WELCOME ADDRESS BY THE EXECUTIVE VICE CHAIRMAN OF THE NIGERIAN COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION ENGR ERNEST C. A. NDUKWE TO DELEGATES AND PARTICIPANTS AT THE INTERNATIONAL TELECOMMUNICATION UNION/ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR AFRICA VALIDATION WORKSHOP ON UNIVERSAL ACCESS AT BOLINGO HOTEL & TOWERS ABUJA ON TUESDAY 28TH SEPTEMBER 2004.

Good morning Distinguished Guests Ladies and Gentlemen. It is a great pleasure and honour to address this august gathering and to participate in this international workshop ICT Market Harmonisation Project Validation on Universal Access/Service. May I on behalf of the Nigerian Government welcome you all once again to this event.

I am particularly pleased to be part of this event because of the special interest we have in promoting universal Access initiatives and accelerating ICT infrastructure development in Nigeria and indeed Africa.

That telecommunications is an important facilitator of economic growth and improved living standards is now a widely accepted fact. The development of a modern nation to its full potential today can never be attained without adequate telecommunications infrastructure. In today's world, modern digital telecommunications networks are as necessary to economic growth – and to attracting foreign investment as are programs dedicated to promoting healthcare, electricity, transportation and agriculture. It is also true that reliable telecommunications networks can improve the productivity and efficiency of other sectors of the economy and enhance the quality of life generally.

Regrettably however, most of the values derivable from info-communications development have been concentrated in the developed countries of the world.

Africa for instance has less than 3% of the world's main lines although it accounts for more than 12% of the world's population.

In Nigeria the telephone density is estimated at around 5 telephones for about 100 people or 5%. As telephones tend to be concentrated in the cities, access in rural areas is even much more limited and non-existent in many parts of the country.

Studies by the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) and the world Bank show that there is a direct correlation between telephone penetration and economic growth.

Information tools such as telephones, personal computers, and the Internet are increasingly critical to economic success and personal advancement. There is therefore a big divide separating the world's information "haves" and "have nots" which is what is now commonly referred to as the digital divide – the divide between those with access to new info-communications technologies and those without.

The advent of Internet for example has been variously described as being as important for society as the development of the personal computer, the telephone or even the printing press. Yet it is difficult to explain to those

who have never used the Internet how it has the power to change lives, to create new businesses or facilitate the delivery of basic services such as health, education.

As stakeholders who have exposed to the central role info-communications plays in the overall economic development of other nations of the world, we have a duty to ensure that our nations are not left behind in the emerging digital economy.

It is instructive to note that the importance of telecommunications infrastructure has always been acknowledged in the past but never followed up with any serious and consistent implementation initiative. For example the "Lagos Plan of Action" which was approved by Heads of States of the OAU recognised as far back as 1980 and resolved that the overall development of the telecommunications sector should be given the necessary backing it deserves in the overall development of the African continent. I wish the region implemented the Lagos Plan of Action.

Also in 1990 the African Telecommunications Development Conference (ATDC) in Harare, Zimbabwe created within the ITU/BDT, a standing African Information and Telecommunications Study Group (AITPSG) entrusting to it as a matter of the utmost urgency the task of elaborating a first draft of the regional telecommunications policy document to be known as the African Green Paper.

The study group, working in close collaboration with the African administrations produced the document - the African Green paper, which was approved by the African Regional Telecommunication Development Conference (AF-RTDC) held in Abidjan, Ivory Coast in 1996.

It is however heartwarming that things are beginning to look up in the continent where most African states including Nigeria are now experiencing the rapid growth of ICT infrastructure to the extent that is evident in Asia and Latin America.

I believe that Africa can sustain this trend and take the necessary steps to join the ranks of the information society by taking specific steps to ensure that we include all and exclude none.

Thank you.

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28th September 2004