ICTAM Guest of Honour Speech |Edith Jiya|24 November 2023|Sunbird Nkopola

Theme: "*Empowering Malawi through Digital Transformation: Bridging the Divide and Sustaining the Future*"

Salutation: The ICTAM President, ICTAM Executive, ladies, and gentlemen

Introduction

Good morning, esteemed guests, colleagues, and friends. Today, I feel honoured this morning to stand before you to discuss a topic of vital importance not only to ICTAM but Malawi at large entitled – **"Empowering Malawi through Digital Transformation: Bridging the Divide and Sustaining the Future".**

Mr President, ladies and gentlemen, this is a great theme befitting addressing many key challenges Malawi has had faced in her journey towards a sustainable Economic growth. Thus, Digital Transformation is the integration of digital technology into all areas of a society, fundamentally changing how it operates and delivers value to its citizens. For Malawi, this is not just a pathway to modernization; it's a leap towards inclusive growth and global competitiveness.

The Current State of Malawi

Malawi, a nation with rich cultural heritage and potential, currently faces a digital gap that hinders its full economic and social development. Despite progress in some areas, a significant portion of our population remains disconnected from the digital world.

Like many developing nations, Malawi faces a myriad of challenges in many of its major sectors including agriculture, education, and infrastructure. These challenges, however, present opportunities for digital innovations that can bring about transformative changes that offer solutions to longstanding issues.

Mr President, ladies and gentlemen before I go any further, let me start by giving a brief account of important statistics on Malawi with reference to the Digital landscape as highlighted by The 2023 DataReportal on Global Digital Insights:

- **Digital Penetration**: As of early 2023, Malawi had 5.04 million internet users, with a penetration rate of 24.4%. The number of internet users increased by 126 thousand (+2.6%) between 2022 and 2023.
- **Mobile Connectivity**: The country recorded 11.81 million cellular mobile connections, equivalent to 57.2% of the population. Social media usage, however, remains low, with only 3.8% of the population on these platforms.
- **Internet Speed**: The median fixed internet connection speed was 8.77 Mbps, showing a significant increase of 55.2% over the previous year.

The above statistics could be very crucial in as far as achieving desired digital transformation level in Malawi is concerned.

Bridging the Digital Divide:

The barriers to digital access in Malawi are multifaceted, including limited infrastructure, affordability, and digital literacy.

Mr President, ladies and gentlemen, let me share with you what I perceive as some of the key factors hindering the digital transformation initiatives in Malawi.

1. **Infrastructure** – A far more robust infrastructure network is essential to support digital transformation initiatives. Investment in reliable power sources, data centres, and cybersecurity is critical for the success of the digital transformation agenda.

   Uninterrupted access to reliable and affordable power is key to supporting digital initiatives. Malawi is slowly but surely already undergoing a shift in its digital landscape, evidenced by the more widespread use of the internet and internet capable devices along with the introduction of various modern technologies (5G connectivity) which necessitates a resilient power infrastructure. Investment in renewable energy sources, such as solar power plants, not only ensures a continuous power supply but also aligns with global sustainability goals. By developing a diversified and sustainable energy portfolio, Malawi can mitigate the risks associated with power shortages and contribute to a greener and more resilient future.

   Further, reliable ICT infrastructure let alone Internet connectivity is key to offering reliable digital services. Malawi still lags in ICT infrastructure availability. We still have areas where mobile network is erratic or not available at all making it difficult for inhabitants of such areas to access digital services most of which are mobile based.

2. **Digital Literacy levels** – Generally literacy level in Malawi is considerably high. This also extends to the Digital literacy aspect which is significantly impacting efforts to bring on board many Malawians onto digital platforms.

3. **Opportunities for Growth**: The World Bank suggests that Malawi has an opportunity to kickstart digital transformation by improving the environment for digital economy, encouraging public-private innovation ventures, and strengthening digital skills and entrepreneurship.

   The Government must play a pivotal role through forward-thinking policies that encourage digital adoption and protect citizens' digital rights. Similarly, the private sector's expertise, resources, and innovation are indispensable in this journey. Together, they can create a robust digital ecosystem.

   Further, collaboration with international partners, be it through knowledge exchange, technological aid, or investment, is crucial. These partnerships can provide the necessary boost to our digital initiatives.

4. **Mobile phone penetration** – Much as this has significantly improved, only a few Malawians have access to smartphones a situation which limits the nature of digital services that can be exposed to them.

