



Connecting Africa is the seminal challenge of our time

By Patricia Obo-Nai, Vodafone Ghana CEO

Africa.Connected

The Covid-19 pandemic has profoundly impacted all aspects of our lives with an unparalleled acceleration in digital transformation. The mobile community in sub-Saharan Africa responded to this crisis proactively to keep individuals and businesses connected. Nonetheless, nearly a billion people on the continent are still being left behind and, to effectively and permanently remedy this, is the seminal challenge of our time.

Vodafone Ghana is proud to join our Vodacom, Vodafone and Safaricom teams across Africa to invite governments, industry players and businesses to become part of our Africa.Connected campaign. We commit to accelerate our efforts to close the digital divide and ensure that every man, woman and child is equally and equitably connected, so no one is left behind. This campaign builds on our six-point plan to future-proof our network and infrastructure, accelerate support to governments, support e-education and e-health, enhance digital accessibility and literacy for the most vulnerable, promote widespread digital adoption for business, and ultimately support our societies to overcome the crisis brought by the pandemic through targeted digital adoption and better financial inclusion.

The economic repercussions of the pandemic have been brutal, and sub-Saharan Africa is 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' (UN) Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) estimates that COVID-19 will drag African economies into an economic slump of about 1.4% in GDP. Preventative measures to restrict the spread of the coronavirus have generated significant setbacks for African economies mainly in terms of lost productivity and trade - both within and among countries. Specifically, these measures have significantly strained almost all key growth-enhancing sectors of many economies, and ultimately, on their overall income

To expedite Africa's economic recovery post-pandemic, the continent must accelerate digitalisation and expand regional cooperation. We are on the cusp of a "pan-African reset", one that could transform the entire continent, improving living conditions and economy opportunities for more than 1 billion people. But the time to act is now! That is why Vodafone is launching the Africa.Connected campaign. Together with our colleagues in markets across Africa, we are calling on governments, industry and business to join us in the journey to close the digital divide in Africa to make the continent more competitive, more resilient, more inclusive and greener.

We must continue a collaborative approach to 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.

The impact of Ghana's digital footprint has been felt with the implementation of the mobile money interoperability platform, biometric national identification card, GhanaPost GPS digital addressing system, paperless port operations, the integrated e-immigration system, e-procurement, e-parliament, e-justice, e-cabinet and smart workplaces among, other initiatives. These initiatives form part of government of Ghana's Digital Ghana Agenda, which is aimed at bridging the digital divide.

Vodafone Ghana is already at the forefront of advocating for change and leading the digitalisation agenda in the country. Our National Coding Programme, the establishment of ICT Centres in Senior High Schools and our Vodafone Cash platform with its various innovative products complement the government's digital economy agenda. We have also developed digital platforms that are delivering end-to-end support for organisations within the agriculture and educational sectors. Vodafone is also offering tailor-made solutions for small- and medium-scale enterprises (SMEs) that are addressing their challenges. Vodafone Ghana's various digital channels, including TOBi and My Vodafone App have also redefined customer engagement during this pandemic.

Public-private partnerships are crucial to accelerate development



There is so much at stake and 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 (PPPs) 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 Healthy 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 our existing work. From our e-School platform developed in 2014 with the Department of Education becoming key to ensure continued learning during lock-down to our existing and amplified work in the fight against Gender Based Violence, technology has been on the front line of this fight.

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 3.8 million jobs (directly and indirectly) and made a significant 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 250,000km of fibre cable. And 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.

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.

