MINISTRY
COMMUNICATIONS AND DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES
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THE MINISTER OF COMMUNICATIONS AND DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES, HON. MONDLI GUNGUBELE INPUT TO THE 2023 SESSION OF THE ITU COUNCIL HIGH-LEVEL SEGMENT IN GENEVA, SWITZERLAND

Our aspiration to harness the transformative power of technology in improving human lives is rooted in the principle of inclusivity, aiming to leave no one behind and promote global prosperity and growth. However, the current global technological landscape presents challenges that require the establishment of strong domestic and international partnerships. In this regard, the ITU assumes a vital role in fostering collaboration and driving positive change.

In order to bridge the digital divide and foster local innovation, we have identified crucial priorities that serve as the foundation for our efforts. These priorities encompass universal connectivity, digital skills and innovation, empowerment and inclusivity, and strategic partnerships. They are supported by our comprehensive masterplan, the digital economy strategy, and the implementation of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) strategy. It is essential to recognize that these priorities are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. By collectively driving digital transformation and nurturing local innovation, they create an environment conducive to economic growth, job creation, and societal development in South Africa.

The Digital Divide in South Africa

Addressing the digital divide in South Africa requires a multi-dimensional and collaborative approach that combines infrastructure development, affordability, digital skills, and targeted interventions. Additionally, requires a comprehensive approach involving various stakeholders and strategies.

In South Africa, the digital divide remains a significant challenge, with approximately 20 million people lacking access to high-speed internet. This divide is deeply rooted in socio-economic and geographical disparities, which persist as a legacy of apartheid. Limited digital infrastructure and a lack of relevant technological skills further exacerbate the divide.

The ITU can provide valuable support to South Africa in addressing the digital divide. It can offer policy guidance and draw from international experiences to assist in developing regulatory frameworks, spectrum management strategies, universal access programs, and digital inclusion policies. Additionally, the ITU can foster collaboration and partnerships between South Africa, other countries, international organizations, and private sector entities. By promoting international technical standards, ensuring interoperability and compatibility of digital infrastructure and services, the ITU can facilitate seamless connectivity and optimize resource utilization.

Innovative Connectivity and Technology Business Models and Approaches

In South Africa, connectivity plays a crucial role in achieving digital inclusion, emphasizing an approach that prioritizes inclusivity and focuses on leveraging technology to address people's needs and challenges. Our strategy for broadband connectivity centres on utilizing existing private, government, and partner networks to establish last-mile connections, ensuring households are connected to the digital realm.

Several innovative connectivity and technology business models and approaches have emerged to address the challenges of connectivity and promote digital inclusion. To name a few Community Networks: Community networks that provide connectivity to underserved areas; Mobile Network Operators (MNOs) play a significant role in expanding connectivity in South Africa; Digital innovation hubs are spaces that provide infrastructure, training, and support for entrepreneurs and start-ups and Public-private partnerships have been established to leverage the resources, expertise, and networks of both sectors.

These innovative connectivity and technology business models and approaches demonstrate the diverse efforts being made to bridge the digital divide and promote digital inclusion in South Africa.

Society Readiness and Building a tech-savvy society.

The building a tech-savvy society is based on the following key pillars: (1) the development of robust and reliable digital infrastructure, including broadband connectivity, mobile networks, and data centres; (2) Prioritising and categorising digital skills into different levels or stages based on their complexity and proficiency, from basic to intermediate, to advance to expert levels. The digital skills continuum recognizes that digital skills are not a fixed or static set of competencies, but rather a continuous journey of learning and improvement; (3) Digital Inclusion and Equality to address disparities by promoting equal opportunities for all citizens to access and utilize digital technologies, regardless of socioeconomic background or geographical location; and (4) innovation and Entrepreneurship in the technology sector

through support to start-ups, provide access to funding and mentorship programs, and foster a culture of innovation through collaboration between academia, government, and industry.

Promoting digital inclusion also requires ensuring access to relevant digital content and online services in local languages. Achieving digital inclusion is vital, especially in underdeveloped and developing regions such as Africa, where unequal access to and use of ICTs persist, underscoring the importance of the United Nations' goal of leaving no one behind.

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