



MINISTRY
COMMUNICATIONS AND DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

**KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY THE MINISTER COMMUNICATIONS AND DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES,
MONDLI GUNGUBELE (MP), DURING THE AI GOVERNMENT SUMMIT,
UNIVERSITY OF JOHANNESBURG, 05 APRIL 2024**

Programme Director,

Deputy Minister of Communications, Hon Philly Mapulane

Premier of the Province of Gauteng, Hon Panyaza Lesufi – who I know shares my passion for the advancement of our people through technology,

His Excellencies, Ambassadors and High Commissioners

Chairpersons of State-Owned Entities and Associations Directors-
General and Senior Officers

Our Host and Dean of the JBS, Prof Corellison

Leaders in Academia, Captains of the Industries and CEOs Ladies and
Gentlemen in the house and joining us online Good morning!

INTRODUCTION

It is an honour and privilege to address this gathering that marks a significant milestone in our technology advancement as a country. This gathering will forge a route that will guide and influence our actions as we lead future generations towards strong global competitiveness using technology to address human needs. **Today, the spotlight falls on Artificial Intelligence (AI).**

On 6-7 July 2023 the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) coordinated a groundbreaking **AI for Good Global Summit** in Geneva, Switzerland to explore the promotion of AI to advance health, climate, gender, inclusive prosperity, sustainable infrastructure, and other global development priorities.

Addressing the Summit, the Secretary-General of the ITU, Ms Doreen Bogdan-Martin emphasized the need to prioritize human values and ensure that AI benefits everyone, including the 2.7 billion people worldwide who are still offline and are often left behind.

She highlighted the importance of meaningful inclusion stating, *“those who are left behind are at the very heart of the sustainable development goals, and they need to be at the heart of how we design AI.”*

The role and potential of AI in assisting the world to get the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG’s) back on track by 2030 is an imperative and a responsibility that every nation of the world must be seized with. Indeed, the era of generative AI is just beginning, and as a country and continent we cannot and must not allow ourselves to be left behind.

The explosion of AI as a greater technology tool has placed a responsibility on all of us to ensure that we realize its maximum innovative potential and make its use safe and ethical for all.

In the global arena, South Africa is seen as an exemplary country with bright prospects within the African continent and global environment.

During the 2024 World Economic Forum held in Davos, Switzerland remarks were made that the prospects of global security and peace has moved from Paris, New York, and Brussels to Pretoria. It is with this appreciation of how the world views us that we believe that South Africa needs to be at the centre of advancing this cutting- edge technology.

Programme Director,

South Africa continues to tackle the social and economic challenges inherent from being such a diverse country.

While the challenges may be many and daunting, they are definitely not insurmountable. Pooling the wisdom and expertise of our sector – particularly AI, we are up to the challenge.

As Minister, I am tasked by law through the Electronic Communications Act (ECA) and various universal access legislative prescripts to develop an approach that will ensure the fast adoption of emerging technologies that will set South Africa towards a brighter future.

It is for this reason that this Summit has been convened for government and the sector to initiate a policy and regulatory framework to guide and leverage the advances in AI for human good. Recently, we have seen extraordinary advances in the capabilities of AI through chatbots, voice cloning, image generators, video apps and much more.

The economic benefit of the adoption of AI has been well documented. For example, in a study conducted by the Access Partnership it is projected that South Africa, Nigeria, Ghana and Kenya stand to benefit US\$136 billion on the adoption and use of AI.

HARNESSING (AI) TO REVOLUTIONISE OUR SOCIO-ECONOMIC WELLBEING

Programme Director,

AI is built on the understanding that machines must complement humans. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) study indicates that: *“People now live alongside digital technologies in the physical and virtual worlds. These include machines pre-programmed to follow a precise set of rules, or that are fully autonomous and can operate without human intervention.*

They include immersive environments that combine features of the physical and virtual worlds to create realistic experiences, such as precision farming and surgical training, that would be difficult to reproduce in real-world settings. Behind these and other innovations in the early phases of implementation are complex mathematical models trained on large computers with vast amounts of data to emulate human-like cognitive functions, i.e. Artificial Intelligence (AI).”

What becomes obvious is that public policy making, and frameworks must adapt to address the governance imperatives of AI and emerging technologies to protect globally agreed human rights.

