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Opening Session

Address by

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Opening remarks
Doreen Bogdan-Martin
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Madam Chair of CSTD − *Commission on Science and Technology for Development*,
Madam Secretary-General of UNCTAD,
Madam President of the Economic and Social Council,
Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen.

It's an honour and pleasure to address the commission again.

The two priority themes this year — data for development; and global cooperation in science, technology and innovation for development — are fit for the times.

Now more than ever, we need to come together behind responsible technological innovation.

And we need reliable, accessible, high-quality, non-discriminatory, and disaggregated data to identify needs, set priorities, deliver, monitor, and evaluate effectiveness in alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

We are now 160 days from the start of the UN Summit of the Future.

Some have compared this moment to pressing "reset" on global cooperation.

Others have called it a turning point for the SDGs.

It's fair to say that it's a once-in-a-generation opportunity — an opportunity to create the vision for the digital world we want — one that works for all people and our planet.

We have been in this position before.

The year is 2005:

We are in Tunis for the second phase of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), organized by ITU on behalf of the entire United Nations (UN) system.

WSIS participants have gathered to make good on the Geneva Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action adopted two years earlier.

The stakes are high.

As then-UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan puts it: "Our task here in Tunis is to move from diagnosis to deeds."

The digital world of 2005 was very different from today. Only 1 billion people were online. We relied on dial-up connections. We used our mobile phones primarily for calls and texts. Mobile payments were just beginning to gain traction. So were social media platforms. What we were seeing with AI was the stuff of science fiction.

WSIS participants knew that the Internet of tomorrow would look very different from the Internet of their time. Like us, they didn't have all the answers.

But they were asking the right questions — the tough questions. Questions about affordability, financing, trust, skills, and much more.

The way I see it, these questions fell into three big priorities: First, focusing on people, not just technology, to ensure that everyone shares in the benefits. Second, making the framework for collaboration inclusive, to reflect the digital world in all its diversity and complexity. And third, building adaptable processes and coordination governance mechanisms, to keep pace with the challenges and opportunities presented by technological innovation.

Dear colleagues,

These priorities ring as true today as they did in 2005.

They offer a roadmap as we prepare for the 20-year review of the World Summit on the Information Society and the Summit of the Future.

I would like to briefly address each priority, starting with focusing on people.

I want you to think about our world as a village.

You can all visualize it!

Those are the words of Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Shirin Ebadi when she opened WSIS in 2005. "If we think of the world as a village," she said, "then everyone should benefit from its riches, especially knowledge."

Today, our global village is technologically rich.

Over the past decade, the digital economy has grown 2.5 times faster than the GDP of the physical economy.

Yet, a third of our modern village is cut off from these riches. 2.6 billion people are still offline worldwide. Countless others are on the wrong side of the digital divide — struggling with safety concerns, slow Internet speeds, inadequate skills, affordability issues, and other challenges.

The gap between the digital "haves" and "have-nots" is widening. Nowhere is this more evident than in gender inequality. In Least Developed Countries, for example, only 30 per cent of women have access to the Internet. This holds back the entire global digital economy.

It's the year of the Summit of the Future.

We will soon have the Fourth International Conference on Small Island Developing States, followed by the Third UN Conference on Landlocked Developing Countries.

ITU will hold its World Telecommunication Standardization Assembly.

Let's send the strong message that today's digital experience must be affordable, safe, relevant, and sustainable — that it must be meaningful for us all.

Now, let's turn to the second priority — making digital cooperation frameworks inclusive.

It's no coincidence that the WSIS Declaration of Principles begins with "We, the representatives of the peoples of the world." This "we" holds a special meaning within the WSIS community.

Over the past 20 years, WSIS has accomplished a great deal, from promoting digital inclusion to supporting capacity-building initiatives.

Providing an inclusive and equal platform for all remains its greatest achievement.

What WSIS accomplished by adopting a multistakeholder model in the early 2000s was truly forward-thinking. We see it in its two critical outcomes: the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) and the WSIS Forum.

IGF has solidified its role as the forum for global digital governance issues.

The WSIS Forum has complemented this process well by focusing on grass-roots digital development — and by bringing UN agencies together and allowing them to create a framework for collaboration.

The discussions taking place at IGF and the WSIS Forum are fundamentally interconnected — the same way that the WSIS Action Lines and the SDGs are inextricably linked.

Let's use these forums — and the two decades of collective learnings acquired through the WSIS process — to accelerate progress on the SDGs.

Let's integrate voices of developing countries, women and girls, youth, and civil society into our action plans to ensure they have a voice in shaping the digital future.

Which leads me to the final priority — building adaptable processes and coordination governance mechanisms.

Misinformation and disinformation, ethics, and other complex issues are top of mind today.

But they were not always at the forefront of the agenda.

And yet, the WSIS Actions Lines anticipated these challenges early on and tackled these difficult questions head-on. These Action Lines have stood the test of time, providing the WSIS process the flexibility needed to keep pace with the rapid evolution of new and emerging technologies.

The outcomes of the WSIS+20 Forum High-Level Event — which will take place here in Geneva from 27 to 31 May — will be critical inputs to the Summit of the Future and the overall review by the General Assembly in 2025.

This is an opportunity to take stock of how far we've come, what's left to do, and the challenges before us.

For over two decades now, the WSIS process has been a strong example of global digital cooperation in action. We must celebrate this process as an existing, well-functioning, and multistakeholder UN mandated process for digital governance.

We must also understand how WSIS and other UN processes like the Global Digital Compact and the Summit of the Future can complement each other.

This is our opportunity to ensure we: avoid duplicative efforts and leverage and build upon established and widely supported mechanisms such as WSIS and its elements.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Only a fraction of the SDGs are on track to be achieved by 2030.

The fault lines between and within countries have deepened — at a time when we need unity, solidarity, and cooperation to address the global challenges that threaten our collective future. While the situation may be dire − here is hope.

Digital and emerging technologies can accelerate progress across all the SDGs.

Let's continue to align the WSIS process with the SDGs.

Let's remember that in this interconnected world of ours, what affects one of us impacts us all.

We only have 160 days left before the start of the Summit of the Future.

Let's make every day, every minute, every second count.

Thank you.