World Telecommunication & Information Society Day
17 May 2026

Digital lifelines

Strengthening resilience in a connected world

MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

Anura Kumara Dissanayake
President,
Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka

I am pleased to convey this message as Sri Lanka joins the global community in commemorating World Telecommunication and Information Society Day (WTISD) 2026, alongside the 161st anniversary of the international Telecommunication Union (ITU).

This year's theme, "Digital Lifelines: Strengthening Resilience in a Connected World" underscores the indispensable role of resilient and secure digital infrastructure in sustaining modern societies. It highlights the importance of ensuring meaningful and universal connectivity, enabling individuals, communities and economies to remain linked and functional under all circumstances.

In today's interconnected world, digital networks and services are integral to nearly every aspect of daily life. Terrestrial systems, submarine cables, satellite technologies, data centres and digital platforms collectively support essential sectors, including healthcare, education, finance, transport, public administration and disaster response. Any disruption within this digital ecosystem, whether arising from natural disasters, extreme weather events, cyber threats or technical failures, can have far-reaching consequences for public safety, economic stability and societal well-being. It is therefore imperative that digital resilience remains a national priority.

Sri Lanka recognises digital resilience as a cornerstone of its broader digital transformation agenda, aligned with the Digital Economy Strategy 2030. As we advance towards a more inclusive and globally integrated digital future, we are placing renewed emphasis on strengthening infrastructure reliability, ensuring continuity of communication services and enhancing cybersecurity frameworks. Equal attention is being given to building adaptive systems capable of responding effectively to emergencies and facilitating the rapid restoration of critical communication networks.

Efforts to reinforce emergency communication mechanisms and safeguard digital lifelines reflect our firm commitment to protecting national interests and ensuring uninterrupted service delivery. These initiatives are vital not only for economic progress, but also for public safety, social cohesion and national resilience.

On this significant occasion, I reaffirm Sri Lanka's continued partnership with the ITU and our steadfast support for the objectives of WTISD 2026. We remain committed to advancing resilient, secure and inclusive digital lifelines for the benefit of all our people.

MESSAGE FROM THE PRIME MINISTER

Dr. Harini Amarasuriya
Prime Minister
Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka

I am pleased to extend felicitations on the occasion of World Telecommunication and Information Society Day (WTISD), which falls on May 17.

The theme for this year, "Digital lifelines: Strengthening resilience in a connected world," highlights the importance of robust and reliable digital infrastructure that supports essential services and communication systems on which modern life increasingly depends.

Under the policy framework "A Thriving Nation, A Beautiful Life" one of our key objectives is to transform digital technology from a simple means of communication to a central driver of efficient, transparent governance and a strong economy.

The government's initiative to provide fiber optic internet access and enable digital learning facilities across schools nationwide can be identified as a significant step toward ensuring equal opportunities for all students.

With the support of the International Telecommunication Union and relevant stakeholders, Sri Lanka must continue to advance its digital development in a sustainable manner, ensuring that digital infrastructure and services contribute meaningfully to national progress.

On this World Telecommunication and Information Society Day, I wish for the strength and determination needed to achieve these goals.

MESSAGE FROM THE DEPUTY MINISTER OF DIGITAL ECONOMY

Eng. Eranga Weeraratne
Deputy Minister
Ministry of Digital Economy

As we commemorate World Telecommunication and Information Society Day (WTISD) 2026, I am pleased to highlight the significance of this year's theme, "Digital Lifelines - Strengthening resilience in a connected world." At the Ministry of Digital Economy, this principle is embedded in our work to ensure that no individual is left behind in the digital era.

WTISD 2026 highlights the importance of resilient digital infrastructure in supporting the critical services and systems on which modern society depends. These digital lifelines help deliver early warnings during disasters, support safe navigation, carry global data traffic, enable emergency communications, and extend connectivity to communities in need. Their resilience is therefore vital to protect public well-being, sustain essential services, and support economic stability during times of disruption. This year's theme also emphasizes that digital resilience depends on many systems working together, supported by international cooperation, standards, capacity-building, innovation, and the continued efforts of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU).

Sri Lanka remains firmly committed to building a digitally connected and inclusive nation under the National Digital Economy Strategy 2030. Key initiatives such as the National Digital Identity, the National Data Exchange, and the expansion of GovPay are advancing the country's digital public infrastructure and supporting more efficient and accessible digital services. In parallel, the recent amendment to the Sri Lanka Telecommunications Act, together with subsequent regulations in telecommunication sector, has strengthened the regulatory environment for greater connectivity, emerging technologies, and digital innovation. Progress in 5G deployment, telecommunication infrastructure sharing, and the National Cyber Security Strategy 2025-2029 further reflects Sri Lanka's commitment to building resilient digital systems and secured digital services.