AI policies are key to building a strong digital ecosystem in which governments, businesses and individuals can reap the benefits.

As we carve out a response towards the adoption of a Artificial Intelligence (AI) policy and regulations *positions* within South Africa, there are three main aspects that would have to be understood when we endeavour to harness AI. These are:

- AI data governance and connectivity to support policy makers in this process;
- The importance of co-operating internationally to ensure that AI as an emerging technology is trustworthy; and
- Common understanding of AI is built through sharing good practices and creating evidence-based AI systems to inform policy design, implementation, and evaluation.

SOUTH AFRICAN POSITION ON HARNESSING AI

Programme Director,

For us to remain a relevant trading partner that protects and advances its national interests, we need to be among the rest of early starters in the productions and adoption of digital technology solutions to human problems.

There are areas that are traditionally the exclusive mandate for governments to conduct its business. Areas such as defence, safety and security, social security net- support and intelligence gathering, amongst others come to mind. These are areas where government must lead in the adoption of AI.

There are, however, other areas where the direct role of government is expected through policy formulation and regulatory approaches that will safeguard the preservation of livelihoods and creation of sustainable jobs. In this area, *the adoption of AI must ensure the ethical and impactful purposive delivery.*

The question related to the theme of “Harnessing AI” especially from the South African perspective is whether as the African continent we can even begin determining AI regulations.

I point this out, because we all know that there would not be effective regulation without the existence of a clear policy position. The danger of formulating regulations not guided by a sound policy is like being asked to comply to a non-existent phenomenon.

AFRICAN UNION MINISTERS OF COMMUNICATIONS AI DECLARATION

In 2019, AU Ministers responsible for Communications and ICTs adopted the Sharm El Sheikh Declaration wherein there was an agreement on establishing a Working Group on AI for:

- The creation of a Common African stance on AI,
- The development of Africa-wide AI capacity building framework and;
- The establishment of an AI think-tank.

As South Africa, through our Presidential Report on the Fourth Industrial Revolution (PC4IR), we also identified AI as one of the key areas for the Africa 4IR Strategy and look forward to collaborating with all of you in our midst.

UNITED NATIONS AI APPROACH

On 26 October 2023, the UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres launched the High- Level Multi-stakeholder Advisory Body on Artificial Intelligence.

In addressing the media on the occasion of this launch he remarked that, *“In our challenging times, AI could power extraordinary progress for humanity. For developing economies, AI offers the possibility of leapfrogging outdated technologies and bringing services directly to people where needs are bigger and for the people that need them most.”*

All these he concluded could only be realised if we harness AI responsibly, making it accessible to all, thereby reducing global inequalities.

The world appreciates the risks associated with the adoption of AI. These risks include misinformation and disinformation, the entrenching of bias and discrimination, surveillance and invasion of privacy; fraud and other violations of human rights.

In order to prevent the malicious use of AI, the UN has established entities wrestling with big questions about how to harness AI to help humanity positively. It offers us a glimpse of real progress towards achieving the SDGs.

AFRICA'S NOTABLE INITIATIVES ON AI

Programme Director,

I have noted that there are various AI initiatives on the African continent. Some of the examples are:

- The AI in Africa Machine Learning Indaba, conducted by South Africa;
- The Alliance for AI, led by Africans in the diaspora;
- Initiatives by major global companies seeking collaboration on the continent, for example Google which has established an AI Centre in Ghana;
- The release of the Africa AI Blueprint by Smart Africa Alliance through the Chairpersonship of South Africa;
- South African government's endeavour to establish the Artificial Intelligence Institute (AIISA) and Centre of Artificial Intelligence Research (CAIR).

Noting these, I therefore impress upon cloud companies such as Microsoft, Google, Huawei, Nokia, and Amazon Web Services, amongst others, to continue establishing AI research centres in Africa.

Secondly, we need universities in South Africa and Africa to consider that the best approach to AI is collaboration.

As the Department of Communications and Digital Technologies in the Republic of South Africa, we have adopted an all-inclusive approach, which is at the heart of our shared response to addressing the digital transformation era.

For Africa to be competitive in the world, we need to realise that there was a space race, then the arms race and now the AI race. We cannot afford to be left behind in this one.

The onus is upon us to participate in this AI race through a coordinated and collaborative approach.

We require venture capital funds that are focused on and dedicated to Artificial Intelligence.

