



KEYNOTE SPEECH BY THE HONOURABLE MINISTER OF COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY - MRS. OMOBOLA JOHNSON AT THE FIRST WEST AFRICAN CONFERENCE ON ELECTROMAGNETIC FIELDS (EMF) EXPOSURE AND HEALTH, VICTORIA GRAND PLAZA, VICTORIA ISLAND, LAGOS, 27TH- 28TH JUNE 2012.

PROTOCOLS

On behalf of President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan, I wish to welcome you all to this timely conference on Electromagnetic Fields Exposure and Health which is the first conference in the West African sub-region.

While we savour the gains recorded in the telecommunications industry in the sub-region in the last decade, we are also mindful of the fact that mobile telephony played – and still plays – a leading role in this positive revolution. Yet, even as we celebrate the gains of this revolution, we are also mindful of the health of our people, both in the short and in the long term. Recognising the enormous concerns, which have been expressed both locally and internationally, on whether exposure to electromagnetic fields poses any health hazards to humans; and determined to ensure that the people of West Africa are well advised as to the facts regarding the issue, the Federal Government of Nigeria decided to take the initiative to bring about this conference.

We have therefore gathered experts in various fields of Health, the Environment, ICT, the Law Makers, Regulatory agencies, Civil society organisations, Consumer groups, among others, from within Nigeria, West Africa and indeed from across the globe. This includes experts from the World Health Organisation (WHO), the International Commission on Non-Ionizing Radiation Protection (ICNIRP) as well as operating companies in the mobile telephony sub-sector, the Mobile Manufacturers’ Forum and other equipment manufacturers, all of whom together with our governments, have interests both in the operations and existence of mobile communications and the health and welfare of the people and the environment, in order for us to get a clear picture of the true situation of affairs regarding EMF exposure and health.

There is more than 3billion mobile phone subscribers in the world served by over 5million base stations connected by mobile infrastructure. With the above facts, it is recognised that radio signals are part of our everyday life emitted from natural sources as well as artificial sources such as the mobile base stations, broadcast towers, radar facilities, remote controls and electrical and electronic equipment. Mobile communications have become an integral part of our life providing connection, entertainment, information and learning over a broad range of media.

In many countries, over half the population use mobile phones and the market is growing rapidly. At the end of 2011, there were over 100 million mobile subscriptions in Nigeria alone. The growth has equally been phenomenal in other countries in West Africa. In some parts of the world, and this is the same with a country like Nigeria, mobile phones are the most reliable or the only phones available.

Given the large number of mobile phone users, it is important therefore to investigate, understand and communicate any potential public health impact from Mobile phones which work by transmitting radio waves through a network of fixed antennas called base transceiver stations (BTS).

Mobile phones are low-powered radiofrequency transmitters, operating at frequencies between 450 and 2700 MHz with peak powers in the range of 0.1 to 2 watts. The handset only transmits power when it is turned on. The power (and hence the radiofrequency exposure to a user) falls off rapidly with increasing distance from the handset.

A person using a mobile phone 30–40cm away from his or her body – for example when text messaging, accessing the Internet, or using a “hands free” device – will therefore have a much lower exposure to radiofrequency fields than someone holding the handset against the ear.

In addition to using "hands-free" devices, which keep mobile phones away from the head and body during phone calls, exposure is also reduced by limiting the number and length of calls. Using the phone in areas of good reception also decreases exposure as it allows the phone to transmit at reduced power. The use of commercial devices for reducing radiofrequency field exposure has not been shown to be effective. Mobile phones are often prohibited in hospitals, on airplanes etc as the radiofrequency signals may interfere with certain electro-medical devices, navigation systems, etc.

Hence the big question: are there any health effects from the use of mobile phones and on transmission from base stations? A large number of studies have been performed over the last two decades to assess whether mobile phones pose a potential health risk. I expect this conference to deliberate on this and shade more light on the findings of these studies on whether there exist adverse health effects from mobile phone use or BTS.

In recent times, agitations and concerns have continued to surface time and time again. This conference is therefore called for us to get the true situation on this topical issue from some of the most informed experts. I call on you therefore, to let the best of your expertise prevail as you deliberate over the next two days.

The Federal Government of Nigeria is very concerned about the welfare and the health of our people; I believe this is the same with our sister countries in West Africa. This

conference therefore is to help our governments get a position that they can use to either reassure our people that they have nothing to worry; or, if the conference finds out at the end of the day that there is something to worry about, then, it becomes the duty of our various governments to do that which must be done – to ensure safety of our people and the environment while using mobile communications.

Let us therefore allow the experts to brainstorm over the next two days, and it is my hope that the communiqué that will be issued at the end of the conference will become our guide on this very interesting and useful topic.

Honourable Minister of Health and my counterpart from the Ministry of Health and Environment, Distinguished Senators and Honourable Members of the House of Representatives, our distinguished guests from far and wide, regulators, other distinguished speakers, delegates, ladies and gentlemen, on this note, it is my pleasure to declare this conference open.

While our government look forward to the outcome of our deliberations, please accept the assurances of our highest esteem. I wish you all fruitful deliberations.

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