The 161st anniversary of the ITU together with WTISD 2026, stands as a timely reminder that collective action is essential to building resilient digital infrastructure that underpins universal meaningful connectivity and supports safe, affordable, and effective digital access across societies and nations.

MESSAGE FROM THE SECRETARY TO THE MINISTRY OF DIGITAL ECONOMY

Waruna Sri Dhanapala
Secretary Ministry of Digital Economy
Chairman of TRCSL

I extend warm greetings on the occasion of World Telecommunication and Information Society Day (WTISD) 2026. As the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) marks its 161st anniversary together with WTISD 2026, this year's theme, "Digital Lifelines - Strengthening resilience in a connected world, " highlights the importance of building digital systems that can withstand, adapt to, and recover from disruption while safeguarding public well-being and economic stability.

Resilience has become an essential requirement of digital networks. In the modern era, the strength of a nation is reflected in how well its digital networks are designed, protected, and prepared to respond to crises. Their true value is seen in their ability to continue functioning and recover quickly during emergencies.

Achieving such resilience requires sustained efforts across several fronts. Strengthening physical telecommunication infrastructure, advancing technological capabilities, and empowering people with digital knowledge and ICT skills are among the key pillars of this process.

In line with the National Digital Economy Blueprint, progress in 5G deployment, telecommunication infrastructure sharing, and digital public infrastructure initiatives reflects Sri Lanka's efforts to build reliable and responsive digital systems that can serve the public under all circumstances. These efforts also reflect our commitment to strengthening digital networks as a foundation for national development.

Such resilience, however cannot be achieved by the government alone. It requires close collaboration among the government, the private sector, and communities. This partnership is essential to strengthen digital networks and promote a culture of preparedness at all levels.

Through careful planning, timely action, and thoughtful recovery, we can build a safer, stronger, and more resilient future for all.

In marking this occasion, I extend my sincere congratulations to the ITU and convey my best wishes for its continued success in advancing global connectivity, ICT development and international cooperation in the years ahead.

MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR GENERAL OF TRCSL

Air Vice Marshal Bandula Herath
(Retd)
Director General TRCSL

I am pleased to convey my greetings as Sri Lanka joins the rest of the world in commemorating World Telecommunication and Information Society Day (WTISD) 2026 under the auspices of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU). WTISD serves to raise awareness of the opportunities and benefits that the Internet and other information and communication technologies can bring to societies and economies. It also highlights their potential to bridge the digital divide and promote inclusive development.

This year's theme, "Digital Lifelines - Strengthening resilience in a connected world," draws attention to the growing importance of resilient digital systems in modern society. Digital lifelines play a vital role in improving quality of life by supporting, protecting, and connecting people, particularly vulnerable groups such as students, patients, older persons, and those facing social or economic challenges. Their importance becomes even greater during times of crisis, including natural disasters, public health emergencies, and other disruptions.

By enabling access to essential services such as healthcare, education, and emergency response, digital lifelines contribute to greater inclusion, resilience, and overall well-being.

They also support safer and more independent living in everyday life. The effectiveness of these lifelines is further strengthened by advanced communication technologies, particularly 4G and 5G networks, which provide reliable, high-speed, and low-latency connectivity.

In this context, 2026 represents an important milestone for Sri Lanka with the commercial launch of 5G technology in the country. This development is expected to further strengthen digital lifelines by expanding connectivity, improving service delivery, and encouraging innovation across multiple sectors. Sri Lanka is therefore well placed to harness next-generation digital infrastructure to build a more connected, inclusive, and resilient society. As we mark this significant day, I wish the ITU continued success in its future endeavours and extend my sincere appreciation to all those who joined in commemorating World Telecommunication and Information Society Day 2026.

World Telecommunication and Information Society Day (WTISD)

World Telecommunication and Information Society Day (WTISD) is celebrated annually on 17 May since 1969. This date commemorates the establishment of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) – the United Nations Agency for Digital Technology, and the signing of the first International Telegraph Convention in 1865.

The primary objective of WTISD is to enhance global awareness of the significant role that Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) play in advancing societies and economies. It also seeks to highlight the importance of bridging the digital divide and ensuring equitable access to digital resources.

