

## **MEDIA STATEMENT**

### **GOVERNMENT JOINS THE WORLD IN OBSERVING WORLD TELECOMMUNICATION AND INFORMATION SOCIETY DAY**

17 May 2020

Acting Minister of Communications and Digital Technologies, Jackson Mthembu, today joins the world in observing World Telecommunication and Information Society Day (WTISD). Proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly 51 years ago, on 17 May 1969, this day is aimed at raising awareness on the possibilities that the use of the Internet and other information and communication technologies (ICT) can bring to societies and economies, as well as of ways to bridge the digital divide.

“Today we observe this day when the world is seized with curbing the spread of the novel Coronavirus, and South Africa too has not been spared. The fight against COVID-19 has put into sharp focus the need for the sector to patriotically work as a collective and deploy its capabilities in fighting the spread of the virus,” said Minister Mthembu.

COVID-19 has hastened the global push into the Fourth Industrial Revolution. “Used correctly, digital technologies have the potential to aid the containment of COVID-19 and mitigate some of the challenges brought upon by the spread of the virus,” said Mthembu.

The theme for this year’s World Telecommunication and Information Society Day is: Connect 2030: ICTs for Sustainable Development Goals. Celebrations of this day acknowledge efforts made to advance communications related services and the International Telecommunications Union’s role in helping people connect around the globe.

The Department recognizes the need for effective deployment, uptake and usage of information and communications technology and global interconnectedness to speed up human progress and to bridge the prevailing digital divide in South Africa. The Department, through its entities including Broadband Infraco which is responsible for the broadband infrastructure deployment; Sentech – the provider of broadcasting signal distributor and communications provider; the SABC – the public broadcaster and the sector as whole, are contributing towards the realization of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals.

In an effort to ensure that all South Africans have access to telecommunications services during COVID 19, the regulatory body ICASA, has assigned temporary radio frequency spectrum to mobile network operators. This is to ensure that all citizens are able to access ICT services as well as government programmes in the fight against this pandemic. As part of the COVID19 interventions, the Department working with the Departments of Basic and Higher Education, and in partnership with mobile network operators and internet service providers have approved 471 local websites to be zero rated for educational purposes during COVID-19 in South Africa.

The zero-rated websites include, among others, TVET colleges, universities, basic education sites as well as sites that provide information which can help South Africans contain the spread of the novel Coronavirus. In addition to the 471 sites, which are already zero-rates, there is an additional 295 sites which are pending approval. Zero rating of telecommunications and data services for specified public services like health, education and public service pronouncements is a very important intervention to empower society and the youth, in particular, to mitigate the negative impact of

COVID19 to their education prospects. Whilst we appreciate the recent lowering of data prices by mobile network operators, we believe much more can be done by the sector.

The ICT industry is and will continue to help provide up to date and accurate medical information, statistics, as well as information about new Government Regulations, to inform all of our citizens about the crisis. COVID-19 provides an opportunity for affordable ICT infrastructure and digital technology solutions such as Artificial Intelligence, High Performance Computing, Robotics and the Internet of Things (IOTs) to be explored.

“As we mark this 51st anniversary, we call on all in the industry, in particular, the SMMEs to come together to develop and explore solutions to mitigate the spread of the virus and the saving of lives. The provision of affordable fast speed broadband connectivity and connecting our people to the world is more important now than ever before,” Minister Mthembu concluded.

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