

Joint Communiqué: Ministerial Forum on Developing Africa's Digital Economy

[Issued On 7 November 2022] On 7th of November 2022, ATU, under the leadership of the Secretary General, Honourable Mr. John Omo, was pleased to partner with Huawei Technologies to host the ATU Ministerial Forum on developing Africa's digital economy in Cape Town, South Africa. The Forum attracted the participation and valuable contributions of Government Ministers and key Government Delegates from Botswana, Malawi, Namibia, Uganda, Zambia and other parts of the continent of Africa. Eminent participants comprised:

1. Minister of ICT and National Guidance, Uganda, Honourable Dr. **Chris Baryomunsi**.
2. Minister of Communications, Knowledge and Technology, Botswana, Honourable Mr. **Thulagano Segokgo**
3. Deputy Minister of Information and Communication Technology, Namibia, Honourable **Emma Theofelus**
4. Principal Secretary of E-Government, Ministry of Information and Digitalization, Malawi, Mr. **Francis Bisika**
5. National Coordinator, SMART Zambia Institute (SZI), Zambia, Mr. **Percy Chinyama**

The Ministerial Forum, driven by the strategic theme, "RISE Stronger with Digital Economy: New paths towards a Resilient Recovery and Growth" delved into the barriers, challenges and opportunities related to the development and advancement of digital economy in Africa.

The Forum was resourceful and provided the platform to celebrate Africa's progress in the ICT space, as well as engineer a new sense of hope for the continent and re-energize ATU's commitment to the continent's digital economy journey. It further reflected upon three key areas, namely:

- 1) Opportunities in the Digital Economy
- 2) Developing the Digital Economy
- 3) Exchange of Ideas and Cooperation

Regarding Opportunities in the Digital Economy

1. Drawing reference to the new digital normal that emerged in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, participants emphasised the need for African countries to seize the opportunity to develop a digital economy and embark on a strong recovery and resilient growth trajectory given the fact that this new era has redefined the way in which we communicate, innovate and live.
2. Participants underscored the importance of ensuring that the digital economy plays a role in promoting inclusive growth, creating jobs, helping economic transformation, continuously contributing to the improvement of public and private service delivery and optimizing the business environment. This is

because the digital economy serves the overall national development vision and strategy and is recognized as a catalyst for development.

3. There was general consensus that the path of Digital-Driven development is laden with challenges and therefore it is critical that high level of government priority and commitment as well as proper coordination and intervention mechanisms with full collaboration between the public and private sectors is prioritised to avert the risks and challenges and ensure that the unconnected are connected, and that every citizen can access, participate and benefit from the digital economy.

Regarding Developing the Digital Economy

1. The forum stressed the importance of countries developing clear indicators and milestones to measure the economic and social impact of the digital economy. This is critical in ensuring adherence to a set plan/implementation roadmap as defined in top-level strategies and vision which further clarifies the overall country-strategic objectives.
2. The forum was convinced that there is value in establishing the foundation for a series of favourable policies to encourage investment, improve efficiency, and enable the infrastructure, skills, digital ecology, and innovation needed to advance the digital economy.
3. According to the forum also, emphasis on investment into resilient digital infrastructure is essential, and therefore there is great value in grounding infrastructure inclusiveness across coverage, accessibility, quality, affordability, and digital skills targets. This includes ensuring access for all and infrastructure for all, to create opportunities for Africa through the adoption and use of digital technologies
4. To develop skills and digital talent, the Forum affirmed that it is necessary that the building of national talent pools and the improvement of youth employment competitiveness in the context of the rise of the digital economy is ensured in four main aspects:
 - i) The ability of the public sector to provide digital services;
 - ii) The improvement of ICT practitioners' digital skills;
 - iii) The cultivation of digital skills for the youth, and;
 - iv) The enhancement of citizens' digital literacy.

This would reinforce the understanding that there is a need to play to respective stakeholder strengths for sustained success in warranting an adequate supply of digital skills in a public-private partnership model which is important to facilitate the transition to a digital economy.

5. Participants recognized that the digital economy is not a standalone sector and that because it has a cross-cutting impact across the economy, it is necessary to accelerate digital transformation in all sectors. Governments must therefore encourage and enable innovation through favourable legislation and policies thereby bridging the gap between industry scenarios and applicable technologies to give full play to the spill-over effects of innovation.

6. The enrichment of digital ecology is an indispensable condition for the prosperity of the digital economy and a direct way to expand the provision of employment. Adopting effective and timely policies is hence key to ensuring the strengthening and integration of the industrial ecosystem, enrichment of local content and the rise of local enterprises in the global value chain. There is also a need to promote healthy competition through regulation to ensure the rights and interests of citizens as consumers, data owners, business operators and employees are fulfilled.

Regarding Exchange of Ideas and Cooperation

1. The forum noted that it is important to welcome and create a favourable environment for private partners to invest, operate and build capacity in areas related to the digital economy in Africa. The cultivation and growth of the digital economy should be centred on the development of African countries creating a fair and equitable business environment for investors, rather than treating development partners and investors differently based on ideological and geopolitical factors.
2. The Forum supported the international exchange of best practices as well as key learnings and experiences to foster an environment of success. Participants further reinforced the importance of working with governments and the private sector to ensure significant improvement in the overall progress of ICTs in Africa.

Conclusion

The Forum expressed support to the leadership of the ATU, to actively organize seminars and conferences, and conduct research on the digital economy in order to promote the formation of a unified position on relevant issues, and to promote effective policies, paths and technologies for the development of the digital economy at a regional scale. Participants welcomed the support and cooperation in capacity working with regional industry organizations.

ATU thanks the Ministers who took part in the forum for demonstrating their commitment to Africa's Digital Economy cause and ensuring that at country level, the continent shelve individualities and pursues the bigger African agenda that benefits Africa as a whole. As such, the ATU Secretary General John Omo called on the Union's partners to work together, to identify common purposes and challenges, and enable collective action to make Africa a better continent that meets today's needs and the needs of future generations.