Historical Background

The celebration of World Telecommunication Day (WTD) was first initiated on 17 May 1969, marking the anniversary of the founding of the ITU on 17 May 1865 and the signing of the first International Telegraph Convention in Paris. This celebration was formally institutionalized in 1973 during the ITU Plenipotentiary Conference held in Torremolinos, Spain.

Subsequently, the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), convened in 2005, called upon the United Nations General Assembly to designate 17 May as World Information Society Day (WISD). The intention was to emphasize the growing importance of ICTs and to address the wide range of social and economic challenges associated with their development and use.

In March 2006, the United Nations General Assembly officially proclaimed 17 May as World Information Society Day. Later that same year, during the ITU Plenipotentiary Conference held in Antalya, Turkey, it was decided to merge both observances. Consequently, the unified celebration became known as World Telecommunication and Information Society Day (WTISD).

WTISD serves as an important platform to underscore the transformative potential of ICTs in modern society. It draws attention to the necessity of digital inclusion and promotes international efforts to reduce disparities in access to technology.

Each year, a specific theme is selected to guide global celebrations and to encourage meaningful dialogue on contemporary issues related to telecommunications and the information society.

WTISD 2026 Theme

The theme for World Telecommunication and Information Society Day (WTISD) 2026 is "Digital lifelines – Strengthening resilience in a connected world". This theme underscores the importance of reinforcing the digital systems that underpin modern life. It calls on governments, industry stakeholders, and communities to strengthen the digital lifelines that keep the world running. Resilience ensures that digital systems are designed to withstand, adapt and recover from disruption, protecting both lives and livelihood.

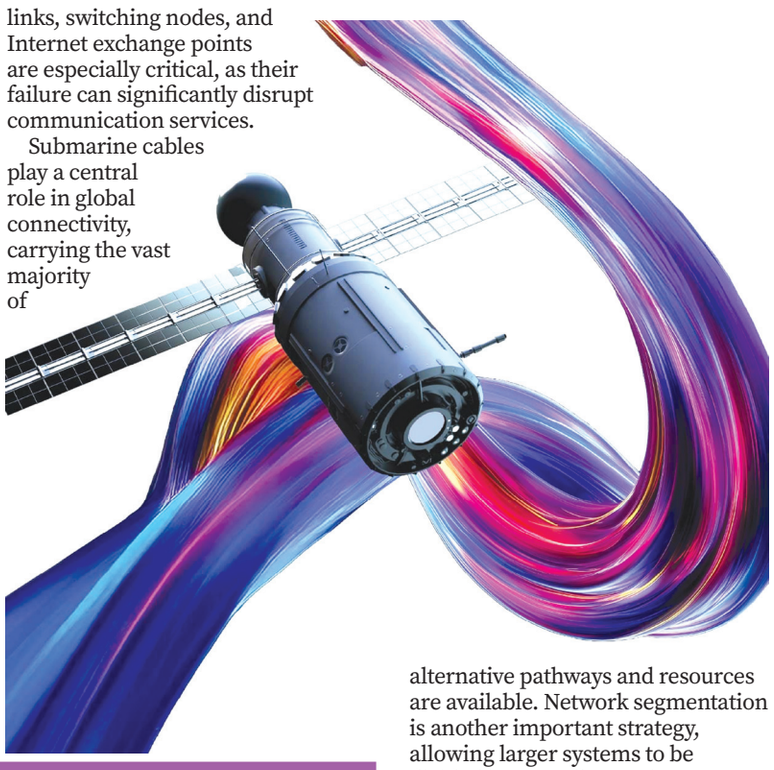
Strengthening Communication Network Resilience

In today's highly connected world, communication networks are essential for everyday life, economic activity, and public services. When these networks become unreliable or fail, the effects can be widespread and severe, disrupting critical functions across societies. The immediate impact of an outage is the inability to carry out activities that depend on connectivity, which can affect individuals, businesses, and entire economies. For this reason, maintaining continuous and stable network operations, especially during emergencies or disasters is a key priority.

Resilient communication networks are built on two fundamental principles: redundancy and diversity. Redundancy ensures that critical components such as submarine cables, terrestrial transmission systems, satellites, and data centers have backup systems ready to take over if failures occur. Diversity complements this by incorporating different technologies, vendors, and routes, reducing the likelihood that a single point of failure or shared vulnerability will disrupt the entire system. Strengthening supporting infrastructure, such as power systems and physical assets like towers and access facilities, is also crucial for rapid recovery. Emerging technologies, including cloud computing, virtualization, and artificial intelligence, further improve resilience by enabling flexible workload distribution across regions. Tools like software-defined networking (SDN), combined with AI and machine learning, allow networks to detect issues early and adapt dynamically during disruptions. Beyond technical solutions, effective collaboration among operators, regulators, and stakeholders is essential to respond quickly to outages, particularly when critical sectors are affected.