5. **Affordability of Digital services** – Internet cost is considerably on the higher side which hinders uptake of Internet-based services by mostly the rural dwellers. High costs of internet smart devices and lack of digital skills are major barriers. For instance, a basic mobile data plan costs 5.4% of the Gross National Product per capita per month.

6. **Data -** The most essential aspect of the digital era, requires secure and efficient storage solutions. Establishing state-of-the-art Data Centres provides the capacity and security needed to manage the vast amounts of information generated by digital platforms. These Data Centres would serve as centralized hubs, facilitating the flow of information across sectors like education, agriculture, and infrastructure itself. Investment in advanced data infrastructure would ensure the reliability and accessibility of critical data, fostering innovation and informed decision-making in a self-enforcing cycle of technological innovation and development.

7. **Language** – Despite having many digital services being at the disposal of Malawians, adoption of the same could be significantly hampered if the language employed to access and use the same is not popular to the general populace.

   I would however not justice by not appreciating efforts being invested in ensuring that there are many good initiatives being implemented including having digital platform menus in local languages (especially USSD based platforms). May I therefore appeal to Software Engineers, Business Analysts, and all related stakeholders here present is to ensure that you consider this a standard, thus, including popular languages in Malawi onto the key menus/user interfaces of the various digital platforms that you develop to interact with the general public.

Furthermore, allow me Mr President, ladies, and gentlemen to highlight some key areas that ICTAM could foster change and revolutionize the Malawi economy through digital innovations:

1. **Agriculture**

The bedrock upon which Malawi's economy sits, the agricultural sector has long been underdeveloped and underutilized. Malawi heavily depends on small-scale subsistence farming, with primary crops like tobacco, tea, and maize, contributing significantly to exports but ranking lower globally. Despite being major exports, these crops are cultivated using traditional methods due to widespread poverty, hindering the adoption of modern farming techniques. This limitation adversely impacts Malawi's economy, preventing it from competing with countries that integrate cutting-edge technology into their agricultural sectors. Overcoming these barriers and embracing modern farming technologies is vital for Malawi to enhance agricultural productivity and maintain competitiveness in the global Market.

The advent of **precision farming** for example, has the potential to revolutionize how farming is done and dramatically increase the average yield without needing to use up more land. This technology allows farmers to apply inputs more precisely and avoid overusing them, leading to reduced environmental impact and improved crop yields. Moreover, precision farming can improve overall profitability for farmers by reducing waste, improving efficiency, and

minimising risk. With the increasing demand for sustainable and efficient agriculture. Precision farming is becoming a more prevalent practice worldwide and must be adopted by the farmers in Malawi as soon as possible.

Further, it is common knowledge that Malawi is rich in freshwater reservoirs that have been underutilized for a very long time from an irrigation standpoint. A combination of poor funding, lack of expertise and lack of mindset change among other factors have stifled the growth of irrigation farming in Malawi. Automated irrigation systems have revolutionised the way farmers irrigate their crops around the world, making the process more efficient, cost-effective, and environmentally friendly. These can prove to be a fruitful avenue of investment for Malawi, weaning farmers off their dependence on rain-fed farming and allowing for a more diverse selection of crops to be grown throughout the country.

Mr President, ladies and gentlemen, in a bid to enhance security in Agricultural investments for instance, technologies like agricultural drones and animal tracking collars are other examples of digital transformations that could be embraced in Malawi at a larger scale.

2. **Sustaining the Future through Digital Education and Innovation**

The cornerstone of our digital transformation lies in education. By integrating digital skills into our educational system and encouraging innovation, we can cultivate a generation of tech-savvy citizens and innovators. Local entrepreneurs and startups must be supported to harness digital technologies for solving local challenges.

Virtual education and open distance learning, especially for students in rural and remote areas, can offer access to courses, subjects, and teachers they might otherwise never be able to find. It can also benefit advanced and highly motivated students and those with unusual schedules and travel requirements and be a useful tool to keep schools running on relatively leaner budgets. Investment technologies that enable these teaching techniques to become more widely accessible is sure to result in a more inclusive and equitable education landscape. As we navigate the complexities of education in the 21st century, the potential impact of investing in technologies that facilitate virtual education and open distance learning is profound.

As ICTAM, consider supporting initiatives to train the general populace rural dwellers specifically in digital related technologies/offerings even employing traditional/physical teaching methods where possible and/or necessary. This would help in facilitating exposing many Malawians to digital platforms and assist them unlearn the many beliefs that they have and have had discouraged them from adopting digital services available to them at the desired rate.

