Opening Statement

H.E. Mr. Mohamed Shareef, Minister of State, Ministry of Environment, Climate Change and Technology, Maldives

Asia-Pacific Regional Community Networks Summit 2021 - Innovating policymaking to connect the unconnected (Virtual Meeting), 18 August 2021 (10:00-13:00 Bangkok Time)

Excellencies,

Distinguished participants,

Ladies and gentlemen,

At the outset, allow me to extend my sincere thanks to ESCAP and ISOC for co-hosting this online event, which facilitates regional dialogue between different stakeholders on a practical solution for improving rural digital connectivity.

Connecting the unconnected remains one of the major challenges for both governments and private sectors in our region. The complex geography of some of our countries, the expensive deployment of digital infrastructure to reach remote rural areas, and the limited access to investment funds, make it harder to achieve universal connectivity. As a result, identifying practical digital connectivity solutions such as the Community Networks that are cost-effective and empowers community ownerships contributes to bridging the rural-urban digital divide.

According to ITU statistics, accessing the Internet from rural locations are lower compared urban locations in many Asia-Pacific countries. To give an example of some countries with available data, Uzbekistan have around 62% of urban

individuals using the Internet compared to 49% of rural individuals. Indonesia have around 59% of urban individuals using the Internet compared to 34% of rural individuals. Female Internet users in rural locations are found to be lacking behind compared to female Internet users in urban locations.

These challenges need transformative Internet access through integrative policies, user-driven tools, and cost-effective innovative solutions that can be rapidly deployed and implemented in under and un-served communities across the region. In this regard, Community Networks have emerged as a complementary solution to connecting the unconnected, allowing for low-cost community-driven solutions to be developed to connect people in remote locations. Community networks have proven to be successful for supplementing 'universal access' goals and providing digital opportunities for rural communities.

In the Maldives, we trialed the concept of Community Networks in the mid-2000s. Though invitations were opened to island communities to build and operate telephone networks in the islands, only a handful of islands took the initiative and even in those few cases the projects did not pass the concept stages. But around 2006 one island took the lead and established a local community driven telephone network in the island with interconnection to the national telephone network via sim card gateways. This too was short lived as personal mobile phone packages and call rates became very affordable.

In 2009, we opened opportunity to provide retail Internet at island level to all. Island communities as well as partnerships and local investment businesses. Many local island level companies stemmed up and took the opportunity and some of these local companies grew to operate in multiple islands and became sizable SMEs to operate

ICT networks in the islands. And today, one of the biggest Internet Service Providers in the Maldives provide Internet service in this business model, where local access is provided through local networks established by island entrepreneurs.

Community Networks in the Maldives as illustrated takes the form of local network entrepreneurs rather than direct community participation.

We need to explore beyond the norms of yesterday and work across the spectrum from pure community driven initiatives to entrepreneurship and digital economy based models for Community Networks of the future.

As a way forward, we need to work together towards identifying innovative digital solutions for bridging the digital divide. Multistakeholder partnership will continue to play an important role especially by governments, private sectors, and other relevant stakeholders. The Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway initiative supported by the ESCAP secretariat is one regional cooperation platform that strengthens multistakeholder partnerships to bridging the digital divide.

With these key points, I thank the co-hosts once again and wish everyone a productive dialogue.

Thank you.