From Small Islands to Smart Islands:
Dialogue highlights digital transformation to accelerate sustainable development in the Pacific

Digital Transformation Key to sustainable development in Pacific SIDS

- Briefing emphasized the importance of closing the digital gap to enhance sustainable development in SIDS
- Leaders outlined plans for a second phase of the Smart Islands initiative to continue advancing digital infrastructure and technology in the region.

New York, 27 July. Opportunities to leverage digital transformation for the Pacific's sustainable development were at the center of a briefing themed “Smart Islands: Bringing Digital Experiences to Pacific Communities Advancing the Sustainable Development Goals” held in New York yesterday.

Hosted by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS), the United Nations Global Pulse (UNGP), and the United Nations Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States (OHRLLS), the event convened over 50 participants online and in person from the diplomatic community, philanthropic organizations, and UN agencies.
Discussions focused on bridging the digital divide and unlocking emerging technologies for the development of Pacific Small Island Developing States (SIDS). As highlighted in the Antigua and Barbuda Agenda for SIDS adopted at the Fourth International Conference on Small Island Developing States (SiDS4) this year, harnessing the potential of science, technology, and innovation is crucial for advancing digitalization benefits in SIDS. However, the geographic characteristics of the islands, with widely dispersed populations, create challenges to securing affordable information and communication technology (ICT) connectivity in the region.

The briefing built on the ongoing implementation of Smart Islands in ten Pacific countries. As part of the two Joint Programmes funded by the Joint SDG Fund, ITU and UNOPS, alongside other UN agencies in the Pacific, have been supporting digital transformation initiatives, solutions, and policy framework developments that align with the Pacific's developmental aspirations.

Smart Islands in the Pacific have received support from national government and stakeholders, industry, UN agencies, regional organizations, and academia in addition to projects funded by the governments of Australia and Japan, and the Asian Development Bank. Over 2,000 participants in communities have benefited from capacity-building activities as part of Smart Islands projects and programmes in the Pacific. The initiative has demonstrated tangible impacts, particularly in early adopters like Vanuatu, where residents now enjoy improved internet coverage, digital payments, and online shopping, fostering new opportunities in e-commerce, e-education and e-health.

In his remarks, Mr. Sanjay Mathur, UNOPS Regional Director for Asia-Pacific, urged that, “Today is our chance to come together and boost the Smart Island initiative. We're showing the world that Pacific islands are leading the way in using digital tools to build a better, more resilient future. By embracing these innovations, we're not just tackling today's challenges but also creating a bright and sustainable future for all Pacific communities.”
Ms. Atsuko Okuda, ITU Asia and the Pacific Regional Director, delivered the opening remarks and presented the progress of the Smart Islands Programme together with Ms. Samina Kadwani, UNOPS Director for East Asia and the Pacific. Ms. Okuda shared her vision for the next phase of the Smart Island initiative, “Our aspiration for the Smart Islands initiative is to take the benefits of digital transformation to the rural and remote communities in the Pacific through a coordinated whole-of-government approach to maximize the impact.”

Mr. Kersten Jauer, Deputy Director of the Strategic Planning and Monitoring Unit at the Executive Office of the UN Secretary-General, gave an overview of the innovation and digital transformation efforts at the United Nations, including the innovation lab UN Global Pulse. “We cannot solve 21st century problems with 20th century tools. This is why the Secretary-General shared his vision of a ‘UN 2.0,’ with the capabilities to harness new opportunities in data, digital, and innovation to better support member states,” he stated.
The briefing also saw the participation of Mr. Jaap van Hierden, UN Resident Coordinator in Micronesia. His remarks on behalf of the UN Pacific illustrated the joint commitment to support digital transformation efforts for Small Island Development States.

In the ensuing interactive session, representatives from the Pacific permanent missions shared testimonies of the tangible positive impact of the Smart Islands initiative. Several representatives expressed their interest in the continuation of the Smart Island Initiative in pursuit of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the SDGs in the Pacific.

The discussions will inform a prospective second phase of the Smart Islands programme, with preparation led by ITU, UNOPS, and other technical UN partners.

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Notes to the editors:

Press contact details:
Ms. Zekun Shi, Communications Officer, UNOPS South East Asia and Pacific
Email: zekuns@unops.org

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