Challenges for network resilience

Communication networks face a wide range of challenges that can threaten their resilience. Natural disasters, especially extreme weather events, can severely damage infrastructure at times when reliable communication is most needed. Events such as cyclones, floods, wildfire have highlighted the vulnerability of existing systems and the urgency of strengthening them. Power failures are one of the leading causes of network disruptions, affecting both hardware and software operations. Mobile networks tend to be more vulnerable to such outages than fixed networks, and access networks closer to end users are generally less resilient than core network components. Certain elements, particularly those in back bone infrastructure such as transmission links, switching nodes, and Internet exchange points are especially critical, as their failure can significantly disrupt communication services.



Submarine cables play a central role in global connectivity, carrying the vast majority of international data traffic. Most cable faults are caused by human activities, such as fishing operations or ships dragging anchors, while natural events like earthquakes, tsunamis and underwater currents are less frequent causes. Cable landing stations, where these systems connect to land-based networks, are also potential points of vulnerability.

Engineering Approaches to Strengthen Network Resilience

To enhance resilience, networks are designed with structural and operational measures. Redundancy and diversity are implemented across multiple layers to ensure alternative pathways and resources are available. Network segmentation is another important strategy, allowing larger systems to be divided into smaller sections so that faults can be isolated and prevented from spreading. In some cases, parts of the network can operate independently during disruptions until normal conditions are restored. Expanding submarine cable routes and integrating satellite systems can improve coverage and provide backup connectivity during emergencies.

Operational resilience is strengthened through advanced network management systems that use automation for monitoring, detecting anomalies, and initiating recovery actions. These capabilities help maintain service continuity across different network layers. Additionally, communication networks depend heavily on other infrastructures, particularly energy systems. Since power outages are a common cause of service interruptions, improving the resilience of electricity supply is essential. Measures such as backup power systems, generators, and diversified power sources are widely used, especially for mobile base stations. Renewable energy solutions like solar or wind power can provide alternatives, although they may be limited by environmental conditions. Portable energy solutions can also support recovery efforts in disaster-affected areas.

The physical robustness of infrastructure such as towers, buildings and cell sites is another key factor. Appropriate site selection, evaluation of soil susceptibility to landslides, the conduct of structural stability analyses, and the implementation of necessary reinforcements collectively contribute to ensuring that these assets can effectively withstand environmental hazards. Access to these sites is equally important during recovery efforts, as damaged transport infrastructure can delay repairs. This highlights the need for coordination with government authorities such as armed forces and emergency services to facilitate access and logistics required for critical site locations. Pre-planning, including positioning skilled personnel near critical sites, can further improve response times when disasters occur.

In addition to technical measures, organizational strategies play a vital role in strengthening network resilience. Cooperation among service providers, regulators, and other stakeholders enables faster and more coordinated responses to disruptions. Multi-sector collaboration is particularly important during large scale crises, where multiple infrastructures such as energy, transport, and communications are affected simultaneously. Key practices include conducting regular emergency drills, establishing clear communication protocols, assigning defined roles and responsibilities, and training staff to handle crisis situations effectively. These efforts help ensure preparedness, improve response efficiency, and support rapid service restoration while also safeguarding personnel.

Overall, a combination of technical solutions and organizational preparedness is necessary to build resilient communication networks. By integrating robust infrastructure design, advanced technologies, and strong collaboration frameworks, networks can better withstand disruptions and recover quickly, ensuring continuity of essential services.

5G as a Digital Lifeline in a Connected World

A lifeline is something essential for survival, continuity, and recovery—especially in times of crisis. Having endured a barrage of health, financial, political, and natural shocks, we know firsthand, how vital lifelines are when everything else unravels. Today, the world marks World Telecommunication and Information Society Day under the theme "Digital Lifelines: Strengthening Resilience in a Connected World," reminding us that connectivity has become as indispensable as power or roads.

In Sri Lanka, where ICTs underpin healthcare, education, commerce, and increasingly governance, 5G is no longer merely a network upgrade—it is a core component of national resilience and growth. It can help bridge the digital divide, support livelihoods, and transform how governments deliver services.

