KEYNOTE ADDRESS – AI-READY AFRICA: BUILDING THE FOUNDATIONS FOR THE NEXT DIGITAL LEAP

Distinguished colleagues, hyperscaler partners, fellow regulators, innovators, ladies and gentlemen – good morning.

It is a pleasure to join you for this conversation on Africa's readiness for artificial intelligence, and I thank Africa Hyperscalers for convening this forum.

Our theme, **"AI-Ready Africa: Building the Compute, Cloud & Connectivity Foundations for the Next Digital Leap,"** forces us to ask a simple question:

> Are our networks, power systems, data assets and regulatory frameworks truly ready for the scale and speed of AI adoption that Africa needs?

AI is no longer a niche technology. It is becoming part of the basic infrastructure of competitiveness – just like roads, power and ports. Countries that get the foundations right will unlock new productivity, new jobs and new opportunities. Those that do not will find themselves consuming other people's innovations instead of shaping their own.

For Africa, with the world's youngest population, the opportunity is huge – but if we ignore inclusion, AI could deepen existing inequalities between rich and poor, urban and rural, connected and unconnected.

Telecoms sit at the centre of this story. Connectivity is no longer just a sector; it is the foundation of every sector. Our networks now carry critical services across global economies – and increasingly, AI-driven applications.

The Nigerian Communications Commission has therefore had to evolve. We remain a regulator, but at the heart of it we are an economic and developmental enabler. We focus on infrastructure that catalyses growth and leaves no community behind.

Across Africa, we must adopt a simple principle: **AI must not become a privilege for the already-connected few; it must become a tool for broad-based national uplift.**

To achieve that, there are three AI divides we must address.

First, the **compute divide** – the gap in access to affordable, scalable computing power. Without data centre capacity, GPUs and efficient infrastructure, we risk being stuck as AI consumers, not AI creators.

Second, the **algorithmic divide** – when models are trained mainly on non-African data. They struggle with our languages, cultures and realities, and may reinforce biases against them.

Third, the **data divide** – the fact that much of Africa's data is uncollected, fragmented or locked in silos. Without high-quality, responsibly governed data, even the best infrastructure will underperform.

At NCC, we see our work as contributing to closing these divides in three ways: **through connectivity; through support for compute, cloud and data centres; and through governance and adaptive regulation.**

1. Connectivity – The Starting Point

First, connectivity. Without robust, affordable, widespread connectivity, there is no AI-ready Africa.

Nigeria's **National Broadband Plan 2020–2025** has guided efforts to expand fibre, reduce costs, improve quality and deepen last-mile access. Today, broadband penetration is approaching half of the population, 4G covers most population centres, 5G has been launched, and coverage in underserved areas is expanding.

We are investing in **broadband intelligence** – national coverage maps, broadband mapping tools and crowdsourced quality-of-service data. This evidence guides decisions on where to deploy new fibre, where to focus universal service support and where future compute clusters and edge nodes can be located.

We are also advancing a **wholesale broadband and open-access framework** to unlock more value from networks, lower barriers for smaller ISPs, encourage infrastructure sharing and support fibre expansion to homes, schools, businesses and public institutions.

2. Compute, Cloud and Data Centres – The Engine Room

Second, **compute, cloud and data centres**.

Nigeria's data centre market is growing strongly. Our role is not to build data centres, but to create a **stable, predictable and competitive environment** where investors can do so with confidence – from hyperscale facilities in major hubs to edge data centres closer to users.

We recognise the interdependence between AI, compute and power. **AI needs compute; compute needs power; power needs resilience.** We are therefore working with other government agencies and partners to improve power reliability for digital infrastructure, support hybrid and green energy solutions, and ensure data centres and networks can operate sustainably and efficiently.

On the **cloud** side, we see cloud as a great equaliser. It allows governments, start-ups, SMEs, hospitals and schools to use AI without owning expensive hardware, and we are seeing growing investments and adoption across sectors.

3. Governance and Adaptive Regulation – Making AI Safe and Trusted

Third, **governance and adaptive regulation**.

Infrastructure alone does not make a system AI-ready. It must also be **well-governed, safe and trusted.**

NCC is moving toward a more **adaptive regulatory model** to keep up with technological change. This includes innovation sandboxes and proof-of-concept windows, interim authorisations and technology-neutral licensing that allow operators to modernise networks without complex re-licensing.

We are finalising a **cybersecurity framework** for the communications sector and strengthening protections for users, including against misinformation and synthetic media. We are also working with stakeholders to protect fibre routes, submarine cables and base stations, and to improve right-of-way and infrastructure protection. Infrastructure has little value if it is constantly under threat.

Our work at NCC is closely linked to the **National Artificial Intelligence Strategy**, led by the Federal Ministry of Communications, Innovation and Digital Economy. One of its flagship initiatives is the development of **Nigeria's first multilingual large language model**, trained in several low-resource Nigerian languages and accented English. This sends a clear message: African voices and contexts must be visible in the datasets that shape global AI.

By pairing **local innovation on the AI side** with **strong connectivity and computing infrastructure**, we begin to close all three divides at once – compute, algorithms and data.

Closing Reflections

Let me close with two simple questions for all of us.

First, **how do we ensure that Africa's AI journey reduces, rather than reinforces, old inequalities** – between urban and rural, men and women, large and small enterprises, connected and unconnected?

Second, **what new models of collaboration will we need** – between hyperscalers, regulators, energy providers, infrastructure companies, innovators and development partners – to build AI-ready infrastructure at the scale and speed Africa requires?

These are shared questions, because **the digital future is a shared future**.

I thank you for your attention and look forward to a practical conversation and to the partnerships that will grow out of this forum.

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