

Remarks at the Opening of the 17th Internet Governance Forum

እንኳን በደህና መጣችሁ። A warm welcome to our beautiful city and Africa's vibrant diplomatic capital – Addis Ababa!

As you deliberate in upcoming days on the theme of Resilient Internet for a Shared Sustainable and Common Future, what better place to reflect on a common future than in the Land of Origins, where humanity as we know it all began.

Although it has been 11 years since the Internet Governance Forum was held on the African continent, Ethiopia is pleased to host the 2022 IGF and is honored to welcome this global and diverse audience for a taste of our history, culture, diversity and ongoing transformation.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

The advent of the Internet has no doubt revolutionized our global societies, economies and politics. We currently find ourselves in a rapidly changing world order with the Internet impacting real world developments and vice versa.

The dynamism of our global community and the related socio-economic and political shifts, warrant gatherings such as the IGF. They will help us to co-create a shared understanding on the use and governance of the Internet.

In a highly globalized context, and with the hopes of closing the digital divide, most if not all African nations, have been leapfrogging in this realm. While there are many advantages to this, undoubtedly plenty challenges confront and await us as a continent, with the dark side of the Internet requiring adequate policies and practice safeguards to be in place.

For Ethiopia, the past four years have been full of challenges and opportunities. For example, the Internet has supported the spread of disinformation as Ethiopia dealt with an armed rebellion in the Northern part of the country. When the COVID19 pandemic hit, the Internet offered the opportunity to conduct some government activities and businesses online, allowing for creativity and the emergence of innovations.

As a developing country, we recognize that our aspirations and intentional journey to realizing a prosperous Ethiopia, conducive and inclusive for all, is intimately tied to advancements in technology. The Internet thus provides a means of securing our ambitious targets as laid out in the National Ten-Year Perspective Plan. At a time where we are emerging from the harsh economic effects of a global pandemic, a conflict, and vulnerabilities due to climate change, our economy is the third largest in Sub-Saharan Africa.

We remain steadfast in our commitment to achieving food sovereignty, increasing industrialization, boosting tourism, maximizing gains from our mining sector and promoting a green and climate conscious culture. All these are being supported through mainstreaming ICT of which the Internet is key.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Ethiopia's ICT and digital transformation journey has been marked by key progress milestones aligned with the five sub-themes of the 17th IGF. Considering our large and growing population, improving connectivity and expanding accessibility has been a priority with investments being made in infrastructure expansion, opening up the telecom sector to private investors and building government digital infrastructure.

Internet coverage shows an increase from 19 million users in 2017 to 30 million in 2022. Rolling out 4G network in populated towns and 5G network in major cities is accelerating connectivity. 2300 high schools throughout the country have internet access.

Two years ago, we adopted a National Digital Strategy which lays out a unified vision for Ethiopia's progress towards an inclusive digital economy. The strategy focuses on developing infrastructure, enabling systems, digital platforms and building the digital ecosystem.

In efforts to enable safety, security and accountability, the Government has taken various measures to strengthen national cyber security institutions. Besides protecting the cyber space of the country, these institutions are working on raising citizen awareness on related matters.

The Ethiopian Government recognizes the benefits of Artificial Intelligence and has committed to use the new technology for national development endeavors. We have established institutions dedicated to AI related research and development activities in the country. We also established an AI Institute dedicated to work on Ethiopia's national interests and competitiveness through the development of AI services, products and solutions. The Institute is currently working in various sectors including health, education, agriculture, transport as well as on public protection and safety.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Internet's contribution to social development is immense. The democratization of knowledge and communication, access to entrepreneurship skills and new employment opportunities, health care access and education, are a few noteworthy ones.

However, today the principle of neutrality of the Internet is questioned. Giant platforms control the content that users can access. They control their personal data, and with the power of artificial intelligence, they very quickly cease to be gateways and rather become gatekeepers.

In politics it has allowed greater participation, but it has also posed a threat to political stability, sovereignty and democratic values of nations. The key elements of internet politics are the manipulation of information to frame ideas and behavior. Spreading of misinformation and rumors by individuals protected by anonymity has become a common practice.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Our rapidly evolving global digital landscape is allowing us to produce massive amount of data. But cautious optimism is required and mainly around: ownership of critical infrastructure, data strategy and data governance and cybersecurity.

Countering imbalances in ownership of submarine cables, terrestrial fiber-optic networks, and data centers as well as international data traffic routes, particularly for Africa, are dependencies that risk jeopardizing state autonomy.

We need to have data strategies to strengthen privacy standards. We need to prevent feeding the Artificial Intelligence industrial development and surveillance capacity of third parties.

Data governance should also aim at harmonizing rules in the digital ecosystem; to spur economic growth while protecting individual rights.

African countries should be able to influence standards in a way that it corresponds with our values and enables us to participate in innovative emerging technologies.

This is why, the focus should be on building trust, equity, and security in cyberspace.

The IGF was created to pave the way for discussions on issues that would ensure sustainability, security, stability and development of the Internet.

I would like to call upon this forum, whose quality of discussions and debates are renowned, to produce more than just reflections. We need to see tangible, pragmatic and implementable proposals to ensure we create the resilient, safe, and inclusive global community we all want.

I commit to review the deliberation of this forum and wish you all a successful 17th edition of the UN Internet Governance Forum

Have a pleasant stay in Ethiopia and I encourage you to visit our new Science Museum, among the many new splendors of our vibrant city.

I thank you!