

Commemorating World Telecommunication and Information Society Day *Connect 2030: ICTs for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)*

Information technology has the innate capability to unite the world. Today, when every nation, community and family is under the threat of the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19), we are turning to technology to make life bearable, now more than ever before. The pandemic has not only highlighted the necessity of ICTs to the economic development of societies but has also allowed us to appreciate the need to stay connected.

Every year on May 17 the world has celebrated World Telecommunication and Information Society Day (WTISD). Most notably, this day strategically falls on the anniversary of when the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) was founded in 1865.

To reaffirm ITU's goal of a connected world, Zambia joins other ITU member states to commemorate the contribution of ICTs to the advancement of the information society. This day is also celebrated to present the 'Connect 2030 Agenda for Global Telecommunication/ICT Development' (PP-18 Resolution 200, Rev. Dubai, 2018) now linked to the Strategic Plan of the Union for the period 2020-2023.

It comes as no surprise therefore that this year's theme, "*Connect 2030: ICTs for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)*", serves to help us to reflect on the technological advancements that help facilitate the acceleration to smart and sustainable development. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development recognises that the spread of ICTs and global interconnectedness has great potential to accelerate human progress, to bridge the digital divide and to develop knowledge societies, as does scientific and technological innovation across areas as diverse as agriculture, medicine and energy. We need to harness the potential of ICTs to achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and other internationally, regionally and locally agreed development goals. The Agenda also specifies targets for the use of ICTs for sustainable development in education (Goal 4), gender equality (Goal 5), infrastructure (Goal 9 - universal and affordable access to the internet) and Goal 17 - partnerships and means of implementation.

Indeed, ICTs are vital in driving progress towards achieving each and every one of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. ICTs are already empowering billions of individuals around the world - by providing access to education resources and healthcare, and services such as mobile banking, e-government and social media, among others.

It is undeniable that the mobile industry plays a critical role in promoting, advancing and measuring the SDGs, and therefore collaborating on accelerating a data revolution for sustainable development to ensuring that tools and applications targeting the vulnerable and marginalised communities cannot be over-emphasised.

For us as a nation, such moves will not only be in sync with the Seventh National Development Plan (7th NDP) anchored on uplifting the lives of Zambians without leaving anyone behind, but a game changer in leveraging the socio-economic impact of mobile technologies on individuals, businesses and the government.

Clearly, access to advanced technologies has grown at a fast pace and yet the impressive gains are still hampered by existing gaps in ICT access - between and within countries, between urban and rural settings, among men and women, and boys and girls. A major digital divide is still in place, with more people offline than online and particularly poor access in vulnerable rural communities. The challenge now is to connect the rest of the population too and therefore, ensuring that no one is left behind.

Today Zambia, comparable to many other member states, has not been spared from the vast challenges which the digital frontier presents. Constraints which include access to broadband, inadequate infrastructure plus many other factors, prevent the nation from achieving its goals and agendas set out to address challenges faced by the marginalised. According to the UN Human Development Report 2019, Zambia's HDI value for 2018 is 0.591 – ranking as medium in the human development category, placing it at 143 out of 189 states and territories.

However, the upsurge in the use of mobile technology and network coverage is proving to lead towards the envisioned future possibility of digital communities that are empowered through access to information for agriculture, economic development, education and decision making.

Zambia through the Zambia Information and Communications Technology Authority (ZICTA), has sought to bridge the digital divide by driving innovation, coordinating the use of the radio spectrum, fostering standards and policies that promote seamless interconnection, and working toward achieving the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Over the years, ZICTA has celebrated this day in collaboration with the Ministry of Transport and Communications by hosting various stakeholders for in-depth deliberations around how Zambia can effectively, efficiently and inclusively advance to a digital society. However, as a result of the outbreak of the Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19), this year's commemoration will be undertaken virtually.

Therefore, to observe this day and endorse efforts on how ICT advancements in the coming decade will help accelerate the achievement of the SDGs, ZICTA in collaboration with Ministry of Transport and Communications, will host a live web-based video conference moderated by ZICTA Director Technologies and Engineering Mr. Mwenya Mutale. It promises to bring together selected participants from the Ministry of Transport and Communications, and various other stakeholders. It is worth noting that

this webinar will be belatedly hosted today Monday May 18, as the 2020 WTISD fell yesterday on a Sunday.

It is only natural that the webinar agenda not only includes a discussion on how the nation can accelerate the use of technological advancements to achieve the set out Sustainable Development Goals but also speaks on the role of ICTs in the global response to COVID-19. This is for the reason that while the world is currently grappling with the complexities of the on-going pandemic, through advancements in ICTs and by staying connected, we will inevitably find breakthrough solutions in health to combat pandemics, make education intuitive and creative, find smarter ways of our agricultural sector, build robust economies and encourage gender equality.

Throughout this week, ZICTA will roll out promotional material to raise awareness of this important day virtually through its social media platforms with the intention of building rapport and encouraging meaningful and insightful conversations online. To join in on the conversation, you are encouraged to follow our Facebook page.

Together, let us reaffirm our theme: *“Connect 2030: ICTs for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)”*.

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