Strengthening Standards, Policy, Legal, and Regulatory Frameworks for Submarine Cable Protection in Africa

Excellencies, distinguished colleagues, and friends,

Let me begin by extending my appreciation to the to the Africa Telecommunication Union (ATU) and Africa Subsea Ecosystem Forum (ASEF) for organizing this important online Capacity Building Workshop on Submarine Cable Resilience. I am particularly grateful to all Membership that joined us online.
Submarine cables are today the invisible infrastructure that carries more than 95% of international data traffic. They support our digital economy, financial services, national security, and daily communications. Any disruption affects not only a single country but sometimes an entire region. This underscores the importance of a robust, harmonized, and coordinated framework.

Excellencies and distinguished Colleagues,

Broadband connectivity must be strengthened to broaden access to new opportunities. Fiber optic technology is considered the backbone of modern digital infrastructure, and investment in fiber infrastructure has been shown to have positive macroeconomic effects, boosting economies and improving social services across Africa.

Excellences, Distinguished Colleagues,

The legal and regulatory frameworks surrounding subsea optic fibre cable deployment across the continent are complex, diverse, and increasingly critical. Given that these cables are considered part of national critical infrastructure, some governments have introduced frameworks governing their installation, protection, and operations. Some countries have started to enforce varying permit regimes and environmental assessments for cable landings, territorial water access, and seabed usage.

In addition, there is a growing trend of mandating security protocols to prevent sabotage or espionage, with some countries incorporating cyber resilience guidelines into cable project requirements. At the continental level, cooperative initiatives are still fragmented.

While digital connectivity is one of the priorities in the continent, there is no unified regulatory framework for subsea infrastructure protection. The emerging trends point toward the greater need for regulatory harmonization. We are also seeing some countries are adding a geopolitical layer to the subsea cable deployment process.

Excellences, Distinguished Colleagues,
Efforts are needed in developing faster processes for repairs, reducing bureaucratic delays, and ensuring redundancy.

Submarine cables face multiple risks including physical damage, cyber threats, inadequate redundancy, and governance challenges. Of these, the major risks to submarine cables continue to be negligent acts of fishing and anchoring, rather than intentional misconduct such as sabotage. This calls for strengthening protection by identifying and mitigating threats (fishing, anchoring, natural disasters) through better information exchange and cooperation between governments and industry. Additionally, by using AI for predictive maintenance, anomaly detection, we can reduce submarine cable outages and enhance overall network resilience.

Distinguished Colleagues,
The need for strengthening submarine cable resilience in Africa cannot be overemphasized. The ITU prioritizes submarine cable resilience by fostering global cooperation, developing protection measures, promoting sustainable practices, and the use of new tech like AI to

mitigate risks from natural events and human activity, ensuring the digital backbone remains robust for the global economy. Initiatives such as the International Advisory Body for Submarine Cable Resilience, which focuses on risk assessment, policy, and better data sharing for faster recovery, can create global guidelines and policies to improve the security and resilience of submarine cables.

The vision and ambition to build a more successful, resilient and connected Africa are clear – but action is urgently needed now to translate vision into reality. It is imperative to move beyond jargon and to take concrete action. Although significant progress has been made with the expansion of international submarine cables, major challenges persist in developing continental terrestrial backbone infrastructure. The fiberization of the continent together with continental Internet Exchange Points (IXPs) will play a critical role on enhancing resilience as well as ensuring that “local” (continental) traffic is routed within a country or continent rather than exchanging local Internet traffic overseas. Paying overseas carriers to exchange “local” (continental) traffic is quite inefficient. It is therefore imperative to find ways of optimizing internet traffic, to support intra-continental traffic flows.

In many instances, outages on submarine cables impair national and regional connectivity. With a fiberized continent, IXPs can eliminate the dependency on international connectivity for national and continental communication which could result in a robust and reliable continental internet infrastructure.
In summary, strengthening the protection of submarine cables in Africa means safeguarding the continent’s connectivity, growth, cybersecurity, and digital sovereignty.
This is why this workshop represents a valuable opportunity to share best practices, enhance our skills, and jointly chart a common roadmap.

Thank you for your attention, and I look forward to the discussions that will follow.