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Africa.Connected
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Closing the digital divide in Africa requires joint effort

By Peter Ndegwa, CEO of Safaricom

Over two decades ago, the mobile phone in Kenya was a novel gadget for staying in touch on the go, through calls and short messages. Today, it does a lot more than just communication. It has emerged as an effective tool for tackling society's most pressing challenges, facilitating inclusive and sustainable development.

But not everyone has benefited. While the mobile industry in sub-Saharan Africa has largely risen to the challenge of keeping individuals and businesses connected – nearly 800 million people in the region are still not connected to the internet.

The digital divide—gaps in access to information and communication technology—has seen many left out of the digital landscape.

The Covid-19 pandemic brought forth this reality given the need to work from home using platforms that ICT provides but, unfortunately were not available to everyone.

How then do we ensure we leave no one behind?

Safaricom is working closely with Vodafone and Vodacom teams across Africa to close the digital divide through the recently launched Africa.Connected initiative. The continent-wide campaign seeks to accelerate economic recovery by driving digital inclusion, enabling access of affordable devices and empowering Micro and Small business to use technology to grow their businesses. The initiative will help boost the continent to be more competitive, resilient, inclusive and sustainable.

Through the campaign, we invite governments, industry, business and civil society to collaborate with us to ensure we bring ICT products and services closer to the people without the access.

To this end, Safaricom is committed to continue working with Government, the industry and social sector institutions to expand and broaden digital offerings, foster an enabling environment for rapid digitalization and speed up infrastructure investments.

Connectivity is an economic imperative

This calls for proven innovative approaches such as mobile money for sustainable development. Mobile money has driven financial inclusion in Kenya, catapulting it from single digit at the turn of the century to over 80% now. Studies have demonstrated that mobile money has helped lift many individuals out of poverty and improve their quality of life.

In Kenya, the internet is mostly accessed via the mobile phone and has opened new revenue opportunities and enhanced the livelihoods of many. Businesses are also deriving huge benefits from digital technology, enabling them to grow, create jobs and enjoy more economic benefits.

We must get more people online

The last two decades have demonstrated that placing the mobile phone in the hands of as many people as possible, connected to fast and reliable internet, can be transformative. Currently, GSMA, the industry association that represents interests of mobile network operators globally, estimates that the industry contributes nine per cent of African economies' GDP, with the ecosystem supporting 650,000 individuals formally and another 1.4 million informally.

A firm infrastructural foundation has been laid and the benefits are there to be realized. Now is the time to quicken the pace of actualizing universal access to mobile technology.

Public-private partnerships are crucial to accelerate development

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Partnerships with government, business and organizations, both local and international, are an important cornerstone of continued success in digitalization. A collaborative approach is key for a future that is fair, inclusive and sustainable. Initiatives such as the African Union Commission's digital transformation strategy and the UN Digital Cooperation Roadmap provide frameworks for how this could progress.

Alliances and collaborations can help unlock greater benefit for all and accelerate economic progress. Take the ongoing strategic partnership between Safaricom and Google to make 4G devices affordable to low-income earners through daily payments, for instance. It targets almost 15 million customers who are still on 2G in the next couple of years. This seeks to address the upfront cost of devices, which hinders these customers from tapping into benefits of the high-speed internet currently available in many parts of the country.

Today, M-PESA is arguably the backbone of our digital economy, facilitating payments, transfers and micro-lending. As it evolves and finds applications in different industries and sectors beyond financial services, it remains a platform around which ecosystems can coalesce.

Over the last two decades, Safaricom has grown to be more than just a mobile service provider. We have morphed into a digital lifestyle enabler by leveraging on partnerships and collaborations to transform lives. Our next phase is geared towards being more customer obsessed by facilitating technology growth for our customers, driving greater experience and ensuring that we leave no one behind in the digital era.

The fourth industrial revolution is here. It is expected to ride on digital technology and innovation, making the need for sustained efforts to close the digital divide more urgent. We have an opportunity—through the Africa.Connected campaign—to jointly rewrite the script and close the digital gap. We need to come together telcos, governments and social sector institutions, to expand and broaden digital offerings, foster an enabling environment for rapid digitisation and speed up infrastructure investments.