communications & digital technologies

Department:
Communications & Digital Technologies
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

Address by the Department Of Communications and Digital Technologies Representative, Mr. Thabiso Thukani at the ICASA 5g Forum Meeting, Johannesburg, 11 October 2023

Thank you, Programme Director,

5G Forum Acting Chairperson

ICASA Councillors present in this meeting

Forum members

Industry Associations

Representatives of International Organisations

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen, Good morning!

On behalf of the Director-General, please allow me to convey her regrets for not being able to attend but let me also express heartfelt gratitude to ICASA for extending the invitation to the Department to this august gathering.

I am profoundly honored to stand before you today at this 5G Forum meeting of the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa. I am told that it is the 3rd instalment since the launch in 2017.

We have been informed that the Steering Committee and the 5 Working Groups have been hard at work, amongst others preparing for this meeting, sculpting the shape and form of the forum, and its outputs and outcomes.

Today, we gather under the theme "From Theory to Practice" to delve deep into the transformative potential of 5G technology in our nation.

This theme resonates deeply with our aspirations. The theoretical promise of 5G technology is vast – remember the famous triangle – from ultra-fast internet speeds to low latency and massive connectivity that will revolutionize various industries.

However, the practical implementation of this technology is "where the rubber hits the tarmac." It is about how we harness this potential to ensure that all South Africans are digitally empowered to

create and participate in tech-enabled opportunities that drive inclusivity and economic transformation.

A cursory reading of the program reflects that the meeting will be paying attention to the pertinent issues such as the impact on the digital economy, reflections on 5G deployment, and reflections on the challenges.

As you are aware, the Department is also in a process to amend legislation to enable the Minister responsible for local government to make a national standard by-law on rapid deployment. This "ladies and gentlemen" should ensure that snags which can impede the roll out of 5G in South Africa are dealt with accordingly.

But equally important, you will also reflect on the critical issues such as cybersecurity challenges of 5G. I am looking forward to the session that will be dealing with the "hype and the reality." I am intrigued by the work of the forum and the lineup of presentations.

As a country we should align ourselves with international standards and developments in supranational institutions such as the International Telecommunication Union and its structures.

That said, this past June, South Africa and Nigeria submitted a multi-country contribution to ITU Working Party 5D contributing to the development and finalization of the ITU-R Framework for IMT-2030. This is a first in history.

IMT-2030 is basically 6G in ITU parlance. These two African countries have contributed to the "capabilities of IMT 2030" and usage scenarios of this important framework which is the basis for 6G.

That contribution Ladies and gentlemen is a step in the right direction.

Next-generation spectrum policy

Chairperson,

You will recall that the Minister started a consultation process on the next generation of spectrum policy for economic development. That process is still alive, and it is the Minister's objective to publish the spectrum policy soon.

Without pre-empting the policy, spectrum remains one of the key enablers of electronic communications networks, it is the lifeblood of broadband networks in South Africa and all over the world.

At its heart, the spectrum policy, envisages economic inclusion of all South Africans, bridging the digital divide, bridging the connectivity-divide which continues to exclude rural and underserved communities.

The policy seeks to drive down the cost to communication and avail more spectrum to support technology innovation and emerging technologies.

Through the use of spectrum, the proposed policy will ensure "support for provision of universal and affordable access to the internet – i.e., Sustainable development goal, 9C".

WRC-23

Ladies and gentlemen,

I do not need to remind you that we are only a month away from the World Radiocommunication Conference of 2023.

As we approach the conference, our responsibility will amongst others ensure that we secure allocations for mobile and IMT services. This allocation will ensure that we continue the deployment 5G and technologies beyond.

It will also ensure that as country we continue to get closer to achieve our "SA Connect" objectives.

National 5G Population Coverage

Who would have imagined that the first successful spectrum auction in South Africa would be concluded in our lifetime.

A year and a half later, after bequeathing the telcos with additional 300 MHz in their spectrum arsenal, how far have moved the needle in terms of connecting the unconnected, how are we doing as a nation in making the cost of data affordable?

South Africa has certainly taken its place under the sun amongst the countries that are deploying 5G technology. That is well and good!

ICASA's report on the state of ICT sector in SA released in March 2023 states that the National 5G population coverage in 2022 stood at 20%, with rural population sitting at 0%, rural provinces such as the Free State, Limpopo, Mpumalanga, and Northern Cape are still adversely impacted.

Programme Director,

As the Department, we challenge the telcos and OEMs present here today strategize and ensure that their infrastructure investments include rollout of 5G even at these provinces. While acknowledging the high capital expenditure capex of deploying 5G networks, propose that we should soon reach at least a 40-50% or more national 5G population coverage.

I am interested to know what use cases have been deployed in South Africa thus far or which use case this forum intends to propose for deployment. The economic development, creating space more entrepreneurship, increased job opportunities, and innovation can only be realized if we roll-out out use cases.

While the forum continues to focus on 5G related issues,

Ladies and gentlemen, we should not wait for 2030 but I suggest we consider transitioning now. Perhaps the forum should also look at the "ITU-R timeline and process" which provides the steps to be followed in developing the "radio interface technology" for 6G.

This will ensure that the forum alive to the current development at the global for a, it remains relevant and start contributing to the "technical performance requirements and evaluation criteria which are next important steps in the process of developing 6G specification.

As I depart Chairperson,

As I highlighted earlier, South Africa and Nigeria contributed to the development and finalization of the IMT-2030 framework and ensured that the "usage scenarios" includes "ubiquitous connectivity" and that the "capabilities" portion of the framework includes "coverage" which are important to ensure that this technology can address our needs.

These usage scenarios have been redefined for IMT-2030 and extended to 6 – we have now moved from a triangle to a hexagon. There are now 6 usage scenarios, I am sure we are going to hear a lot about this hexagon in the coming few months after WRC and onwards.

Lastly, let me take this opportunity on behalf of Director-General wish you nothing but the best in the two days and hope that Department receive a copy of a report or recommendations from this meeting.