-Regional Heads and Ministers of Government

-CANTO Board of Directors, Secretary General & Staff

-Conference Speakers

-Partners

-Captains of industry

-Delegates all

-Good evening!

I am delighted to see so many of you at CANTO's 39th Annual Conference and Trade Show. Your presence here is a testament to your significant contributions to our field. Welcome!

As industry leaders, we're not just witnessing but actively shaping the digital revolution in ICTs and telecoms. Your role in this revolution is not just significant, it's pivotal. Digital technologies are not just enhancing communication and efficiency, they are also inspiring innovation and fostering growth across many industries. I can stand here before you today and mention a lot of industry developoments, but I choose not to. One reason is that you are already aware of that. A second reason is, unfortunately we are not able to offer all of these developments in our region to our customers. I choose to make use of this platform to bring to your attention some of the challenges we face in the ICT space in our beloved region.

As industry leaders in the caribbean it is our task to decrease or eliminate the digital divide with the developed countries. We are facing challenges in this area, because we are not getting enough support and attention from one of the biggest handset providers in the region when it comes to offering for instance 5G services. For some time now we are combining our efforts within CANTO to get this supplier to the table to discuss this matter with us so we can find solutions to the issues our customers are experiencing. The most important reason for this is .. we should leave no one behind.

Remember that phrase ?

We will continue to reach out and find solutions. We will not accept the answer that our market is to small. We have commited ourselves to secure the digital future of our region and therefore no matter the size, everyone must be able to participate with all enhancements in the digital space.

Another challenge that we are facing is the fair share issue.

There are developments in the world that we from CANTO are closely following. Therefore since last year we have assembled the Fair Share committee chaired by Lisa Agard. Recent developments on this matter are that in May 2024 an european court ruled that Meta must pay for Networl usage. This is an important step for “Fair Share’. In an article by Wolfgang Kopf, senoir Vice President for Group Public and regulatory Affairs at Deutsche Telecom AG he states that the old internet is dead. The internet is open to everyone. However despite of its virtual nature, it relies on costly infrastructure. As data traffic grows, continous network expansion is crucial to ensure data reaches and end users without discrimination. Traditionally, the internet operated on a decentralized infrastructure comprised of thousands of interconnected networks, forming a "network of networks." In this framework, fees for transmitting data between networks played a major role in funding network expansion. Charges were typically waived only between networks with comparable data exchange volumes, referred to as Tier 1 operators, thereby ensuring a practical and fair system. However, today's Internet bears little resemblance with this old world. Currently, 71% of global data traffic flows through proprietary backbone networks and content delivery networks owned by a handful of large Internet companies and hyperscalers – Big Tech. These companies employ every possible tactic to attract customers to their platforms and create barriers to switching. Leveraging their superior bargaining power, they have managed to ensure they pay nothing or significantly less than in the early days of the Internet for data transport to the customer, despite highly asymmetrical data traffic flows. They benefit from the fact that telecom networks are strictly regulated, whereas there are no regulations for Big Tech’s backbone networks. While European network operators are subject to strict net neutrality rules, Big Tech backbone networks are not. Furthermore, discussions about broader platform neutrality for content have not even begun.

The principle of net neutrality is being taken to an absurd extreme. Network operators must transport all Big Tech traffic to customers, no matter how large the volumes or how much spam and advertising it may contain. This entails constant network upgrades, not only to manage high data volumes but also to comply with net neutrality. Congested networks hinder free and neutral data flows. Therefore, the European debate correctly identifies a threat to net neutrality, but this threat emanates from Big Tech, not network operators. Continuous network expansion is vital for maintaining net neutrality. Isn’t it fair to ask the companies that disproportionately benefit from this valuable service to contribute to its costs?

Recently some carribean countries were hit by hurricane Beryl.

The infrastructure of these countries was damaged. The customers cant make use of also the services of the Big tech companies. But is is only the responsibility to get everyone online again, so they can leave no one behind. Isnt it a legitamite quation to raise what the contributions is of the big tech companies since there services make the most use of the operators infrastructure?

We will continue to combine our efforts to find solutions for this challenge that we are facing. These efforts are all related to decrease or eliminate the digital divide that I mentioned in the beginning.

The impact of climate change, the costly infrastructure and our small markets must make us aware that we should also look at doing business in a different way. I apploud the inauguration of the caribbean data center Association. Their main focus is to bring to the attention of industrie leaders in our region the possibilities that they can offer. Some of these data centers are located below the hurricane belt. These tier 1 data centers are able to provide secure, reliable and redundant solutions. This is very important to protect our data. With these solutions we can find ways to invest more efficient by combining our efforts in a smart way.

As a region, we are witnessing the countless benefits and opportunities the rapid technological advancements can offer. However, with this transformation comes a responsibility to ensure that our digital technologies are sustainable and ethical and contribute positively to the environment, society, and the economy. That's the crux of this year's theme-*Towards a Sustainable Digital Economy*! We at CANTO understand the challenges, and hence, we've put together an impressive lineup of speakers and panellists to help the industry navigate the way forward.

As I hinted earlier, we must leave no one behind. There is also a social dimension to this. We must foster inclusivity and ensure that the benefits of digitalisation are accessible to all. This is not just a goal, it's a responsibility that we all share. By bridging the digital divide and empowering communities in our region, we can create a more inclusive digital ecosystem.

Not only should there be digital inclusion but also ethical use of technology. As leaders, we must advocate for the responsible use of AI, ensuring transparency and fairness in automated decision-making processes. We must also address digital privacy and security issues, protecting user data from breaches and misuse.

Colleagues, the call for us to embrace the dual dimensions of digitisation and sustainability will require the industry to prioritise innovation that supports long-term ecological balance. This includes developing smart grids, deploying 5G technology with minimal environmental impact, and creating circular economies within the telecom sector. Moreover, we must champion policies and practices that promote sustainable business models and corporate social responsibility.

For many Caribbean telcos, I'm sure I am preaching to the converted. Our challenge is how do we accomplish all of this with declining revenues. This is the most important reason why me must keep working to find solutions that will benefit all of us.

Digital sustainability is not a goal we can achieve alone. It is a journey that requires collective effort, collaboration, innovation, and a shared vision of a better future. Each of us has a role to play, whether we are policymakers, regulators, industry leaders, telecom operators, technologists, vendors, or academic or civil society community members. Let's work together, guided by a shared vision, to create Gigabyte Society in the caribbean by 2030. Why NOT? If this is the goal of the European Union it will only increase the digital divide if there are no changes in the way we do business. Let's use our collective wisdom to solve our common challenges.

As I close, in times like these the importance of technological advancements and the role of CANTO really hit home. I am referring to the recent passage of the devastating category four hurricane Beryl, which left a trail of destruction among the windward islands of the Caribbean. The work of CANTO's Disaster Recovery Planning Working Committee comes into focus. They’ve been collaborating with regional telcos to hammer out an agreement to promote special pricing for communication services post-disaster to aid recovery efforts.

On behalf of CANTO and our membership, I extend our deepest condolences to all those affected by the recent hurricane. Our hearts go out to the victims and their families during this tragic time. As our Secretary General said earlier, we stand in solidarity with the affected nations and are committed to providing all necessary support to aid recovery and rebuilding efforts. Together, we will overcome this hardship, emerging stronger and more resilient. And again we will make sure we leave no one behind. Please know that our thoughts and prayers are with you, and we pledge our support to help restore communication and connectivity as swiftly as possible.

Friends and colleagues, I thank you all!