Lastly, we need to realise collaboration between government and private sector in AI research.

SOUTH AFRICAN AI ADOPTED INITIATIVES

Programme Director,

In November 2022, the Artificial Intelligence Institute of South Africa was formed and it has since established Applied AI Hubs with key stakeholders such as academia, private sector, investors and civil society.

There are several South African start-ups, such as Xineoh which focus on simplifying AI and Machine Learning. They possess distinctive Algorithms like Amazon.com and Netflix wherein they determine user behaviour and predict potential purchasing behaviour.

We also have a start-up known as Clevva, a technology business that specialises in the art and science of AI for people.

In Nairobi, Kenya, Strathmore University established the @iLabAfrica Research Centre that sought to promote cutting-edge research in AI, among other emerging technologies.

In Nigeria, the University of Lagos recently opened an AI Hub that will focus on deep learning and tools to collect data for AI purposes.

In essence, the core economic sectors that have been the bedrock of the African continent are identified as the ones to largely benefit from AI. Economic sectors such as Agriculture, Mining, Art etc. are identified to become efficient, high quality and providing expansion in benefits.

Programme Director,

The Artificial Intelligence Institute of South Africa (AIISA) has started to focus on ensuring the key economic sectors are first to leverage AI capabilities. We launched the first AI Hub in UJ focused on Manufacturing because of the size of its contribution to GDP which is close to 14%.

We then launched the second AI Hub in TUT focusing mainly on Automotive Sector because of the vastness of vehicle production and assembling in the South Africa.

We are also launching the CUT AI Hub focused on Agriculture and Farming as a notable sector.

Before the end of May, we plan to launch the AI Hub focused on Defence and Military capabilities at our Military Academy, Saldanha, West Coast of the Western Cape.

In total we would like to capacitate the AIISA with at least 11 AI Hubs ranging from Built Environment, Just Energy Transition, Health, Media and Languages etc.

The International Telecommunications Union (ITU) called for the ‘AI for Good’ approach that still must be adopted by the member-states.

I therefore encourage all the African countries to work in unison to adopt the recommendations of the AI for Good principles, which encourage for a trusted, safe and inclusive development of AI technologies and equitable access.

The G20 2019 which was under the Presidency of Japan, put in place the importance of AI within their midst for addressing their economic challenges.

These notable approaches prompted the President of South Africa, His Excellency, Mr Matamela Cyril Ramaphosa, at the African Union Summit of 2020, to call for a unified African regional AI stance which will serve as a Blueprint to guide the African member- states in developing policies and regulations related to AI as a technology tool for good.

As a result, South Africa in collaboration with the Smart Africa Alliance and other member-states supported by diverse stakeholders drafted an AI Blueprint Roadmap which will be tabled at the AU soon. We hope that with such a Blueprint our continent’s endeavours to be a global authority will be realised.

AFRICA’S AI REGULATION APPROACHES

Programme Director,

To institutionalize open AI, explicit regulations related to the following 5 important considerations must be put in place in relation to the development of continental and national AI Policies and Programmes which are:

- Data-centric approach linked to developmental agenda,
- People before Technology as a centre,
- AI for economic and growth prospects,
- Multi-stakeholder Approach centred on PPP Model,
- Governance and Regulatory AI Framework, and
- Institutional Mechanisms located within Localised Agencies.

We must as a continent recognise that increased availability of digitised data in the global economy, unlimited access to computing power and lower data storage costs are important in driving the growth of AI globally.

I am happy to announce that an AI Expert Advisory Council will be appointed and it will comprise of a group of eminent persons that will guide us towards the implementation and development of AI policy and Regulation amongst other matters.

To this effect, I have appointed a brilliant young man in Professor Vukosi Marivate to head an AI Task Force together with the Department to recommend to me names of appropriate AI experts suitable for appointment to the AI Expert Advisory Council which I will announce as soon as possible.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, my expectation is that after today's session, we will have a clear way forward towards leveraging this cutting edge technology to resolve some of South Africa's economic and social challenges.

I also expect that there will be Provincial Seminars undertaken to further seek inputs during the public comments process before we finalise the draft National AI Policy as a guiding policy document.

I would like to point out that *with the right mix of policies, Africa and its citizens can reap the benefits of AI in years to come.*

Thank you all.