The wake-up call of Ditwah

Cyclone Ditwah offers a clear mandate for Sri Lanka to embed 5G-ready resilience into national disaster-management strategies. It showed that connectivity is a lifeline, as power outages and damaged telecom infrastructure cut off communities during floods and landslides, delaying rescues and separating families.

5G-enabled networks can rebuild that lifeline with greater resilience. Device-to-device (D2D) and mesh-type connectivity let phones share vital information even when some parts of the network are down. Network slicing can prioritise emergency services so first responders stay connected even when the network is weak, helping coordinate evacuations and locate stranded people. 5G-linked sensors and drones can send real-time data on rainfall, river levels, and landslide risks to the National Disaster Management Centre, feeding AI-based systems that shorten warning times and speed up response.

Emerging livelihoods

5G is a key enabler of sustainable economic growth. It can unlock sectors from agriculture to entertainment, creating jobs and digital livelihoods. Building 5G networks itself demands skilled technicians, planners, and data engineers. Studies show that in emerging economies, 5G's benefits can outweigh investment costs by roughly three-to-seven times over the long term, with most gains from Smart Industry (factories, logistics, energy) and Smart Rural (agriculture, mobile health, digital learning, transport, water and sanitation, and broadband services).

For small and medium enterprises (SMEs), many of which still rely on slow or unreliable broadband, 5G can transform organisations by exposing them to digital tools, online markets, and global supply chains. High-speed 5G-enabled connections support real-time inventory management, digital payments, remote collaboration, and data-driven marketing, enabling rural enterprises to compete more effectively. A spice producer in Matale could use 5G platforms to receive instant orders, track shipments, and deal directly with overseas buyers. When combined with national digital-inclusion efforts—such as fibre-to-the-village and shared infrastructure—5G becomes a lifeline that sustains livelihoods and keeps local economies connected.

Healthier communities

Community health and well-being experiences a paradigm shift with 5G. Connected wearables can continuously monitor vital signs and share data in real time with clinics or telehealth platforms, enabling early detection of health issues. In rural and semi-urban areas, 5G-enabled mobile health units with video consultations and AI-assisted diagnostics can bring preventive care and fitness guidance directly to homes and schools.

5G can further promote physical activity by delivering virtual trainers, live group classes, and wellness challenges to high-rise apartments and remote villages alike. Local entrepreneurs can use 5G apps to organise sports events, integrating real-time performance feedback. For Sri Lankan youth and working-age adults, such digitally supported activity helps counter rising non-communicable diseases, turning 5G into a health-preserving lifeline that fosters active, resilient communities.

Governance trade-offs

Governments can leverage 5G-ready networks to deliver more efficient, transparent, and responsive public services. Digital identity systems, online tax filing, e-procurement, and real-time project monitoring can reduce corruption, improve accountability, and ensure that critical services reach citizens without delay. 5G functions as a governance lifeline that strengthens trust between the state and society.

Conversely, dense networks of sensors, cameras, and connected devices increase the risk of privacy violations and data misuse. This calls for a balance between services and strong data-protection laws, clear spectrum-management policies, and independent oversight. In the digital-lifeline era, resilient governance—transparent regulations and public-interest safeguards—is as essential as resilient networks.

The chicken-and-egg deadlock

Despite the hype, operators hesitate to invest in 5G without clear demand and proven use-cases, while users see little reason to adopt 5G services until networks are reliable and affordable. Additional hurdles include high deployment costs, uneven urban-rural infrastructure, and scarce low-band 5G spectrum that is essential for cost-effective rural coverage. The true benefits of 5G can be realised only when device and user penetration are high, particularly in this age of AI where large volumes of data is key to effective decision making.

To break this deadlock, practical steps are needed: prioritise 5G roll-out in high-value locations such as universities, hospitals, and factories; launch small pilot projects that demonstrate real benefits, such as faster services, better healthcare, smarter public services, or more efficient farming; and establish a smart regulatory framework that ensures timely spectrum availability and reduces investment risk. Together, these measures can transform the stalemate into a positive, self-reinforcing cycle of demand, investment, and innovation.

