African Telecommunications Union (ATU) Secretary General's Message for the 2023 celebration of the African Telecommunications/ICT Day

Theme: *"Towards a Digital Revolution and Inclusion of the Marginalized: Addressing Accessibility Factors"*

Greetings to our revered Member States!

I am pleased to invite you to join the African Telecommunications Union (ATU) on 7th December for the 2023 celebration of African Telecommunications/ICT Day. This celebration will mark the 46th year since the establishment of ATU, and as has been our tradition, we will take joy in this opportunity to contemplate the status of telecommunications/ICTs in Africa, assess our progress, envision the future, and strengthen our collaborative efforts to advance the digital landscape across the continent.

Consistent with our practice, the theme: **"Towards a Digital Revolution and Inclusion of the Marginalized: Addressing Accessibility Factors"** was formally adopted during the 24th Ordinary Session of the Administrative Council meeting in Kigali, Rwanda for this year's celebration. This theme emphasizes the critical aspect of bridging the digital divide which has been a constant refrain through our many activities this year. I call upon all ATU Member States and ICT stakeholders to actively participate in setting the stage for advancing digital inclusion during this significant celebration, as it is our shared responsibility.

In this defining moment, we extend to you a profound invitation to join us in the forging of a world where every individual, regardless of where they are or how far from the digital grid they stand, is liberated from the restraints of accessibility challenges — challenges that lie within our power to surmount. We encourage our Member States to carefully plan, coordinate, and bring to life a range of meaningful activities that align with the essence of this year's ATD theme. Deciding to speak in one voice on this day, is deciding to have a louder and clearer voice that cannot be mistaken and that can permeate every decision-making boardroom in the world.

Building on the foundation laid during last year's ATD celebrations, which spotlighted the pivotal role of ICTs in augmenting financial inclusion across Africa, this year we embark on a journey into the necessary and related space of digital revolution. Our exploration of financial inclusion opened our minds to a broader perspective that is now aiding us in setting our sights on a transformative path. It is our conviction that through this path, we will dismantle barriers and create a digital realm where all voices are integrated into the very fabric of our future.

Within this context, we recognize for example, the pressing issue that 72% of Africa's population lacks access to mobile internet, and nearly 200 million people in the region reside in areas not covered by a mobile broadband network. This stark reality amplifies our dedication to achieving widespread access and cross-border connectivity throughout Africa. We want to achieve this with a sense of urgency and by engaging all industry stakeholders, and the international community.

As a result of prudent leadership by the administrations of our Member States, we are witnessing tremendous regulatory, policy and infrastructure reforms in the telecommunications/ICT sector. In just one example, between 2012 and 2022, the number of people in the region with mobile broadband access more than tripled, from 114 million to almost 400 million. This, coupled with increased internet penetration, ownership of digital devices and the advantage of being the continent with the youngest population, has brought Africa to the verge of a digital revolution.

The adoption of digital technologies is expanding at an unprecedented rate across the continent and Africans are increasingly taking advantage of the expansion to access opportunities and information, and to improve their online experiences. The biggest hindrance that we have to deal with decisively is the gap in internet connectivity and accessibility which is determined by, among other factors, geographical locations, income levels, and gender.

A report on the State of Mobile Internet Connectivity 2022 estimates that rural populations in Sub-Saharan Africa are 54% less likely to use mobile internet than urban dwellers. Low-income earners and women are also less likely to own smartphones, access internet connectivity or have the relevant digital skills compared to high-income earners and men. These are serious issues which we must jointly address to experience the ultimate digital revolution.

I encourage the administrations of our Member States to consider increasing investments in expanding mobile broadband coverage, especially in rural and marginalized areas. Additionally, since the deployment of mobile broadband networks depends on other factors, including road and electricity connectivity, our Member States need to prioritize infrastructural development as a prerequisite to addressing connectivity and accessibility issues.

It is estimated that more than 90% of jobs today in both formal and informal sectors have a digital aspect. This implies that most people in Africa who remain offline are excluded from a range of opportunities that their counterparts who are offline have access to. We have a responsibility, in collaboration with partners, to promote e-skilling initiatives to digitally equip and empower our youthful population, and bring them to the fold of those who are already harnessing the power of digital revolution.

In pursuit of a *Digital Revolution and Inclusion of the Marginalized,* the ATU, with the goodwill and support of our Member States and partners, has undertaken various activities and made notable achievements. We have facilitated the digital inclusion of the marginalized and addressed internet connectivity and accessibility issues by providing policy and regulatory support.

Through relevant Task Groups, the Union has developed model frameworks, strategies and recommendations, including a model framework for e-skilling in Africa, a model framework for Data Centres and Cloud Computing services and Infrastructures for Africa, a strategy framework to migrate Africa from IPv4 to IPV6, a white paper on connectivity and accessibility best practices in Africa and a model cybersecurity framework. The Union has also coordinated efforts to secure significant amounts and appropriate types of broadband spectrum hence significantly enhanced broadband delivery.

ATU is also actively involved in enhancing digital inclusion through the promotion of the development of high-quality telecommunications/ICT infrastructure and connectivity, digital services, cybersecurity and data management, enabling environment and human capacity

development. We call on our Member States and partners to continue supporting us in coordinating these initiatives.

The Union is confident that, if embraced, digital inclusion and access to the limitless world of the online community will be a significant turning point for Africa, propelling the continent into a future of boundless opportunities, shared prosperity, and global relevance. The transformative power of a digitally connected Africa cannot be underestimated, and by ensuring that everyone is part of this digital transformation, we pave the way for an era of unparalleled growth and development.

On behalf of the Union, I wish our Member States, Associate Members, partners and all ICT stakeholders an exciting and memorable ATU/ICT Day 2023.

Thank you!