Mr President, I will fail my duty if I conclude my speech without highlighting some of the notable success stories that Malawi has registered in the digitalization space:

1. **The Muuni Fund Initiative**: Launched by the Ministry of Information and Digitalization, the Muuni Fund aims to financially support innovative ideas that contribute to Malawi's technological advancement. *According to the BNN website*, this initiative recognizes the abundance of creative and talented young individuals in Malawi, focusing on harnessing their potential to transform the nation through technological innovation. It especially targets sectors like Agriculture, Health, Education, Banking, and ICT, with an allocation of K410 million coming through from the Malawi Communications Regulatory Authority (MACRA).

2. **Agricultural Transformation through Digitalization**: The African Development Bank has played a significant role in transforming Malawi's agricultural sector. This includes the creation of 8,000 new irrigation projects and training 250 young agricultural entrepreneurs. The strategy also facilitated access to agricultural loans for 10,000 people and helped establish 12 small agricultural businesses. Furthermore, it enabled over 2.28 million transactions through a **digital payment platform**, significantly improving the business climate and economic diversification in the agricultural sector.

Conclusion:

Mr President, ladies, and gentlemen, in conclusion, the journey towards digitally transforming Malawi is challenging yet full of potential. It's a journey that demands collaboration, innovation, and perseverance. The digital transformation of Malawi presents a marvellous opportunity for investors and stakeholders to contribute to sustainable development and lifting a nation out of economic turmoil. By focusing on strategic investments in connectivity, education, agriculture, and infrastructure for instance, we can empower a significant percentage of Malawi's populace, bridge economic divides, and pave the way for a prosperous and digital future. Together, we can empower Malawi and set an example on the world stage as regards the positive impact of digital transformation on emerging economies.

As it is said "*Digital Transformation is not a Destination but a Journey*"; let us embrace this digital revolution, not just as a means to bridge our current divide but as a sustainable path to a brighter, more connected future for Malawi.

Long at last Mr President, ladies, and gentlemen, let me challenge the ICT Association of Malawi to be pivotal in ensuring that Malawi registers success in:

1. **Climate change Management** – Craft a pragmatic roadmap specific to Malawi highlighting how can ICTAM intervene to curb diverse climate change impacts which are threatening living organisms, people inclusive let alone socio-economic development in Malawi.

2. Addressing **Foreign Exchange scarcity** that Malawi has had experienced whose impact to the national economic development needs not overemphasizing. Fellow Malawians, why should we continue importing ICT services, yet we have a lot of ICT experts being produced in our tertiary institutions? For instance, why should we import platforms like payroll whose

processes are routine and straight forward? By employing digitalization, how could Malawi improve major foreign exchange earning activities like Agriculture, mining, and the like?

3. **Malawi 2063 Agenda** – Digitalization is a key enabler to attainment of many goals outlined in this blueprint. The Malawi 2063 agenda, a development strategy for the country, emphasizes digitalization as a crucial pillar. It is viewed as an enabler for various sectors such as agriculture, tourism, and mining. The government of Malawi has aligned its priorities with this agenda, focusing on digitalization as a core driver for national development. What role would ICTAM play to ensure that Malawi realizes its dream as outlined in the Malawi 2063 Agenda?

4. **Enhanced Financial Inclusion** – Data from various surveys and studies portray that Malawi lags when it comes to Financial Inclusion. ICTAM being the mother body of ICT in Malawi should invest deliberate efforts in the drive to scale up Financial Inclusion statistics.

5. Mr President, ladies, and gentlemen Last yet important is my proposal to consider having what I would term as an **ICTAM database** of all qualified and vetted Malawian ICT experts. This would assist The Private Sector, Government, and related stakeholders to vet prospective employees and/or suppliers prior to engaging them. This would be a key control to ensure that credible persons are hired to do tasks befitting their capabilities and to a larger extent mitigate fraud-related activities or substandard ICT related jobs/projects.

I would personally be happy to see a roadmap on how among other things the five (5) issues I have highlighted are going to be addressed. I would expect ICTAM to appraise all relevant stakeholders on the progress in addressing the challenges mentioned herein.

At this juncture, let me thank you Mr President and the entire ICTAM Executive for inviting me to grace this occasion, I do not take this for granted. Further, let me take this opportunity to thank everyone in this room for your attention. I wish you a successful conference and may God bless ICTAM.

_____*End of Speech* _____