Demystifying 5G

Raising awareness and education about 5G is as crucial as deploying the network itself. 5G is mostly seen only as faster mobile data, overlooking its true potential. Awareness campaigns through schools, media, and digital platforms can demystify 5G and highlight everyday uses. Technical and vocational training in 5G-related skills are needed to build a local workforce that can design, deploy, and manage these systems. 5G-enabled services such as cloud platforms, e-commerce, logistics, and digital finance create demand for app developers, cybersecurity specialists, and digital-service providers. For Sri Lanka, where youth unemployment is high and the digital divide is still wide, investing in 5G- oriented education is essential to align the workforce with the digital economy. Such investment is an essential part of building an inclusive, resilient digital economy and strong digital lifelines that can withstand future shocks.

Prof. Dileeka Dias

Prof. Dileeka Dias is a distinguished academic with nearly four decades of experience in teaching, research, and innovation in telecommunications and academic leadership. She currently serves as a Professor in the Department of Electronic and Telecommunication Engineering of University of Moratuwa . Her research interests center on wireless communications.

She holds a PhD and MSc from the University of California, Davis, USA and a BSc Engineering degree from the University of Moratuwa. She is a Chartered Member of the Institution of Engineers, Sri Lanka (IESL), and a Senior Member of the IEEE.

Prof. Dias has held several senior academic positions at the University of Moratuwa, including Founder Dean of the Faculty of Graduate Studies, Dean of the Faculty of Information Technology, Head of the Department of Electronic and Telecommunication Engineering, and Director of the Dialog-University of Moratuwa Mobile Communications Research Laboratory. She currently serves as the Deputy Vice Chancellor.

Beyond the Signal Bars: Building a Resilient Digital Sri Lanka

Air Vice Marshal
Bandula Herath (Retd)
Director General TRCSL

The TRCSL's plans for new regional offices in Kandy, Matara, Batticaloa, Jaffna and Anuradhapura signal an attempt to bring regulation closer to ordinary citizens — decentralising services that were once confined largely to Colombo

RUWANTHI ABEYAKOON

On May 17, the world pauses to mark World Telecommunication and Information Society Day, a day rooted in the founding of the International Telecommunication Union in 1865. From the crackling Morse code messages of the 19th century to today's instant video calls and artificial intelligence-powered networks, telecommunications have transformed how humanity connects, governs, trades, learns and survives. What was once a luxury reserved for governments and military systems, has now become the invisible infrastructure of everyday life.

This year's global theme — "Strengthening resilience in a connected world through digital connections" — resonates deeply with Sri Lanka, a country attempting to rebuild, modernise and digitally empower itself after years of economic turbulence.At the centre of this transformation is Air Vice Marshal Bandula Herath (Retd), the Director General of the Telecommunications Regulatory Commission of Sri Lanka (TRCSL), whose tenure has become synonymous with sweeping reform, aggressive modernisation and an uncompromising stance against corruption.

For him, telecommunications are not merely about mobile phones and internet packages."Communication is the backbone of the modern global village," he said. "Without it, a country becomes isolated from the world and even from its own people."

The Invisible National Treasure

People rarely think about the radio spectrum — the unseen frequencies that carry television broadcasts, mobile calls, Wi-Fi signals, satellite transmissions and emergency communications. Yet according to Herath, it is one of the country's most valuable assets."The radio spectrum is a national resource, just like water or land. It belongs to the people," he said.

The TRCSL oversees how this finite resource is distributed and protected across six major sectors: telecommunications, broadcasting, transport and navigation, emergency services, scientific applications and industrial operations.

While the average citizen experiences the spectrum through a smartphone screen or television remote, its reach extends much further — guiding aircraft, supporting maritime navigation, enabling disaster warnings and powering meteorological systems. In a hyper connected age, spectrum management has become a matter of national security as much as economic development.

Infusing telecommunications laws into modern era

When Herath assumed office in late 2024, he inherited a telecommunications framework he described as "22 years outdated."

The laws regulating one of the country's fastest-moving sectors had failed to keep pace with technological evolution. While the rest of the world accelerated toward 5G, cyber security frameworks and digital economies, many of Sri Lanka's core telecommunications regulations remained rooted in another era.The response was immediate.

Under his leadership, the TRCSL initiated one of the most extensive legal overhauls in its history, taking actions for fast implementation of the revised Telecommunications Act while introducing 18 new regulations aimed at modernising governance. One of the most glaring omissions involved submarine cables.

Although almost all of Sri Lanka's internet traffic flows through underwater fibre-optic cables crossing the Indian Ocean, there had previously been no proper legal framework governing them. That absence, Herath said, posed both economic and strategic risks. "These cables are not just wires under the sea. They are the lifeline of the country's digital economy."

