



Statement by the Hon Fekitamoeloa Utoikamanu

Minister of MEIDECC, Tonga at the 80th Session of ESCAP

Agenda Item 2: Theme: Leveraging Digital Innovation for Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific

Distinguished Chair, Excellencies and delegates

Digital innovation is crucial in our committed effort towards sustainable development, and I recognize its significance on this important occasion.

It is estimated that the number of Internet users reached 5.4 billion globally in 2023, which makes the possibilities for transformational growth very significant.

One in three people worldwide uses social media, and the escalating adoption of digital technologies across the globe is rapidly changing how people live.

A combination of human capital, core physical and digital assets, and meaningful collaboration is the engine of digital progress.

Digital transformation is the key underlying basis for evidence-based policy-making, digital financial inclusion, healthcare, education, trade and tourism, business and e-commerce.

There are five key pillars which are necessary to ensure an inclusive and whole-of-society digital transformation. These are connectivity, government, regulation, business, and people.

Technological advancements have significantly influenced countries such as Tonga. By empowering individuals, we can tap into data reserves, enhance decision-making skills, and encourage inclusive economic growth.

The realm of digital innovation, within the context of our island nation, holds immense potential for impacting various aspects of our society, presenting a wide array of opportunities.

Bridging geographical barriers connects remote communities and addresses challenges posed by dispersed geography.

The advancement of digital technology promotes economic variety. Implementing digital technologies can lead to the emergence of new industries and job prospects, decreasing dependence on traditional sectors.

Using digital innovation not only strengthens climate resilience, but it helps to protect vulnerable communities from climate risks.

The advancement of digital technology fosters inclusivity in society so that marginalized groups can acquire empowerment, transparency can be enhanced, and civic participation can be increased through improved access to information and communication.

However, not everyone and every community benefits equally from digital innovation. Internet access, cost, and digital skills present challenges for Tonga, like they do for other countries. To achieve universal access to digital advancements, it is crucial to highlight the need to address disparities.

Tonga stands at a pivotal juncture in its digital transformation journey, propelled by the unwavering commitment of our government to harness the transformative power of technology.

Our infrastructure has undergone a significant expansion, with the successful completion of domestic submarine fiber cables in 2023. This has improved our connectivity and laid the foundation for seamless digital communication. The donation for a secondary submarine fiber cable will improve our digital infrastructure and connect all citizens.

The government has established the Digital Transformation Department (DTD) to drive our digital agenda. It aims to improve digital services and empower citizens.

To measure our digital transformation progress, the government partnered with the UNCDF to implement the IDES toolkit. This tool evaluates our digital landscape to improve and benefit all Tongans.

Tonga's Digital Economies score reached 53% by the end of 2022, showcasing our progress. With collaboration and determination, we will utilize digitization to benefit our nation.

In order to fully utilize digital innovation, Tonga is making a call for action.

First, investment in digital infrastructure. The expansion of broadband access and the reduction of connectivity costs will have a transformative impact on our society, as it will enable every citizen to participate actively in the digital economy.

Second, digital skills development. The importance of enhancing the digital literacy of our workforce cannot be overstated, as it is a key factor in our ability to adopt new technologies and take advantage of the employment prospects they offer.

Third, data protection and privacy. In this era of embracing digital technologies, it becomes crucial and of utmost importance to prioritize the protection and preservation of our citizens' data privacy and security.

Fourth, international cooperation. The importance of collaborating with both regional and international partners cannot be overstated, as it allows for the sharing of best practices, the pooling of resources, and collective efforts in addressing the challenges of digital innovation.

We strongly believe that the chosen theme for this session, "Leveraging Digital Innovation for Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific," presents the perfect opportunity to delve into these matters and establish a direction for the future.

Let us join forces and tap into the immense potential of digital innovation to create a future in Asia and the Pacific that is inclusive, resilient, and prosperous for all generations to come.

Thank you.