TELECOMMUNICATIONS AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

INTRODUCTION

Mr. Chairman,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I wish to extend warm greetings from the Federal Republic of Nigeria to all participants at this event.

Let me begin by thanking the organizers of this conference for inviting me to present a paper and for this opportunity to come together once again to brainstorm, exchange ideas and experiences that we will take back to our individual countries for further enhancement of the information and communications infrastructure in Africa, and indeed the world.

In the 21st century the world will be witnessing an upsurge in the use of telecommunications and information in nearly all aspects of human endeavour. The wireless revolution and the Internet phenomenon have recently changed the way people live and transact business, and the telecommunications/information technology industry has taken center stage in world affairs and will continue to be so far into the foreseeable future.

In Africa, the story is not as exciting and the Continent remains the least developed region in the world today as far as telecommunications and IT infrastructure is concerned. We spend more money on arms and ammunitions than on such progressive industries as telecommunications and information technology. An immediate shift of paradigm therefore needs to be made if Africa will be emancipated in the 21st century.

At the ITU, organised exhibition and forum, Africa Telecom'98 in south Africa which I was privileged to attend, to the organizers launched what was called African Renaissance. A conscious attempt to awaken African countries to the need to improve teledensity urgently.

This was backed by tremendous spirit of optimism by all those in attendance including government ministers, speakers, exhibitors, delegates and the worldwide media.

It was also at that forum that Dr. Chasia of the ITU pointed out that whereas Africa had by 1997 installed 14 million lines in the century since the telephone was invented, China had installed 20 million lines in 1997 alone! What this showed was that it can be done and we in Africa, can also catch up with the rest of the world, very quickly if we try.

Market liberalisation no doubt holds the key to opening up the continent to foreign investment in the telecommunications sector and it is reassuring the note that this fact is now widely acknowledged all over Africa. Most countries have embraced liberalisation and there have been a few success stories, thus encouraging others to move in the same direction.

Also, rapid and unprecedented growth in telecommunications and information technology elsewhe5re in the world, which is now reaching saturation point, has shifted attention to

Africa as one of the last major markets for telecommunications. Nigeria is therefore positioning to take advantage of this opportunity.

The Nigerian Scenario – Progress

➢ Regulatory body was established in 1993
➢ Commenced market liberalisation in 1994
➢ A number of private telecommunications operators (PTOs) have been licenced and are operating. Licenced undertakings include fixed telephony services, VSAT, paging, payphones, Internet services and other value added services.
➢ A democratic government is now in place
➢ Nigeria is at the point of processing four (4) licences for digital mobile telecommunications
➢ Incumbent operator is progressively being more receptive to competition.
➢ The regulatory body is being strengthened and is receiving a lot of support from the government to be able to perform its roles.
➢ Several Internet providers have been licenced to encourage fast growth of Internet nationwide.
➢ Incumbent monopoly PTT is slated for privatization within the next 18 months.

The Nigerian Scenario – Prospects

➢ Nigeria remains the most populous country in Africa.
➢ Lack of digital mobile networks represent tremendous opportunity for prospective mobile and cellular operators.
➢ Major market for long distance network operators.
➢ Central location as potential for telecommunications hub for West African region.
➢ Possess ingredients that could support local manufacturing.
➢ Potential market for broad band networks.

Conclusion

Telecommunications is the infrastructure of the emerging global information society. As we enter the 21st century our challenge is to rapidly grow our telecommunications as a way to emancipate our people economically. The challenge to our leaders is to come up with policies that will rapidly build Africa's capacity to compete effectively with other economies. Without a solid telecommunications infrastructure, the country will not attract the right level of urgently needed local and foreign investment to build our economy.

With a population of over 100 million people and its economic potential, Nigeria still remains Africa's most important market. We cannot tap the full potential of this market a sound telecommunications and information technology base. For the enterprise in today's highly competitive world, the strategic components in developing and maintaining competitive edge are telecommunications and information management. The expansion of our telecommunications network will therefore accelerate development across the nation. Even for the rural and previously disadvantaged areas, access to telecommunications will contribute a great deal towards improving education, developing businesses and creating jobs. With respect to technology options, let me emphasize once more that fixed wireless and mobile

cellular technologies provide a quick way of expanding telecommunications networks and are therefore important for Africa. With wireless systems, strong networks can be rolled out quickly. However, in very low density and widely dispersed areas, satellite communications systems can fill in the gaps. Satellite systems today can deliver a huge range of services directly to subscribers in remote areas including broadband services necessary for Internet connectivity for distance learning.

The expansion of our telecommunications facilities must go side by side with the development of the human resource capacity that will support the industry. We must develop our knowledge skills and competencies to understand the complex linkages of wireless networks, fiber optics, satellite systems, computer to computer networks, Internet webs and a lost of other telecommunications technologies.

Let me also quickly add that manpower requirements for telecommunications infrastructural development does not only stop with the engineers and technicians. There will also be required, well trained personnel in other specialist areas such as financial planning, law, accountancy consultancy services, business management, personnel management, etc. Such skilled staffs are most needed in the middle and upper management levels, and they need to be re-trained and up-to-date.

We are aware that Africa is looking up to Nigeria to take advantage of its vast human and material resources and become the catalyst for economic emancipation of the African continent.

Nigeria is taking up this challenge and is moving steadily towards full market liberalisation and privatisation of existing monopoly and strengthening of the regulatory agency to play the role that is required of it in the emerging market.

Thank you

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Engr. Ernest C.A Ndukwe
Executive Vice Chairman/Chief Executive
Nigerian Communications Commission