

KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY DR. AMINU MAIDA, EXECUTIVE VICE CHAIRMAN/CEO, NIGERIAN COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION (NCC) DELIVERED AT THE RURAL CONNECTIVITY SUMMIT ON OCTOBER 22, 2025, AT THE RADISSON BLU HOTEL, ISAAC JOHN STREET, GRA IKEJA, LAGOS

Theme: "Rethinking Digital Connectivity to Unlock Rural Economic Potentials"

Topic: "Leaving Nobody Behind: Leveraging Regulatory Advantages to Bridge Nigeria's Digital Divide"

Protocols

Distinguished guests, esteemed stakeholders, ladies, and gentlemen.

The accurate measure of connectivity is not in megabits per second, but in the economic value it creates or loses. For the industrialist, the miner, the entrepreneur, and our security services, connectivity is an indispensable enabler.

When it fails, opportunities stall, and lives can be at risk. It is therefore a privilege to address this inaugural Rural Connectivity Summit, organized by the Rural Connectivity Initiative in partnership with key stakeholders. I extend my sincere gratitude to the organizers for this invitation to deliver the keynote address, which aligns perfectly with the NCC's commitment to fostering strategic partnerships for rural digital inclusion.

As outlined in your proposal, this summit aims to accelerate infrastructure deployment in underserved areas, enhance policy frameworks, and promote innovative financing models to bridge the digital divide—efforts that resonate deeply with our regulatory mandate.

The theme, "Rethinking Digital Connectivity to Unlock Rural Economic Potentials," and the topic of this keynote, "Leaving Nobody Behind: Leveraging Regulatory Advantages to Bridge Nigeria's Digital Divide," serve as a call to action. The digital divide is a barrier to education, healthcare, financial inclusion, and economic empowerment. Bridging this divide is central to achieving inclusive national development—particularly in rural areas, where over 45% of Nigeria's population lives yet continues to face systemic exclusion from digital opportunities. This address

outlines the Commission's deliberate, data-driven blueprint for architecting an inclusive digital future for every Nigerian, drawing on our ongoing initiatives and collaborations.

Bridging the digital divide is a fundamental economic and national security imperative. Research shows that a 10% increase in broadband penetration can drive approximately 1.38% of GDP growth in developing economies. As of August 2025, Nigeria's broadband penetration stands at roughly 48.81%.

Nations that embraced transformative technologies in previous eras defined the economic landscape for generations. Today, data and broadband are the new engines of progress. Countries like Rwanda and India have built formidable digital economies through strategic investment in infrastructure and human capacity development. Nigeria's potential is even greater. With a population of over 200 million and a median age of 18, our youthful, entrepreneurial population is our greatest asset. We can surpass others if we equip these youth, irrespective of their geography, with reliable, affordable, high-speed connectivity.

The cost of inaction is profound. A community without digital connectivity is functionally invisible, cut off from modern education, global markets, specialized healthcare, and opportunity. This "digital invisibility" is an unacceptable situation that we must act decisively to end. Central to this effort is the pursuit of Universal and Meaningful Connectivity (UMC), as emphasized in the ITU's ICT Development Index (IDI) 2025.

UMC ensures not just access, but safe, enriching, and productive online experiences at affordable costs. Globally, the average IDI score is 77.6, with high-income economies averaging 92. In Africa, the average is 56.1. Nigeria's IDI score for 2025 is 52.9, ranking us 137th out of 164 economies, an improvement from 46.9 in 2024. This score reflects stronger performance in Meaningful Connectivity (68.7) than Universal Connectivity (37.1), highlighting gains in network coverage (86.3 for 3G/4G) and affordability, but persistent gaps in Internet usage (39.2%) and household access (40.1%). These figures underscore the need for targeted interventions to elevate Nigeria's standing and achieve UMC for all.

The urban-rural digital connectivity divide in Nigeria remains stark, exacerbating inequalities. While urban areas boast up to 57% Internet access, rural communities lag significantly at only 23%. Cities like Lagos, Abuja, and Port Harcourt account for 75-80% of total data usage, driven especially by better infrastructure and affordability. In contrast, rural areas face barriers such as limited fibre optic networks, high deployment costs, and infrastructure vandalism, resulting in lower broadband penetration and

slower adoption. This divide not only hampers economic potential in agriculture, education, and health but also widens the gap in digital skills and opportunities.

To address these challenges, the NCC and its Universal Service Provision Fund (USPF) have been at the forefront of bridging the digital divide, particularly through Digital Intervention Initiatives and Digital Connectivity projects targeted at underserved and unserved rural areas.

