



Remarks/ video message

By

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At the

2021 Africa Thinktank Summit

Excellencies, Ladies and gentlemen,

- I am pleased to address this year's edition of the Africa Thinktank Summit.
- At the outset, I wish to express my gratitude to the African Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF) for giving me the opportunity to contribute to the theme of the summit "*Digital Transformation in post-COVID-19 Africa: Opportunities, Challenges and Options for Building Back Better*".
- The theme of the summit could not be more timely. The COVID-19 has underscored the role that digitization can play to increase the resilience of our countries when facing systemic crises.
- Unfortunately, digitization is not yet a reality in Africa.
- Africa is currently home to 21 of the 25 least connected countries in the world, with less than a third of its population having access to broadband connectivity.

- If African countries don't take decisive steps to change this reality, the digital revolution will become a new divide. In fact, it has already increased inequalities.
- For example, while half of the world turned into new technologies to overcome the challenge of school closures, in Africa, 32 million children dropped school in Eastern and Southern Africa during 2021 due to school closures.
- This means that 40 per cent of all school-aged children in the two sub-regions were out of school. Can you imagine the devastating impact of this reality on Africa's human capital?
- This growing divide is not just separating countries. It is creating more and more inequalities within countries, with stark differences in access along socioeconomic groupings, gender, rural/urban areas, and disability.
- The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has underlined and worsened social exclusion, exposing the vulnerability of the digitally excluded who lack access to vital resources, including health, education and e-commerce.
- But when there are challenges, there are also opportunities.
- In this regard, although the pandemic has exposed the challenges of digital divide in Africa, it is also serving as an accelerator for the development and spread of emerging technology on the continent leading to remarkable innovations.
- For example, according to a study by WHO, 13% of all new or modified health technologies developed to respond to COVID-19 are African, including COVID-19 tracker applications, solar-powered hand-washing stations, and private sector zipline drones to deliver COVID tests¹.
- This is good news.
- Because digital technologies are a powerful tool to promote rapid economic growth, innovation, job creation and access to services.
- For example, a recent joint report by Google and the International Finance Corporation (IFC) estimates that Africa's internet economy could contribute up to \$180 billion to the continent's GDP by 2025 and \$712 billion by 2050.
- In this regard, promoting digital transformation and bridging the digital divide is key to sustain hard-won development gains and promote inclusive growth and sustainable development that is underpinned by structural economic transformation and regional integration.
- Digitization is also critical to strengthen public institutions.
- New technologies have supported African governments in improving process efficiency and service delivery, as well as in increasing engagement with their citizens.
- Furthermore, digital technologies can also prove useful in the prevention and detection of fraud and corruption. Studies have shown that digitization is associated with better control of corruption as it helps promote transparency, accountability and citizen participation and facilitates advocacy and closer interaction of government and citizens.
- Moreover, adopting digital tools could increase indirect tax collection at the border by up to 2 percent of GDP per year.

¹ WHO, "COVID-19 spurs health innovation in Africa", available at: <https://www.afro.who.int/news/covid-19-spurs-health-innovation-africa>

- Digital transformation also provides tools and space for the people to strengthen their ownership as well as their economic and social participation.
- For example, digital technologies can make a difference in increasing the resilience of the small-scale farmers that have to fight the effects of climate change and other vulnerabilities.
- In this regard, we must all build on the progress that has been made in applying technological advances.
- For example, the use of technology in healthcare has shown transformative benefits in treating patients, conducting research, educating the health workforce, tracking the COVID-19 and monitoring public health in Africa.
- Let us leverage these tools and platforms to create opportunities for eHealth solutions, applications and services that lead to improved, inclusive and resilient national health systems.
- There are two crucial aspects that need to be taken into account in order to create a policy environment that makes the most of digitization.
- First, promoting sustainable and broadly-shared recovery requires mobilizing all sources of finance and the pandemic has exacerbated fragilities and further limited fiscal space.
- The World Bank estimates that achieving universal, affordable, and good quality internet access on the continent by 2030 will require an investment of US \$100 billion.
- In addition, Africa's digital infrastructure requires not just capital investment, but also policy support, digital skill-building and expenses for internet infrastructure as these are key enablers for productivity and sustainable economic growth.
- This means that African governments need to prioritize digitization, because there is still a lot to do, but most importantly, because digitization can have a multiplying impact in all aspects of development.
- Second, rapidly accelerating technologies, including artificial intelligence will form an important part of the digital future, with the ability to revolutionize industries including agriculture, healthcare, etc.
- There is urgent need to ensure that African governmental can both identify and understand these emerging technology opportunities, and to support them in establishing pathways to realize them and prevent tomorrow's gaps in advanced technology.
- Against this background, the role of thinktanks and academia cannot be over-emphasized. The actual and potential contributions of thinktanks and scientists to raising policymakers' awareness of the challenges and opportunities of digitization are unparalleled.
- You have a central role to play in ensuring that African countries leverage digital transformation to build forward and build better.

In this regard, I wish you successful discussions during this summit and I extend to all of you an invitation to work together with the United Nations Office of the Special Adviser on Africa to lay solid foundations to achieve the Africa we Want and ensure that no one is left behind.

I thank you.