**ATU SG Welcome Address at** **the Intel AI Programme for African** **DeepTech Startups & Ecosystem Stakeholders Forum**

 **28 May 2024, Sankara Nairobi Hotel**

**Distinguished Guests,**

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

I am delighted to represent the African Telecommunications Union in this special event focusing on supporting the development of startups in the deep tech ecosystem across Africa.

Let me begin by extending a warm welcome to all the government representatives, hubs, developers, startups, and representatives from AfriLabs, Intel and Prosper Africa and other private sector players in attendance. It is encouraging to see your faces burning with the desire to transform Africa’s digital landscape through deep tech.

ATU, AfriLabs and Intel have a longstanding relationship premised on shared mandates and aspirations related to the convergence of emerging technologies. At the core, our organizations continue to steadfastly support capacity-building initiatives and create platforms for innovators and developers of deep tech startups to showcase their practices and benefit from the much-needed financial, technical and incubation support.

I am deeply impressed by the focus of today's event. The theme, centered on the African deep-tech startup ecosystem, is timely and essential as it highlights the critical challenge of inadequate specialized support. I commend the thoughtful initiative to invite hubs, AI startups, and developers to participate in this training, confident that they will be well-equipped with the necessary skills and resources. It is also encouraging to see government officials, high-level stakeholders, and representatives here, recognizing the importance of this effort. Together, we must do our part to create a thriving environment for deep-tech startups in Africa.

**Current State of Digital Connectivity**

As we engage today, we recognize that Africa’s digital connectivity has seen notable progress. As of now, 39% of the population uses the Internet, with more than 470 million unique mobile subscribers. This growth is a testament to the continent's potential. However, challenges persist. Digital literacy, affordability, and infrastructure limitations continue to impede meaningful Internet connectivity for many.

The connectivity gap is made worse by socio-economic hurdles such as inadequate electricity infrastructure, low income levels, and limited literacy. These challenges are especially pronounced in rural areas, where a majority of Africans live. Consequently, these populations are often deprived of the benefits of technology that their urban counterparts enjoy.

Our efforts to bridge Africa’s connectivity gap must prioritize marginalized groups. This includes the millions living in rural areas, women, and those with disabilities. Studies indicate that individuals in rural areas are 54% less likely to use mobile Internet than those in urban areas, and women are 37% less likely than men to use mobile Internet. Addressing these disparities is crucial for inclusive digital development.

**The Role of Research and Innovation**

Research and innovation are critical to overcoming these challenges. The deep tech ecosystem plays a critical role in driving this progress. This forum serves as a reminder of our collective responsibility to encourage innovation and support the growth of start-ups.

As we delve into the challenges, opportunities, and trends within the deep tech ecosystem, I urge each of you to consider your personal contribution to creating an environment conducive to technological advancement across Africa.

ATU deeply appreciates AfriLabs and Intel for their collaboration in conducting the “Evaluating the African Deep-Tech Start-up Ecosystem” research. This study provides valuable insights into the state of the deep tech ecosystem in Africa and highlights the lack of specialized support as a major barrier to the growth of start-ups.

So what does this mean for us? It means that we now have a clearer roadmap for addressing the critical gaps within our ecosystem. This research, together with others, stresses the urgency of developing targeted support mechanisms—be it through policy reforms, increased funding opportunities, or specialized training programs—to nurture our start-ups from infancy to maturity.

**Harnessing Africa's Youth Potential**

According to the World Bank, Africa's working-age population will increase by over 450 million by 2035. However, only a quarter of these individuals are expected to secure stable employment. This presents a monumental challenge but also an immense opportunity. With over 70% of Sub-Saharan Africa’s population under the age of 30, and projections indicating that by 2030, 75% of Africa's population will be under the age of 35, the youth will constitute 42% of the global youth population. We must leverage this youthful potential to drive development and shape our digital future.

Equipping the youth with specialized education and digital skills will enable them to compete globally and contribute significantly to the deep tech ecosystem. Already, Africa is home to a thriving ecosystem of hubs, start-ups, and innovation funds, with young entrepreneurs leading the charge.

**Success Stories and Future Collaboration**

A report by the African Development Bank reveals that Nigeria, Egypt, South Africa, and Kenya account for nearly one-third of Africa’s incubators and accelerators. These countries attract over 92% of Africa’s investment in deep tech and nearly 80% of foreign direct investment. We urge other nations to emulate these success stories and establish their own innovation ecosystems.

We must continue to collaborate to create an environment that supports innovation. This includes formulating and implementing regulatory policies to protect innovators and consumers, and providing the necessary technical and financial support to sustain the ecosystem.

Through initiatives like the ATU Africa Innovation Challenge and the ATU Innovation Portal, we are working with partners and Associate Members to raise awareness about available innovation funding opportunities. We aim to bring together innovators, researchers, startups, and experts from established organizations and academia. We invite all stakeholders to join us in bridging Africa’s connectivity gap through innovation.

**Closing**

Once again, I sincerely thank AfriLabs and Intel for organizing this deep tech start-ups and ecosystem stakeholders’ forum and inviting me to speak with you and share ATU insights on the issues under discussion. Let us work together to drive innovation and create a brighter digital future for Africa.

Thank you.