Sri Lanka currently relies on multiple submarine cable systems owned by both state and private operators. Beyond supporting domestic connectivity, these networks form part of larger regional infrastructure linking Asia, the Middle East and Europe.The new regulations are expected to enable Sri Lanka not only to safeguard these systems, but also to generate revenue through maintenance and international traffic services.

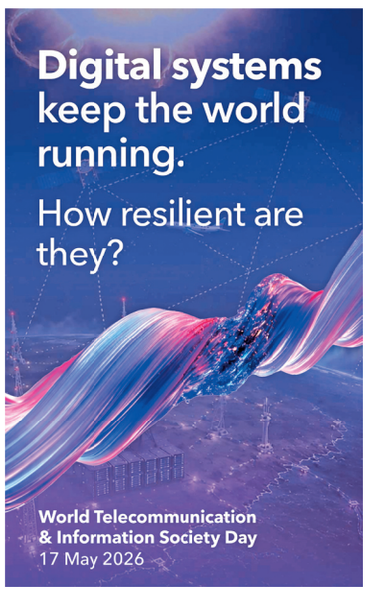
Environmental concerns are also entering the equation. Abandoned submarine cables contain chemicals and materials that can threaten marine ecosystems, prompting the TRCSL to begin examining environmental safeguards as part of future regulation.

The 5G leap

Perhaps the most visible symbol of Sri Lanka's digital ambitions arrived in December 2024 with the official rollout of 5G technology. While discussions and trials surrounding 5G had existed for years, implementation repeatedly stalled. Herath pushed the initiative forward, generating nearly Rs. 16 billion in State revenue through spectrum allocation. Yet he insists the real value of 5G extends far beyond faster downloads or smoother social media scrolling.

"5G should not simply become a tool for endless entertainment consumption," he said. "It must be used meaningfully." Unlike earlier generations of mobile technology, 5G's true power lies in ultra-low latency — the near-instant response time between devices and networks.

That capability opens the door to transformative sectors: Remote robotic surgeries and advanced telemedicine, precision agriculture systems reacting in real time, smart manufacturing and industrial automation, immersive digital



classrooms and remote learning and intelligent transport and logistics systems

The TRCSL is already preparing for the next frontier: 6G. While 5G itself remains in its early stages globally, Sri Lanka has begun developing a roadmap for the transition between 2025 and 2030 — an indication of how rapidly the digital landscape is evolving.

The battle for better service

For years, Sri Lankan mobile users have voiced frustration over dropped calls, weak coverage and inconsistent internet speeds. Herath openly acknowledges the problem. "In terms of Quality of Service, we are sadly at one of the lowest levels in Asia," he said. At the heart of the issue, he added, is market imbalance.

One operator dominates nearly 70 percent of the market while another controls a substantial share, leaving smaller competitors struggling to survive. According to the DG, such concentration weakens competition and reduces the incentive for service improvement. To counter this, the TRCSL is introducing significant market power regulations designed to prevent dominant operators from unfairly controlling the market.

More significantly, the regulator is building its own independent monitoring systems rather than relying solely on operator-provided performance reports."We cannot depend only on the data they give us," he said. "Sometimes the data comes from the best locations while ordinary users struggle elsewhere."The goal is to create a more transparent system where service quality is independently verified rather than self-reported.

Fighting the illegal mobile phone trade

Another major front in Herath's reform agenda involves combating the illegal importation of mobile devices. The issue, he said, goes far beyond lost tax revenue. Consumers purchasing unauthorised phones often receive no warranty protection, while illegal imports also create opportunities for criminal misuse and black-market activity.

To address this, the TRCSL is implementing an automated International Mobile Equipment Identity (IMEI) registration and blocking system. Every legitimate mobile device possesses a unique IMEI number. Under the new framework, stolen or illegally imported devices could eventually become unusable on local networks. Subscriber regulation is tightening as well. The TRCSL has introduced restrictions limiting the number of SIM cards an individual may hold, while strengthening identity verification procedures for eSIM activations. Automated links with government databases are also expected to identify inactive or fraudulent registrations — including SIMs tied to deceased individuals or expired tourist visas.

Bridging the Rural Divide

Despite rapid urban digitalisation, connectivity gaps remain a reality for many rural communities. Closing that divide has become a cornerstone of the TRCSL's broader vision. Through the "Gamata Sannivedanaya" initiative, the commission is funding telecommunications towers in underserved regions using billions of rupees collected through development funds. The maritime sector is also receiving attention.

