Keynote Address

Honourable Deepak Balgobin

Minister of Information Technology, Communication and Innovation

Republic of Mauritius

Opening Ceremony

Inaugural Small Islands Developing States (SIDS) Internet Governance Forum (IGF)

**T
h
e
m
e
:**

Thursday, 25th August 2022 @ 14.30 – 16.00 hrs (Atlantic Standard Time) VIRTUAL

- **Honourable Mia Motley, Prime Minister of Barbados**
- **Honourable Siaosi Sovaleni, Prime Minister, Kingdom of Tonga,**
- **Dear Colleague Ministers,**
- **Representatives of the United Nations Envoy on Technology,**
- **Ladies and Gentlemen,**
- **All Protocol observed.**

Good afternoon, Good Evening and Good Morning to you all, wherever you are across the globe.

On behalf of the people of the island of Mauritius, allow me to express my warmest thanks to the Carribean Telecommunications Union for honouring me as a keynote speaker at this Inaugural Internet Governance Forum for Small Islands Developing States.

It is indeed my pleasure to be among your midst today for this opening ceremony centered around the "Internet Governance Priorities for ICT-Driven Development".

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The importance of ICT to drive development worldwide cannot be disputed and it has become the engine "*par excellence*" for socio-economic advancement that could benefit all sections of our people in an inclusive manner.

This is true for small island states as ICT is known for its seamless and empowerment features.

It is reckoned that SIDS are particularly at risk with regard to the impacts of climate change like the rise of sea level and more frequent and increasingly potent natural disasters.

And it is in this spirit that the SIDS Accelerated Modalities of Action (the SAMOA) Pathway has been developed in 2014 to provide a comprehensive framework of actions to support the sustainable development of SIDS countries.

The commitments of the SAMOA Pathway have become even more pressing today and extend further to integrate SIDS in the regional and global markets.

This is the point where the most difficult challenges are encountered.

Due to our remoteness from the rest of the world we, SIDS countries, experience difficulties in accessing goods and in participating in the global value chains, in a more meaningful manner.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

By nature of the small populations, restrictive land sizes and the isolation of our land masses from the rest of developed countries, SIDS economies are significantly vulnerable, the more so, when it comes to the digital economy.

Remoteness stands out as one of the major challenges of all SIDS that needs to be addressed for our inclusive growth perspective.

And one way of keeping SIDS countries in sync with the rest of the world is through resilient Internet connectivity. The foundations of a sound and healthy digital economy rest heavily on its Internet connectivity, both inland and at international level.

Connecting to more submarine cables has the net effect of enhancing resilience of connectivity and stimulating competition among service providers, which further brings down communication costs and attracts investments, improve the quality of life of people and bring about inclusiveness.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Streamlining trade flows across the world and making of it a global village cannot be achieved if SIDS are left aside.

In general, the digital economy in SIDS countries is still at an immature stage as compared to developing countries.

And the digital transformation of SIDS will not happen with the sole efforts of these countries alone.

In the first place, there is a need to provide support to SIDS through appropriate governance institutions, particularly, in the area of e-Commerce or Digital Trade.

For this to happen, the empirical enablers of the digitalization process have to be established upstream. A number of pre-requisites have to be put in place.

1. Firstly, Internet has to be made more affordable. Earlier I mentioned that one way in which this can be achieved is through competitive use of connectivity.

2. Secondly, for an effective e-Commerce ecosystem to be established in SIDS, alongside the Internet infrastructure we require a logistics infrastructure. This consists of all traffic routes such as rails, roads, air- and water-ways for goods and services including warehousing and control systems, as well as handling facilities, including security measures.

3. Thirdly, for a digital ecosystem to operate in an efficient and secure manner, a sound regulatory framework is required. Not all SIDS have modern legislations on electronic transactions, cybercrime, privacy and data protection, and protection of consumers online. Due to specificities of SIDS countries, the policies and regulatory models for large countries cannot always be conveniently replicated to SIDS.

Supporting SIDS in drafting adequate legal frameworks can foster digital economy development.

4. Digital literacy of users is another challenge that has to be appropriately addressed for the successful take-up and inclusive use of digital services. Women and girls, senior citizens, persons with disabilities and small businesses should be at par with other players in the digital ecosystem.

5. Another major challenge that awaits SIDS in the shaping of their ICT landscape is the availability of skilled resources in the field. The demand is particularly felt with the adoption of new and emerging technologies. Given the small population sizes of SIDS, the services of foreign experts usually have to be facilitated in a more pronounced manner by international institutions.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Once the base for the digital ecosystem is laid down, the benefits will spill over across all business sectors of SIDS, more particularly for the promotion of tourism which appears as a major activity of our economies.

New business opportunities and employment will also emerge to further drive the digital transformation of SIDS economies.

The adoption of digital technologies will undoubtedly have a positive impact on public service delivery as well.

Internet Governance is not only about the mere administration and regulation of the Internet and ICT services, but also in ensuring that an inclusive use of them is being made.

And for SIDS to take an active and inclusive part in the globalization of business activities, our concerns have to be reckoned through instances such as UN bodies, the World Trade Organisation and the International Telecommunications Union.

By the way, I wish to avail of this forum, to inform my SIDS colleagues present at this forum, that Mauritius has submitted its candidature for election to the ITU Council for Region D (Africa) for the term 2023-2026 and is hereby seeking your support at the forthcoming ITU plenipotentiary Conference 2022.

To conclude, I wish to reiterate my thanks to the organisers and sponsors of this important event.

I am personally of the opinion that a multi-stakeholder forum like this one is an ideal channel for pushing the digital agenda and priorities of SIDS countries forward.

On this note, I wish all participants fruitful deliberations, and thank you for your attention.