Excellencies

The LDC’s have been at the forefront of demanding equitable access to our digital world and the innovation this access creates.

In fact it was the Istanbul Programme of Action for LDCs that first recognized the importance of Information and Communication Technologies as essential catalysts for sustainable development. It did this by elevating ICT Networks as an infrastructure priority, on par with water, electricity and transport.

For those of us who aren’t forced to live on less than one dollar and 25 cents a day, this emphasis on connectivity, by those who often struggle for the bare necessities of life, may seem odd. After all, you can’t eat a mobile phone.

But in 2016, connectivity is a basic tool of empowerment – not only a lifeline to family, friends and community but a way to tap into the information one needs to create the necessary knowledge to make wise decisions to control your future.

The ground-breaking language of the IPoA, is thankfully reflected in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development which recognizes that ‘the spread of information and communication technology and global interconnectedness has great potential to accelerate human progress’.

Furthermore, (SDG 9.c) calls on us to ‘to provide universal and affordable access to the Internet in least developed countries by 2020’.

There is no doubt this aspirational directive and specific target is transformative and achievable, but it will not happen without a concerted partnership between governments and the private sector.
And it won’t happen without regulatory reform in the LDCs, in order to give the private sector the confidence it needs to invest.

And it won’t happen without public commitment to develop a broadband policy that will strengthen essential ICT infrastructure.

I am pleased to report that since we met last in Istanbul in 2011, extraordinary progress has been made to expand access to ICTs in the LDCs’ through mobile technologies.

In the past year mobile-broadband has become 20-30 per cent more affordable globally. The largest decrease in prices occurred in the LDCs, where average prices, for all types of mobile-broadband service, were reduced by more than 25 per cent.

However, significant gaps remain in ICT development between developed and developing countries, with LDCs falling even further behind developing countries.

The biggest disparity remains access to broadband technology – which is a revolutionary use of the ‘electromagnetic frequency spectrum’, and the lifeblood of global connectivity and the internet.

This gap must be addressed, if the potential of ICTs is to fulfil its potential as a primary enabler for all three pillars of sustainable development.

Last year, only 6.7 per cent of households in LDCs had Internet access compared with 46 per cent of households worldwide. While 80% of the households in the developing world are online.

To address this unfortunate reality, ITU Member States agreed to set up the overall strategy for the ICTs sector, known as Connect 2020. Within the 4 main goals for ICT growth, inclusiveness, sustainability and innovation & partnership, a number are focused on LDCs:

For example:
In the LDCs, 15% of households should have access to the Internet by 2020 and 20% of individuals should be using the Internet by 2020.

To help the LDC’s achieve these goals we have developed comprehensive capacity building and digital inclusion programmes;

We have rolled out strategies to help LDCs maximize the selection and use of appropriate new technologies;

We are providing assistance in dealing with cyber security issues, to build trust and confidence in ICT networks;

And we continue to provide guidance on how best to create an enabling policy and regulatory environment that will attract the private sector; especially broadband service providers.

ITU has mainstreamed the needs of LDCs in all its activities, programmes and projects and has undertaken, financed and implemented programmes since 2011 to assist LDCs in using ICTs for climate change adaptation and disaster management.

ITU provides seed money to Countries in Special Need, which includes LDCs, for the development of new rural infrastructure, reconstruction of old systems and the development of the human capacity necessary to sustain and maintain this increasingly important utility.

ITU’s assistance for the LDCs also includes:

- The design and Review of Emergency Telecommunications Plans;
- The promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls in ICT access and careers – right now there are at least 200 million fewer women than men online and this digital inequality is greatest in the LDCs;
We believe that if everyone in the LDCs had an affordable point of connectivity to our knowledge society **AND** the basic digital literacy skills to use that connectivity – we would see a burst of innovation that we can’t even imagine.

Information Technology’s greatest strength has always been its ability to help an individual solve the most pressing problems in their lives and that of their community, by drawing upon the vast repository of global knowledge it delivers **directly** to those with access to it.

A mobile phone may never replace food and water as a necessity of life but it can ‘reboot’ our humanity and it provides a key tool to empower the Least Developed Countries to leap frog many of the hurdles they face in creating their own sustainable ‘digital’ future.