

Harnessing Digital Innovation: South Africa's Vision for Collaboration in the Intelligent Age

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Programme Director,
Chair of the Session, Minister of Finance, Mr. Enoch Godongwana,
Fellow Ministers and Colleagues,
Senior Government Officials,
Media Representatives,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

The theme for this year's World Economic Forum (WEF), "*Collaboration for the Intelligent Age*," resonates deeply with me as South Africa's Minister of Communications and Digital Technologies.

I firmly believe that the Department of Communications and Digital Technologies (DCDT) has immense potential to drive South Africa's economic growth while also playing a pivotal role in shaping global progress.

We know that digital transformation is a driving force for modern economies, fostering innovation, enhancing efficiency, and promoting inclusivity across industries and society.

As we navigate this intelligent age, South Africa's Department of Communications and Digital Technologies (DCDT) is ready to work with our sister nations, the private sector, and the whole of society to unleash the full potential of the digital revolution, ensuring that no one is left behind.

Our country's participation in this year's WEF is both timely and significant.

The communications and digital technologies sector is a key enabler of socio-economic development, with far-reaching impacts on public services, commerce, education, and governance.

Globally, it has become clear that nations that effectively harness digital innovation are better positioned to create sustainable growth, improve the quality of life for their citizens, and compete in an increasingly interconnected world.

South Africa has embraced this reality by placing digital transformation at the core of its national agenda.

This focus on digital advancement guides our strategic goals, ensuring that we prioritise meaningful universal connectivity, equip citizens with critical digital skills, and create a productive digital economy.

These are not abstract ideals; they are the pillars upon which we are building a more inclusive society and a thriving digital ecosystem.

Rather than presenting them as isolated objectives, we view these priorities as interconnected. Universal connectivity enables access to e-learning, e-commerce, and e-government services.

At Davos, we will advocate for stronger global partnerships to support these efforts, seeking innovative solutions and collaborative frameworks that advance our digital economy, attract investment, and ensure sustainable progress that makes a lasting and positive impact on the lives of our people.

G20 Leadership

As the current chair of the G20, South Africa has a unique opportunity to shape global conversations on digital inclusion, data governance, and technology-driven economic growth.

Our G20 presidency is rooted in the principles of collaboration, equality, and sustainability, which align closely with the objectives of the WEF.

By championing a unified approach to digital transformation, we aim to ensure that emerging markets have a voice in shaping the rules of the global digital economy.

At Davos, we will seek to build on the momentum of our G20 agenda by advocating for:

- Greater investment in digital infrastructure across developing countries.
- Enhanced public-private partnerships to foster innovation and technology adoption.
- Stronger international cooperation on cybersecurity and data protection.

However, setting the tone for South Africa's G20 leadership extends beyond advocacy. It involves ensuring that our national priorities are aligned with global efforts to create a more inclusive and secure digital future.

This is why strengthening our national digital environment is essential.

Secure Digital Environment

To fully realize the benefits of digital innovation, it is crucial to create a secure and trusted digital ecosystem.

Our National Data and Cloud Policy recognises the importance of fostering this environment by promoting data sovereignty, encouraging investment in local data infrastructure, and ensuring that cloud services are accessible, reliable, and secure.

This policy positions South Africa as a leading destination for data-driven businesses and enhances our capability to manage data ethically and responsibly.

South Africa is currently finalising the Cybersecurity Bill, which will reinforce the creation of a secure digital environment. This legislation aims to establish institutional mechanisms to monitor, detect, and mitigate cyber threats effectively.

Our focus is on protecting digital assets. Additionally, we are ensuring that our regulatory framework remains flexible and adaptive to the evolving technological landscape.

This approach aligns with our G20 goals and the broader global agenda on technology governance. While robust safeguards are essential for a thriving digital economy, overly restrictive policies can stifle innovation.

Therefore, our approach is pragmatic: policies must evolve based on implementation experiences guided by emerging evidence, allowing us to maximise benefits while mitigating risks.

Our leadership in data protection, exemplified by the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA), positions South Africa as a responsible and forward-thinking partner in global digital governance.

At WEF, we will engage in discussions on developing global frameworks that balance innovation with the imperative of safeguarding privacy and security.

We believe that South Africa's experience in navigating complex regulatory environments offers valuable insights for shaping these frameworks.

Unlocking Investment in Data Infrastructure

Data is the lifeblood of the digital economy, and South Africa has emerged as a continental leader in data center investment.

Our supportive policies, combined with unique geographical advantages—such as coastal access to both the Indian and Atlantic oceans—make us an ideal location for sustainable data centers.

The cooling effect of the oceans, coupled with our growing renewable energy capabilities, enhances our appeal to investors seeking energy-efficient solutions.

At WEF, we will advocate for investments that serve local markets while positioning South Africa as a continental hub for data services.

Expanding Access to Smart Devices

Ensuring connectivity and access to digital devices is closely linked to addressing the affordability barrier.

For many South Africans, the cost of entry-level smartphones remains prohibitive, limiting their ability to benefit from digital services.

Early research by the GSM Association (GSMA) indicates that an affordability target of 15-20% of average monthly income could be considered reasonable for digital inclusion.

However, in South Africa, the cost of entry-level smartphones often exceeds a month's income for the median earner, making it even less accessible for the bottom 40 percent of the population.

Lowering the cost of smart devices is essential to enable broader participation in the digital economy.

If we don't make smart devices affordable, we will risk excluding many poor South Africans from critical opportunities, including e-learning, e-commerce, and access to e-government services.

To address this challenge, we are advocating for the reclassification of smart devices as luxury goods to ensure that the additional taxes they carry are not an obstacle to achieving universal access.

Economy Masterplan

South Africa's Digital Economy Masterplan serves as a comprehensive roadmap for sectoral interventions aimed at fostering inclusive economic growth.

It encompasses key initiatives such as broadband expansion, digital skills development, and the digitisation of government services.

Through SA Connect, we are working to provide high-speed broadband access to underserved areas, ensuring that all citizens can benefit from the digital economy.

Our efforts in e-government have already resulted in the digitisation of over 130 government services, significantly improving service delivery and accessibility.

While this represents steady progress, there is still much more to be done to ensure that more than a quarter of our population who are digitally inactive can access the internet.

Furthermore, we are in the process of remodeling the Masterplan to align with emerging global trends, including the rise of artificial intelligence and the need for sustainable digital infrastructure.

By doing so, we aim to position South Africa as a leader in the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) and a preferred destination for technology-driven investments.

The theme of this year's WEF, "*Collaboration for the Intelligent Age*," could not be more relevant to the communications and digital technologies sector, which is a catalyst for socio-economic progress.

South Africa's participation at WEF is an opportunity to showcase our achievements and ambitions in this space. It is also a platform to forge new partnerships that will help us accelerate our digital transformation journey.

As we head to Davos, we do so with a clear message: South Africa is ready to lead, collaborate, and innovate in the intelligent age.

Africa must take an active role in the digital revolution—not only as consumers but also as creators and innovators shaping the future.

By aligning our efforts with global initiatives, we will ensure that the Intelligent Age is driven by collaboration, inclusivity, and innovation, fostering shared prosperity where no one is left behind.