WORLD TELECOMMUNICATIONS AND INFORMATION SOCIETY DAY

Category: Infrastructure and Telecommunications
written by Tshepiso Hadebe | May 17, 2023

Did you know that when Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone in 1876, he proposed "ahoy" as a standard phone greeting? Well now you do. Although telecommunications have come a long way since the invention of the telephone to the age of the internet, 2.7 billion people in the world remain unconnected to the internet, about a third of them are in least developed countries.[1] It is in light of this that the International Telecommunications Union ("**ITU**") has decided to celebrate the 2023 World Telecommunication and Information Society Day ("**WTISD**") by focusing on empowering the least developed countries through information and communications technologies.

WTISD is commemorated every year on 17 May to mark the signing of the first International Telegraph Convention and founding of the ITU in 1865.[2] The WTISD 2023 celebrations are calling on public and private sectors to make pledges for universal connectivity and digital transformation. This is in pursuit of a broader goal which is to ensure access to information which is critical for the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals ("**SDG's**") and to ensure digital inclusion.

Although the South African telecommunications sector has been growing, the digital divide remains a challenge as it exacerbates existing inequalities. This severely impacts the right to access information and the right to freedom of expression, both of which are constitutionally guaranteed rights.[3] According to the 2023 State of the ICT Sector Report published by the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa ("**ICASA**")[4], only 10.4% of households in South Africa have access to internet at home. A further look at the statistics indicates that 17.2% of households in metro areas have access to internet at home, compared to the 8,8% in urban areas and 1.2% in rural

areas.

Access to the internet is also divided along gender lines. Statistics indicate that in South Africa, an estimated 16.4% of men enjoy meaningful connectivity compared to 12.1% of women.[5] These disparities are caused by a multitude of factors, including the high costs of data and lack of adequate digital infrastructure.

All is not lost. In the past few months, we have seen significant efforts by the government geared towards connectivity and digital inclusion. ICASA held and concluded a successful spectrum auction. The winners of the spectrum auction are required to zero rate all mobile content provided by public benefit organisations. This will in turn enable people to download education, health and welfare resources on their devices at no charge.[6]

For medium to longer term connectivity goals, the government published the National Infrastructure Plan 2050 ("**NIP 2050**"). The NIP 2050 promotes the delivery of ICT infrastructure and services through PPPs. It recognises that communications are the lifeblood of a market economy, and that digital communication are becoming increasingly central. To that end, it recognises digital infrastructure as one of the critical network sectors. A lot still needs to be done in order for South Africa to achieve its vision of an information society in which all citizens enjoy meaningful connectivity. This will in turn enable them to actively participate in the digital economy and exercise their rights to access information and freedom of expression.

Contact us for more good, clear, precise advice.

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[1] ITU, World Telecommunications & Information Society Day 2023, https://www.itu.int/wtisd/en/

[2] See above

[3] Constitution of the Republic of South Africa 1996, Section 16 – Freedom of expression and section 32 – Access to information , https://www.gov.za/documents/constitution/chapter-2-bill-rights

[4] ICASA, State of the ICT Sector Report, https://www.icasa.org.za/uploads/files/State-of-the-ICT-Sector-in-South-Africa-2023-Report.pdf

[5] Alliance for Affordable Internet, South Africa, https://a4ai.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/MC_South-Africa_FS_Screen_V1.pdf

[6] Tamar Kahn, Zero-rated online content for public benefit bodies hailed as breakthrough, https://www.businesslive.co.za/bd/national/education/2022-03-30-zero-rated-online-content-for-public-benefit-bodies-hailed-as-breakthrough/