

cities
homes
villages
neighbours
rural
communities
businesses
people
families
cities
homes
villages
Africa.Connected
rural
communities
businesses
people
cities
homes

Leave no one behind

Uniting to bridge the digital chasm in Lesotho



In Lesotho, the imperative to connect through accelerated digital transformation has never been as stark as it is today, following the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. This imperative is further amplified by geographical settlements, economic inequality and the daily struggle to eke out an existence for the majority of our mainly rural inhabitants.

Digital connectivity is likely to be the answer to most of these difficult realities. For instance, eEducation should, literally and figuratively, bridge the learning barriers for the majority of rural learners who have to cross flooded rivers, deal with the unavailability or unaffordability of public transport or even lockdown-imposed disruption to continuous learning. Today, Vodacom Lesotho, together with our Vodacom and Vodafone teams across Africa, invites governments, industry and business to join our Africa.Connected campaign to accelerate and build upon our existing digitalisation efforts as we come together to ensure everyone is connected and no one is left behind.

This campaign comprises Vodafone's market specific six-pillar plan to future-proof our network and infrastructure, accelerate support to government (to support eHealth and eEducation), enhance digital accessibility and literacy for the most vulnerable, promote widespread digital adoption for business, and support our societies to overcome the Covid-19 crisis through targeted digital adoption and financial inclusion.

Covid-19 has unleashed untold damage to world economies in general, but in particular has been very unforgiving to already-underserved enclave economies such as Lesotho's. Vodacom Lesotho has contributed towards cushioning the blow to our country's economy with initiatives such as the expansion of digital infrastructure to reach almost all parts of the country. This contribution will act as a springboard for the acceleration of digital access for eEducation, eHealth and financial inclusion. More schools have been connected, girls trained in coding, teachers trained in ICT skills, more schools provided with computer laboratories and more smart devices made affordable to citizens. With the country experiencing a long-term culture of internal displacement and migrant labour across its borders, connectivity has truly become a matter of life and death. Government, international NGOs and private sector institutions have also come to the party to add to the repertoire of digital services payable through mobile money.

Partnerships with government, business and organisations, both local and international, are an important cornerstone of continued success in digitalisation. We must continue a collaborative approach to build a future that is fair, inclusive and sustainable. We aim to draw on initiatives such as the African Union Commission digital transformation strategy and the United Nations' (UN) Digital Cooperation Roadmap, which provide sensible frameworks for how this could progress. Government's cashless policy is a case in point to reduce the costs in effort, time and distance. Now is the time to work together to make this happen.



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 almost 3.8 million jobs (directly and indirectly) and made a substantial 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

Urgent connectivity and usage across Africa remains low with an 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.

