability of regulatory certainty, transparent and efficient licensing

frameworks, and a predictable investment environment that enables long-term planning and capital allocation.

She expressed support for the proposed *Infrastructure Investment Facilitation Framework (IIFF)*, noting that one of the most significant barriers to infrastructure financing is not necessarily the availability of capital, but the challenge of transforming projects from initial concepts into investment-ready opportunities. In this regard, Lele emphasized the importance of strengthening project preparation support and implementing effective risk mitigation mechanisms to enhance investor confidence. She further underscored the strategic value of developing regional digital corridors, which can drive greater connectivity, promote cross-border digital integration, and support broader economic growth and digital inclusion across the continent. She argued that digital infrastructure should be regarded as an essential component of economic development alongside transport, energy and logistics infrastructure.



Mr. Ismail, Vice President, Global Standardization, Huawei,

emphasized that geography should not determine access to digital opportunities. He highlighted the need to combine technological innovation with sustainable business models to extend connectivity to underserved and rural communities where traditional infrastructure is often costly to deploy. He stressed that enabling policy and regulatory frameworks, including targeted rural coverage incentives, improved spectrum management and effective use of Universal Service Funds, are essential to accelerate connectivity.

Mr. Ismail also underscored the importance of collaboration among governments, regulators, operators and technology

companies, as well as infrastructure sharing and open-access approaches to reduce costs and expand coverage.

As a practical example, he referred to Huawei's commitment under the ITU Partner2Connect initiative, noting that the company exceeded its target of connecting 120 million people in rural areas across 80 countries by 2025, reaching approximately 170 million people, including many in developing countries facing significant connectivity challenges.



H.E. Ambassador Raúl Cano Ricciardi, Permanent Representative of Paraguay noted Paraguay's dependence on regional fibre networks for international access. He noted that Paraguay's international connectivity depends largely on terrestrial fibre networks that cross neighbouring countries before reaching submarine cable systems. As a result, resilience is a major concern because disruptions beyond Paraguay's borders can affect national connectivity. He stressed the importance of improving the reliability and security of international communications links to support digital transformation and public digital services.

The ambassador emphasized the need for multiple international connectivity pathways rather than dependence on a limited number of routes. He explained that Paraguay's position as a landlocked country creates significant logistical and infrastructure challenges in reaching global cable systems. Greater diversification of routes toward both Atlantic and Pacific access points would improve network performance and reduce vulnerability to disruptions.

He underscored that LLDCs need alternative connectivity routes and backup infrastructure to ensure continuity of

service when individual networks experience failures. Increased redundancy would strengthen resilience, improve quality of service and create a more robust digital ecosystem capable of supporting growing digital economies.

Ambassador Ricciardi called for closer collaboration among governments, regulators, development partners and the private sector to expand cross-border fibre networks and improve access to submarine cable systems.



Ms. Aysel Kandemir, Director General of Communication at the Ministry of Transport and Infrastructure of Türkiye, emphasized that the connectivity issue is a development challenge for LLDCs and geographical constraints continue to result in higher trade costs, longer transit times and limited access to digital opportunities in the region. She underlined that to overcome these barriers, digital technologies provide great opportunities and open new pathways to regional and global markets.

She also emphasized that transport and digital infrastructure should be developed together. Drawing on Türkiye's experience as a regional bridge between Europe, Asia and the Middle East, she underscored Türkiye's commitment for strengthening regional connectivity both in transport and digital infrastructure as Middle Corridor creating new opportunities for landlocked countries to access global markets.

She noted that investments in broadband, digital services and intelligent transport systems can help strengthen economic resilience and market access. She iterated Türkiye's readiness to share its experience and cooperate with partner countries in advancing digital transformation, smart connectivity and sustainable development.

Interactive Discussion

Several interventions reinforced themes raised throughout the dialogue. As host of the Third UN Conference on LLDCs, Turkmenistan reaffirmed its commitment to implementation of the Awaza Programme of Action and highlighted the importance of international cooperation, knowledge exchange and investment in resilient infrastructure. Participants welcomed the partnership-oriented approach discussed throughout the session and noted a broader shift in development cooperation away from isolated projects toward approaches that bring together multiple stakeholders around shared objectives.

It was also emphasized that digital technologies can help address geographic constraints and reduce trade costs through tools such as customs modernization and cargo-tracking systems.

Some participants highlighted ongoing investments in broadband, digital public services, cybersecurity and digital skills, while underlining the importance of regional cooperation and interoperable digital systems.

A delegation shared their experience in implementing a national digital economy and society agenda, combining policy reforms, infrastructure investments and pilot projects to support digital transformation.

A participant raised concerns about the long-term resilience of connectivity arrangements for LLDCs. While acknowledging the importance of cooperation with transit countries and welcoming Namibia's offer of regional support, the participant questioned whether LLDCs could rely indefinitely on neighbouring countries for access to international connectivity, noting that political, economic or regional circumstances may change over time.

The participant noted a need for an ITU resolution on connectivity and infrastructure resilience for LLDCs, stressing that the issue goes beyond building links and requires safeguards to ensure continuity of access under changing circumstances. He underscored the importance of resilience, redundancy, diversified connectivity routes

and long-term policy arrangements that can protect LLDCs from overdependence on any single transit corridor, country or infrastructure pathway. He further highlighted the need to consider worst-case scenarios and to explore practical mechanisms that would allow LLDCs to maintain reliable access to digital infrastructure even if regional conditions become less favourable in the future.



In response, the BDT Director, Dr. Zavazava, acknowledged the importance of the concern and agreed that resilience must be a central consideration in digital connectivity planning for LLDCs. He noted that the issue raised was precisely why international cooperation frameworks and ITU-led processes remain important. His response emphasized that connectivity strategies should be built on multiple layers of cooperation, infrastructure redundancy and regional partnerships rather than dependence on a single route or access point.

The Director also highlighted that while United Nations resolutions and programmes of action provide important political guidance and a shared framework for cooperation, they are generally not legally binding obligations on Member States. Their success therefore depends on voluntary commitment, national ownership, strong partnerships,

investment, and sustained implementation by governments, development partners, the private sector, and other stakeholders. He emphasized that progress on digital connectivity for LLDCs will be driven not by resolutions alone, but by concrete action and collaboration.

In closing the High-Level Dialogue, Dr. Zavazava reiterated a broader message that had emerged throughout the dialogue: while neighbouring transit countries play a critical role in supporting LLDC connectivity, sustainable digital transformation ultimately requires diversified infrastructure investments, stronger regional cooperation and partnerships that can withstand future changes in political, economic or technological conditions. His intervention reinforced the view that resilience should be treated as a strategic component of connectivity planning and that the implementation of the Awaza Programme of Action provides an opportunity to strengthen both the physical and institutional foundations needed to ensure reliable connectivity for LLDCs over the long term.



Key Takeaways

Five messages emerged consistently throughout the discussion:

1. Connectivity is a foundational enabler of the Awaza Programme of Action and broader sustainable development goals.
2. Financing and investment mobilization remain major challenges, particularly for digital infrastructure, AI-related investments and last-mile connectivity.
3. Regional cooperation is essential, especially for international connectivity, cross-border fibre infrastructure and shared digital ecosystems.
4. Infrastructure alone is insufficient; digital skills, governance, innovation, practical applications, skills and demand creation are equally important.
5. Partnerships among governments, development institutions, international organizations and the private sector will be critical for translating commitments into implementation and scaling investment across LLDCs.