



AFRICAN TELECOMMUNICATIONS UNION
L'UNION AFRICAINE DES TÉLÉCOMMUNICATIONS

African Telecommunications Union Secretary General's Message for the 2020 ATU Day Celebrations Under the Theme: "*Post COVID 19: Role of Telecoms/ICT in the Resumption of Socio-Economic Activities*".

The African Telecommunications Union (ATU) was established on 7th December 1977. This founding day has been set aside for annual reflection and demonstration on the key role Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) have played and continue to play in the social and economic development of the continent. Specifically, 7th December, is celebrated each year by Member States of the Union based on the theme endorsed by the Administrative Council of the African Telecommunications Union (ATU).

The theme adopted by the Administrative Council for this year is: "***Post COVID 19: Role of Telecoms/ICT in the Resumption of Socio-Economic Activities***".

I am particularly excited that this theme is consistent with the ATU's statutory objective of promoting programmes for the development of the African Information Society and the Pillar on promotion of Quality Broadband Infrastructure and Affordable ICT services under the current 2019-2022 ATU Strategic Plan. This theme was set against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic which has attracted global concern and affected people of all ages and classes with far reaching implications on the national, regional and global economy.

Since February 14th 2020 when the 1st case of Corona Virus was reported in Africa, the effects of the pandemic in the continent have been far-reaching. Economically, there has been a sharp decline in GDP growth in African countries. Industries such as the tourism, retail, hospitality, and civil aviation have been among the hardest hit.

The health sector in many of the African countries is strained, and this has consequently led to a constraint in provision of basic healthcare. The socio-economic inequalities have also been magnified as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic with the vulnerable population of the society becoming even more vulnerable. A large population of Africans especially those living in peri-urban areas lack access to basic sanitation and clean water, posing a great challenge to proper practices such as handwashing. Women and children have been among the most affected population by the COVID-19 pandemic. Women have felt the bigger brunt of the effects of the pandemic in regards to job losses, increased gender and sexual based violence as well as violation of their rights. Children have also been affected by the disruption in education as a result of the nationwide closures of schools and colleges and have been increasingly exposed to online abuse and sexual violence. Environmentally, the increased production and imports of protective supplies and equipment used in the fight against COVID-19 has led to an increase in medical solid waste pollution.

As highlighted above, the entire world including Africa is grappling with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, amidst the chaos and the uncertainty, ICT has emerged as a key enabler sustaining the continuity of activities within governments, businesses and the society. With disruption caused by COVID-19 pandemic most activities are now conducted online and hence telecommunications and ICTs have become the driving force with e-learning, telemedicine and working from home becoming the “new normal”.

With the efforts being made by the scientist to develop a vaccine for the virus and the economic crisis experienced in many countries, slowly by slowly the world is planning for a life post COVID-19 and so should Africa. ATU is therefore encouraging its Member States to come together and deliberate on how telecommunications and ICTs can and will play a critical role in the resumption of socio-economic activities across the continent.

The growth of ICT in Africa has significantly improved over the last decade. This has been greatly attributed to ICT infrastructure such as fixed-line telephones, mobile phones, Internet, and broadband. While the continent has witnessed fast growth of ICT, network penetration is still low in Africa compared to other regions and the risk of Africa being left behind post COVID-19 remains high thus exacerbating the digital divide. This divide is evident among and within the Member States as well. That is why there exists a need for Member States to come together to share experience, knowledge and data while deliberating on effective ways of promoting a conducive environment for investment and further growth in order to enhance access to and use of ICT services post COVID-19. There is also need for development of digital economies in African countries; harmonised standardisation and prudent spectrum and orbital resources management as well as bridge the digital divide in Africa. ATU therefore hopes to work with its Members to focus on promoting the accessibility of all people including the disadvantaged. It is our conviction that in order for Africa to fully benefit from the power of ICT, there need to be ubiquitous levels of access.

ATU has over the past few months spearheaded and collaborated with ICT players on various programmes, projects and activities aimed at enabling the digital transformation in Africa. ATU is developing Recommendations on Spectrum for Rural Connectivity. Likewise, ATU is currently working with partners to develop Spectrum Management Tool Kits for Africa, undertaking harmonization of Frequencies for Emergency Telecommunications among others. ATU has in collaboration with the ITU commenced the development of the optimization of the GE84 (FM Plan) Plan for Africa and convened a regional forum on OTTs whose main objective was to identify the key issues and challenges facing African States and develop recommendations on the best course of action. Lastly, ATU introduced the ‘ATU Africa Innovation Challenge 2020’ whose aim was to recognize young African innovators who have developed solutions that can help Africa combat the COVID-19 pandemic just to mention a few.

While the Union has been engaged in multiple undertakings, it is cooperation with all our Members and the African people that has exceptionally stood in our hearts. I am therefore grateful to all African governments and in particular Ministers responsible for ICTs, all our

regulators, Associate Members, and other key ICT international organizations that have continually supported us in these processes.

To commemorate the ATU day, the Union will conduct a round table forum on 7th December 2020 from 12:00 Noon – 13:30 PM (EAT) bringing together ICT policy makers and regulators from the region to deliberate on the theme and to showcase the steps they have undertaken in their response to COVID-19.

The opportunity for Africa to take advantage of the power of ICT exists and we need to come out and help other industries regain their footing. We all have an important role to play in the development of African economies post COVID-19 and the decisions that are to be made in the next few months will impact generations to come. Let us come together to achieve this common goal.

The ATU General Secretariat wishes all the Member States, Associate Members and partners, a focused and memorable African Telecommunications and ICT Day 2020 as we together take Africa to the next level in realizing the full potential of ICT in reviving socio-economic activities in Africa post COVID-19.

Thank you!