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Leave no one behind: uniting to bridge the digital chasm in Africa

By Vodacom Group CEO Shameel Joosub

Africa.Connected

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Life as we knew it is no more. The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly changed our lives and the digital landscape globally, with an unparalleled acceleration in digital transformation. While the telecoms community in sub-Saharan Africa has responded to this crisis with great tenacity to keep citizens and businesses connected, north of a billion people on the continent are still not able to reap the benefits of being connected. Remedying this is the seminal challenge of our time.

Vodacom South Africa is working very closely with our Vodacom, Vodafone and Safaricom teams across Africa in Ghana, Tanzania, Kenya, DRC, Egypt, Mozambique and Lesotho as we invite governments, industry players, business and civil society as part of our Africa.Connected campaign to build on our existing efforts and achievements to close the digital divide. Our ultimate goal is to ensure everyone on the continent is connected and that no one is left behind.

This campaign builds on our six-point plan to future-proof our network and infrastructure, accelerate support to governments (to support eHealth and eEducation), enhance digital accessibility and literacy for the most vulnerable, promote widespread digital adoption for business, support our societies to overcome the COVID-19 crisis through targeted digital adoption, and enable financial inclusion.

The economic repercussions of the pandemic have been brutal, with sub-Saharan Africa facing a significant economic crisis. According to the World Bank in Africa, growth in Sub-Saharan Africa is predicted to fall to -3.3% in 2020, pushing the region into its first recession in 25 years.

A white paper by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) estimates that COVID-19 will drag African economies into a fall of about 1.4% in GDP. Preventative measures to restrict the spread of the coronavirus have resulted in significant setbacks for our economies, mainly in terms of lost productivity and trade – both within and among countries. These measures have strained almost all key growth-enhancing sectors of many economies and, ultimately, their overall income.

To expedite Africa's economic recovery post-pandemic, the continent must accelerate digitalisation efforts and expand regional cooperation. We have the opportunity to transform the entire continent, improving living conditions and economic prospects for more than 1 billion people. The time to act is now. That is why the success of our Africa.Connected campaign is so critical. Together with our colleagues in markets across Africa, we're inviting government, industry and business to join us on the journey to close the digital divide and make the continent more competitive, more resilient, more inclusive, and greener.

Globally, public-private partnerships have proven to be an important cornerstone of continued success in digitalisation. A strong collaboration will build a future that is fair, inclusive and sustainable. Initiatives such as the African Union Commission Digital Transformation Strategy and the UN Digital Cooperation Roadmap provide sensible frameworks for how this could progress. Execution through widespread private and public sector collaboration now needs to begin in earnest.



Public-private partnerships are crucial to accelerating development

There is so much at stake with ambitious targets to close the current digital divide. We simply cannot achieve this if we work in isolation. What we must put in place is a strategic and considered set of public-private partnerships to compete in the global digital economy. The UN Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development estimates that an additional \$109 billion in investment is required to achieve universal, affordable, and good quality broadband internet access by 2030 – this cannot be met by the private sector alone.

During the pandemic the telecoms industry has worked with governments and businesses to develop initiatives that have alleviated the impact of the pandemic on citizens and offered much needed support. From our partnership with Discovery Health to curb the spread of COVID-19 to zero-rating key platforms to ensure access to critical information for all, the pandemic has put our social contract as a business front and centre of everything we have done in the last year and showcased the importance of technology for good. This includes our e-School platform, developed with the Department of Education, which has become key to ensuring continued remote learning during the pandemic. We have also amplified our existing work in the fight against Gender Based Violence through the launch of technological initiatives such as our reporting app.



Connectivity is an economic imperative

The numbers tell the story. According to the GSMA Mobile Economy 2020 report, mobile technologies and services generated 9% of GDP in Sub-Saharan Africa in 2019 – a contribution that amounted to more than \$155 billion of economic value added. The mobile ecosystem also supported almost 3.8 million jobs (directly and indirectly) and made a substantial contribution to the funding of the public sector, with \$17 billion raised through taxation. By 2024, mobile's contribution will reach around \$184 billion as countries increasingly benefit from the improvements in productivity and efficiency brought about by the increased take-up of mobile services.



We must get more people online

Internet connectivity and usage across Africa remains low, with an urgent need for innovative ways to connect the unconnected and the underserved. The mobile market in sub-Saharan Africa will reach several important milestones over the next five years: half a billion mobile subscribers in 2021, 1 billion mobile connections in 2024, and 50% subscriber penetration by 2025. These achievements will be underpinned by continued and consistent investment in network infrastructure by the operators.

To support broader digitalisation and fast-track growth on the continent, major infrastructure expansions will be required. These include expansions in backbone networks and last-mile connectivity, including 250,000 new 4G base stations and 250,000 km of fibre cable. With 5G on the horizon, there is no question that there is a significant task ahead. We now need to take the spirit of cooperation fostered during the pandemic and apply it to our collective challenge of closing the digital divide for good.

The digitalisation of Africa will not happen overnight. This is a long-term commitment that is only possible through sustained, robust and authentic collaboration. But therein lies the opportunity. What we need is a range of partnerships between the likes of network suppliers, Open RAN suppliers and big tech players such as Facebook, Alphabet and Microsoft; in addition to Aid Funding and developmental funding from the United States, United Kingdom, Europe and Asia.

Africa has shown herself to be uniquely innovative in solving a myriad of real-life challenges. When there is a need, and a common goal, we can only imagine what we can do as a continent to build the digital future of Africa. Working together, we can bridge the digital divide.