HE Boutros Harb, Minister of Telecommunications of Lebanon

HE Talal Abu-Ghazaleh, Chairman of the Arab States Research and Education Network

HE Yasser AbdulMunem, Director of Education and Scientific Research of the League of Arab States

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great honour to be here with you today for the opening of the 6th e-AGE International platform and to represent the European Commission.

I would like to start by expressing my sincere thanks to the Lebanese authorities to host this event, to the American University of Beirut for their warm welcome and for being such a great host to all of us and to ASREN for organising this event and more particularly to Yusef Torman its Managing Director for giving me an opportunity to take the floor.

The participants who attend this event today are researchers, policy makers, academicians or connectivity providers.

I come from a slightly different "universe": the world of international development cooperation. And until recently, those two worlds hardly met.

But this is changing. ICT are now part of our daily lives and digital technologies, including the internet, are being adopted in the whole world at an unprecedented rate – faster than any other technologies in the past.

The reason for that trend is that E-infrastructures are an important tool: they give access to unique facilities and data. But they are also extremely valuable to increase the efficiency of many services, in areas such as health, education and governance.

It is therefore not surprising that the role of digital technologies as an enabler for sustainable development has been recognised in the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, where it is recognised that (and I quote) "*the spread of information and communication technology and global interconnectedness has great potential to accelerate human progress, to bridge the digital divide and to develop knowledge societies*".

References can thus be found explicitly as a target under SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure), but also in the targets relating to climate change, gender equality and women empowerment, private sector development, education and health.

Nevertheless, connectivity and affordability that many take for granted do remain a problem both across and within regions and there are large variations in connectivity between high and lower income countries and between cities and rural areas.

This is why the European Commission is supporting projects which aim at improving infrastructure networks and at connecting European research and education institutions with peer institutions in partner countries.

Examples of such projects include EUMEDCONNECT 3 for Mediterranean countries or AfricaConnect 2 for African countries, while there are many other examples in other regions of the world. Although those networks were initially conceived mainly as infrastructure networks, today they have evolved into research collaboration platforms which have the potential to expand ICT cooperation even further.

Such projects already started a few years ago, but recently they served to articulate a new concept for the European Commission development policy: the "Digital for Development" (D4D), a framework for mainstreaming digital technologies, contributing to the achievement of the SDG.

In education notably, it is increasingly understood that ICT/digitalisation can be a powerful tool to improve access and equity in education, delivery of quality learning and teaching, teachers' professional development as well as education management, governance and administration.

Such topics are at the confluence of different priorities of development policy (social development, higher education…) and the role that National Research and Education Networks can play in this respect is increasingly acknowledged. I would take this opportunity to pay tribute to the representatives of the NRENS present here today.

To conclude, I would also like to acknowledge the participation to this event of representatives of other regional Research and Education Networks: GEANT for the EU, WACREN for W and C Africa and the UbuntuNet Alliance for E and S Africa. It shows that this is not only about technical networks but more importantly about human networks.

I am convinced that it makes the audience as well as the discussions particularly diversified and rich.

I wish you a fruitful conference

Thank you for your attention