Thousands of multi-day fishing vessels depend on radio communications for safety and coordination at sea. Licensing processes that once required lengthy travel to Colombo are now being decentralised and digitised, allowing fishermen in areas such as Galle and Jaffna to access services locally or online. Perhaps the most socially transformative initiative involves education. Working alongside the Ministry of Education, the TRCSL is expanding fibre-optic internet access to 6,000 secondary schools across the country. More than 1,300 schools were connected last year alone. For Herath, the impact extends beyond the classroom."When fibre enters a school, it enters the entire village," he said. In rural communities, schools often become the first gateway to digital infrastructure , enabling not only learning, but broader social and economic transformation.

Toward a digitally resilient future

As Sri Lanka marks World Telecommunication and Information Society Day, the country finds itself at a defining digital crossroads. Telecommunications are no longer a secondary utility. They shape economic resilience, national security, education, healthcare, governance and public trust. The TRCSL's plans for new regional offices in Kandy, Matara, Batticaloa, Jaffna and Anuradhapura signal an attempt to bring regulation closer to ordinary citizens — decentralising services that were once confined largely to Colombo. For Herath, the mission is ultimately about people rather than technology.

The cables, towers, satellites and fibre networks may form the infrastructure, but the larger goal is building a connected society where opportunity is not determined by geography, privilege or influence. In a world increasingly defined by digital resilience, Sri Lanka's telecommunications story is no longer simply about stronger signals.It is about building stronger systems, stronger institutions and ultimately, a stronger nation.

Digital Lifelines: Bridging the Divide with 'Gamata Sannivedanaya' & the 'School Fiberization'Projects

As the world commemorates World Telecommunication and Information Society Day (WTISD) today, the global spotlight is on "Digital Lifelines: Strengthening Resilience in a Connected World." While international debates focus on submarine cables and satellite constellations, in the heart of rural Sri Lanka, the definition of a "lifeline" is much more personal. It is the ability for a student in a remote village to access a digital library, for a farmer to check market prices, and for a small business to reach a global market.

However, these lifelines require a robust physical foundation to function. Driven by the Telecommunications Regulatory Commission of Sri Lanka (TRCSL), two flagship initiatives, GamataSannivedanaya and the School Fiberization Project, are reshaping the nation's landscape by ensuring that no village or classroom is left behind in the digital age.

'Gamata Sannivedanaya' Project (GSP)

At the center of this transformation, the 'GamataSannivedanaya' project is a national initiative by the TRCSL that is rapidly turning the vision of 100% island wide 4G/fiber coverage into a reality through completing approximately 600 towers by the end of 2029. The 2026 theme emphasizes that connectivity is no longer a luxury - it is the backbone of social and economic resilience. This project addresses this head-on by identifying the "blind spots" in our national network. Following an exhaustive survey and prioritizing public complaints across all 25 districts and 14,000 Grama Niladhari divisions, the project has targeted underserved areas where conventional market forces had previously failed to reach.

The project is moving steadily toward its goal of total connectivity by successfully completing 85 towers, providing immediate relief to previously underserved areas. Despite global economic challenges and rising operational costs, the government has introduced revised guidelines to fast-track tower construction. With a commitment to installing over 150 new telecom towers this year alone, the project is ensuring that even the most remote communities are not left behind.

'School Fiberization' Project: Empowering the Next Generation

Connectivity in the village is only half the battle; connectivity in the classroom is where the future is built. The School Fiberization Project aims to provide high-speed, reliable internet to approximately 6,000 secondary schools island wide. This initiative is designed to enhance digital learning, improve administrative efficiency, and support modern educational tools.

To date, 1,314 schools are successfully connected via fiber optic infrastructure by Sri Lanka Telecom (SLT) and additional 607 schools are currently in the implementation phase and will be completed soon. The project has already identified the next phase of expansion, targeting 1,495 additional schools for fiberization. This initiative is more than just providing internet; it future proofs our education system, supporting digital learning tools and improving administrative efficiency across the country.

As we celebrate WTISD 2026, Sri Lanka stands at a pivotal junction. The 'Gamata Sannivedanaya' and the school fiberization projects are not just about erecting steel structures, hardware or cables; it is about building the infrastructure for a digital economy, and it serves as a testament to Sri Lanka's resilience. It aligns with our national goal of digital transformation, empowering citizens with the tools to navigate a world that is increasingly online. In a resilient connected world, no village should be an island. Through these projects, we are ensuring that every corner of Sri Lanka is plugged into the global grid, creating a digital lifeline that is strong, secure, and accessible to all.