Issues Note for Theme 2

Leveraging the power of science, technology and innovation to fight multidimensional vulnerabilities and to achieve the SDGs

Issues Note

sustainable development. However, the largest beneficiaries tend to be the providers of intellectual and physical capital—the innovators, shareholders, and investors, and consumers who are able to afford and access the digital world. As a result, there is a risk that LDCs will not be able to participate and benefit from these advances, due to their limited capacities and limited access.

During the period of the implementation of the IPOA, internet access in LDCs increased to 19% in 2019[4] from about 5% in 2011. While in developed countries, 87% of individuals used the internet in 2019. There is also a wide gap in digital connectivity between urban and rural areas in the LDCs. Eighty-nine per cent of urban households had a mobile phone compared 63 per cent of rural ones (ITU, 2018).

In most least developed countries, successful applications are still largely narrowband, especially in rural areas. These range from text alerts with diet reminders for diabetics to mobile platforms for farmers to check agricultural prices, natural disaster monitoring and, increasing mobile money services. These services have been successful as applications operate on widely available basic handsets and they require modest user skills to operate.

This digital divide results from low broadband coverage especially in rural and remote areas, the relatively higher cost of using the internet, lack of local content and lack of relevant digital skills in LDCs. In addition, the digital divide in LDCs also has a gendered dimension, with only 14% of women using the internet compared to 25% of men in 2019. This means that approximately 800 million people in LDCs are not online and have no possibility of participating in online services, including e-commerce, e-governance, e-health and e-learning, and communication.

Income, gender, age, education, health and other inequalities also affect access to new technologies and risk further exacerbating social divides.

The United Nations Technology Bank for the LDCs has an important role to play in the advancement of science, technology and innovation, as well as bridging the digital divide and contributing to COVID-19 response and recovery.

Promoting private sector engagement, digitalization and broadband connectivity

Broadband internet, and information and communication technologies promote economic development. Given its potential applications in diverse sectors of the economy, failure to ensure high levels of broadband access and use will have significant implications for LDC, with the risk of seeing them fall further behind.[13]

As an enabling technology, broadband creates value and reduces costs by supporting applications in many different sectors such as agriculture, education, financial services, government, health and disaster management. Yet broadband internet access in the majority of the LDCs remains below the global average.[14] COVID-19 has highlighted that internet access is an essential public service. A whole-of-government approach to digital investment can benefit the entire value chain: citizens, businesses, governments and their partners, and the supporting ecosystem of ICT developers and implementers.

During the lockdown period, many LDCs found it challenging to avail online facilities for remote learning and working, primarily due to insufficient broadband services combined with often high costs. In order to build a resilient society in the face of new and emerging challenges, there is need to promote digital access and broadband connectivity in LDCs.

Developed countries have seen rapid fixed broadband connectivity increases since 2005, while developing countries on average saw an acceleration after 2014. However, fixed broadband connectivity growth in LDCs was from a very low starting point, causing a new digital divide. In 2020, the average number of subscriptions per 100 inhabitants in LDCs was