Frank K Tumwebaze, minister/politician

Why ICT is a must for all of us today

On Monday, July 24, Frank K. Tumwebaze, the Minister of ICT and National Guidance, opened the East African Communications Organisation (EACO) Congress Week, at Silver Springs Hotel, Bugolobi. Below are his edited remarks:

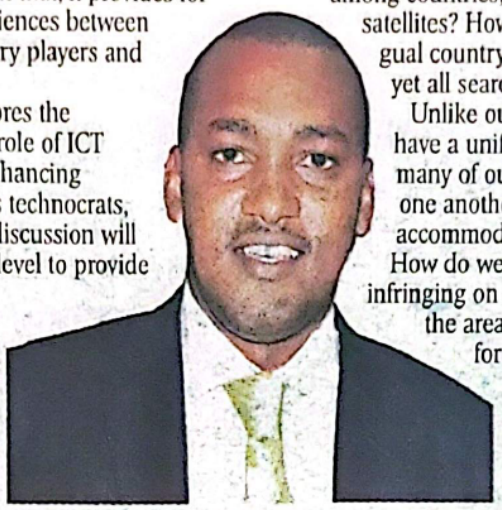
It is my pleasure to welcome you all to this regional gathering that has brought together persons responsible for different facets of ICT (Telecommunications, Information Technology, Broadcasting and postal services from the East African Community). This meeting is unique, in that, it provides for direct interaction and sharing of experiences between high level policy makers, regulators, industry players and academia on critical issues affecting us all.

Your participation in this forum underscores the importance our governments attach to the role of ICT in facilitating national development and enhancing regional integration. I am confident that, as technocrats, your recommendations arising out of this discussion will be a necessary input for us at the political level to provide strategic direction for the sector.

A few would disagree that technology is central to any serious economy in this era. The scope and pace of development in any economy currently is a function of revolutionary advances in ICTs. What does this, therefore, mean for us in EAC?

We need as each nation to embrace ICTs to not only meet the UN Sustainable Development Goals and other national and regional targets but most importantly to provide better services to our citizens in a faster, efficient and transparent manner. I doubt that there will be a tomorrow to talk about other than that enabled by ICTs.

As governments, industry players, private sector and the international organisations, we each have a role to play in order to transform the existing digital divide into digital opportunities for national development and enhance regional integration. As a region, we have a number of success stories in the use and application of ICTs in the areas of education, trade/commerce, healthcare, etc. for which we should applaud ourselves. However, we have a lot of unexploited potential and as you may well know, ICT has no sectoral boundaries. There is no sector that you can mention which does not rely on ICTs.



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Last week, we had our ICT stakeholders consultative workshop at Sheraton Hotel as we move towards reshaping and integrating the various policies in different sectors into a Digital Vision for Uganda.

A lot of views were advanced specifically; the need for government systems integration and increasing access to government services online, enhancing universal access, promotion of local content, cost of broadband and the growing hate content on social media, among others. These are areas you experts could include in your discussions and guide us on how to practically address them. You could for instance interrogate the push factors for varying data costs among countries, future outer space usage – why not launch satellites? How do we bridge the digital divide in a multi-lingual country like Uganda with over 50 different languages yet all search engines are in English, Swahili etc.?

Unlike our colleagues in Rwanda and Tanzania who have a unifying language irrespective of literacy level, many of our different tribes cannot communicate with one another with ease. Can we have search engines that accommodate all the languages spoken in a country? How do we protect our citizens from hate content without infringing on their right to free speech? These are some of the areas where you can suggest practical solutions for us.

I, however, wish to acknowledge the value of collaboration with all stakeholders in the ICT ecosystem. I am pleased to know that such collaborative approaches have been an affective co-ordinating mechanism among EAC countries. This EACO model is unique because it brings together all the key stakeholders in the ICT space. It is collaborative and thus forward looking but it is very important that we take advantage of our membership of these regional and international fora to improve our respective country situations and not just become tourists.

It is my hope that during the week, we can interrogate why we are where we are in ICT uptake and what we can do to fully realise and exploit the potential that ICTs offer for our individual economies, the region and in particular our citizens. I wish you fruitful deliberations and a pleasant stay in Uganda.

I now have the honour to declare the EACO Congress Week open.

I thank you for your attention

Frank K Tumwebaze
Minister of ICT and National Guidance

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