The USPF, as the Commission's engine for social equity, translates high-level policy into tangible impact in commercially non-viable regions. Key programmes include the Rural Broadband Initiative (RUBI) and the Accelerated Mobile Phone Expansion (AMPE), which subsidize the deployment of Base Transceiver Stations (BTS) and fibre backbone infrastructure. Since 2007, the USPF has invested in over 2,500 education projects, delivering more than 100,000 computers to schools nationwide. A notable example is the Emerging Technologies Centre at the Ogun State Institute of Technology (OGITECH), where over 9,000 students now access high-end computing resources to develop innovations like drones for local agriculture.

Beyond education, the USPF's E-Health Project connects rural primary health centres with larger hospitals for remote consultations and specialist care. At the same time, the E-Accessibility Project deploys assistive technologies for persons with disabilities. To ensure sustainability, the USPF launched the Impact Alliance, partnering with the private sector, civil society, and international bodies to co-create and co-invest in inclusive connectivity solutions.

Additionally, the NCC just launched Nigeria Digital Connectivity Index (NDCI) (October 9, 2025), which is expected to provide an annual public scorecard measuring each state's digital readiness, fostering competition and accountability. These initiatives have been projected to lead to measurable progress, such as increased broadband investment commitments from operators following the approval of cost-reflective tariffs.

A key pillar of our approach is supporting Community Networks, which empower local communities to build and manage their own connectivity solutions. The NCC has actively engaged in this space through targeted events and partnerships. In October 2024, the Commission participated in a conference on National Strategies for Community Networks in Nigeria, which brought together stakeholders to co-design national strategies for sustainable, community-led connectivity. Building on this, in June 2025, the NCC organized a workshop on Enabling Policy Frameworks for the Establishment of Community Networks in Nigeria, in collaboration with the

Association for Progressive Communications (APC) under its LocNet Initiative. This two-day event in Abuja explored regulatory enablers to bridge rural gaps. Currently, we are engaged with APC's LocNet to conduct a comprehensive Study on Community Networks (ongoing) and the Development of the Frameworks, scheduled for January 2026. These efforts aim to create flexible policies that integrate community networks into our national broadband ecosystem, ensuring grassroots innovation drives inclusion.

The importance of stakeholder engagements cannot be overstated in bridging the connectivity divide. The NCC has prioritized multi-stakeholder collaborations to protect infrastructure, reduce barriers, and promote investment. For years, the industry faced challenges of vandalism, access denials, and fibre cuts. The sector experienced about 19,384 fibre cuts, 3,241 equipment thefts, and over 19,000 denials of access to sites between January and August 2025 alone. To address this, we championed the Critical National Information Infrastructure (CNII) Presidential Order, signed by President Tinubu in June 2024, empowering law enforcement to combat vandalism. Through the Telecommunications Industry Working Group and partnerships with the Office of the National Security Adviser (ONSA), major cartels responsible for the theft of telecommunications equipment have been dismantled.

On Right of Way (RoW) fees, our advocacy has led to 11 states offering zero charges—including Adamawa, Bauchi, Enugu, Benue, and Zamfara in recent years—and 17 others capping at the N145 per linear metre benchmark. The Commission also promotes the "dig-once" policies to minimize damage and costs.

Engagements with operators like MTN, Airtel, Glo, and T2; international partners like GSMA and World Bank; and academia have yielded tools like the Wholesale Fibre Study for open-access infrastructure and the Ease of Doing Business Portal (also launched along the NDCI in October 2025) for streamlined deployments and open data availability.

To further drive digital innovation and connectivity, the NCC is developing the General Authorisation Framework (GAF), introduced in draft form in July 2025. This framework provides flexible pathways for market entry, including Proof of Concept (PoC), Regulatory Sandbox, and Interim Service Authorisation (ISA), allowing innovators to test new technologies in controlled environments. By reducing entry barriers, the GAF fosters disruptive solutions tailored to rural needs, such as satellite connectivity and low-cost 5G towers, ensuring regulatory advantages translate into widespread digital access.

In conclusion, we stand at a strategic crossroads. The global digital race is accelerating, and we must act decisively to ensure our youth are creators, not just consumers, of digital value. This is a shared national mission. On behalf of the Commission, I reaffirm our unwavering commitment to this mission.

We will continue to urge state governments to adopt zero RoW policies, operators to prioritize rural rollouts, and communities to embrace the best efforts provided for connectivity in their localities.

Just as was reiterated at the Business Roundtable on Improving Investments in Broadband Connectivity and Safeguarding Critical National Information Infrastructure, the importance and urgency of protecting telecom assets cannot be overemphasised. Key strategies must be put in place by local communities to see these assets as their bridge between backwardness and global relevance and participation. By doing so, we will unlock rural economic potentials, bridge the divide, and ensure no Nigerian is left behind. Let us turn today's dialogue into tomorrow's transformation for the prosperity of our people and the future of our nation.

Thank you.

Dr. Aminu Maida

Executive Vice Chairman/CEO

Nigerian Communications Commission