

# Accelerating Africa's digital future

By [Fadi Pharaon](#)

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As a continent with very high potential for growing economies, how can African countries accelerate their digital adoption and leapfrog into a new era of socio-economic prosperity?



Fadi Pharaon, president of Ericsson Middle East and Africa

This could be achieved by leveraging new technologies that make it easier to conduct business, raise productivity and efficiency while encouraging an inclusive society. Embracing new ways of enabling positive change will boost livelihoods, promote financial inclusion and improve access to health, education, government services and more.

With the ambition of supporting the acceleration of Africa's digitisation journey, we are working jointly with our customers – the service providers – and other stakeholders across the continent to enable #AfricanMotion.

**Digitisation boosting economies**

We believe that Information and Communications Technology (ICT) is the catalyst for digital transformation, with mobile networks being the crucial ingredient in increasing Africa's economic competitiveness in the global arena. While we have witnessed impressive market developments in recent years, Africa's ICT sector still has growth potential compared to leading economies.

As digital infrastructure and transaction become increasingly impactful to the development of the African societies and economies, affordable broadband access will need to be extended to over a billion individuals to bridge the "digital divide" and enable them to reap the benefits of the digital economy.

The Ericsson Mobility Report shows us that by 2025, 77% of subscriptions in the Middle East and North Africa are expected to be for mobile broadband, while in sub-Saharan Africa mobile broadband subscriptions will increase to reach around 72% of mobile subscriptions. Mobile broadband connectivity not only offers great potential to transform cities and industries, but it enables connectivity as a basic human right; fostering inclusion and making a positive, sustainable economic impact.

With our commitment to innovation and long history of engaging in Africa's telecom industry, we at Ericsson are driven to deliver the next-generation technology solutions to Africa. These can enable sweeping changes to industrial production, allow seamless access to societal services and provide people with ways of living harmoniously with their environment.

### **Sustainability through connectivity**

Bridging the "digital divide" is a demanding journey both for the public sector and the telecoms industry. This carries significant potential to contribute to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Africa. In order to achieve that, we have a continuous ongoing journey serving several parameters.

And the story just begins here. We strongly believe in the importance of education for the economic development of Africa by building the right foundation to propel a steady eco-system. Our efforts to support education in Africa is a continuous determination and for that we are proud to launch our three-year global partnership with UNICEF that will help map school connectivity in 35 countries by the end of 2023. Our partnership will support the UN's Giga initiative, a global program led by UNICEF and the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) that aims to connect every school to the Internet.

Another key example in supporting education is our "Connect to Learn" program, an initiative that implements Information and Communications Technology (ICT) in schools often in resource-poor settings to enhance the quality and access to teaching and learning resources in a safe, cost effective, and user-friendly way. The program uses the power of mobility, broadband and cloud solutions. Since 2008, we have helped to connect over 500,000 people, students and teachers at remote villages across 10 sub-Saharan countries with technology tools, digital learning resources and new interactive forms of teaching pedagogies.

Furthermore, another testimony that reiterates our efforts in supporting education, is our recently announced "Ericsson Educate" initiative with UNESCO. In response to how the global Covid-19 Pandemic, UNESCO and Ericsson have launched a new portal for teaching Artificial Intelligence (AI) to children. Teaching AI is a learning program, which includes a free, multi-lingual artificial intelligence (AI) skills portal that can be accessed globally by parents and teachers, enabling them to support children and students in home learning environments to learn about AI.

Additionally, we have also launched recently our Digital Lab program in South Africa. The program represents Ericsson's commitment to supporting the UN Sustainable Development Goals – especially Goal #4, with the aim of ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all.

The Ericsson Digital Lab program is an innovative education program targeted towards older children to support them in their first encounters with the world of programming and new technologies. The program started in Gothenburg, Sweden, as

a collaboration with Universeum, a public science centre based in Gothenburg. During 2019-20 the program was expanded to South Africa. We partnered with “Wot-If? Trust” to bring this innovative digital skills program to the youth in Diepsloot, Johannesburg, South Africa and our ambition is to expand this initiative to more young students across Africa.

On the other hand, we also focus on another fundamental goal and that is financial inclusion through the use of digital technology which is an essential element in furthering the economic development of Africa. Mobile money services have become an essential, life-changing tool across the continent, providing access to safe and secure financial services but also to energy, health, education and employment opportunities.

One key example to showcase our efforts in that area is our Ericsson Wallet Platform that allows users to store, transfer and withdraw money; pay merchants and utility providers; and use financial services such as savings and loans.

With connectivity acting as a critical enabler of social and economic change, sustainable technologies that support the SDGs are the need of the hour. According to Ericsson research, ICT solutions could help to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by up to 15% by 2030, amounting to around ten gigatons of CO<sub>2</sub>e - more than the current carbon footprint of the EU and US combined. Examples of areas where the savings can be enabled by ICT solutions are transportation, energy, industries and agriculture. This is reflected in our initiatives such as Ericsson Weather Data and Mixed Reality for Urban Design.

Clearly, the SDGs provide a unique opportunity for interesting discussions that will lead to more multi-sectoral partnerships and opportunities that will help spur progress towards meeting the goals.

### **Partnerships and collaborations for societal impact**

What is now needed is a framework that facilitates harnessing the power of ICTs to foster inclusive socioeconomic development across Africa. However, this bridging of the digital divide – which promises to level the global playing field so Africa can achieve its full potential – requires a well-planned policy and regulatory environment.

A conducive, enabling policy environment that generates regulatory certainty is key to encouraging market development through partnerships, entrepreneurship, job creation and knowledge sharing. Factors like:

- Timely availability of ample, cost-effective and harmonised spectral resources
- Support of long-term stable network regulations that uphold the principle of technology neutrality, stimulate investments and foster infrastructure competition
- Provision of free flow of data, while ensuring data protection, privacy and security regulation

Ericsson Middle East and Africa are constantly looking for opportunities to collaborate and engage with partners across the board to facilitate such policy development to fast tracking digitisation across the African continent and our recent collaboration with the African Telecommunications Union is one clear example.

### **Fostering and empowering local talents**

At Ericsson, we strongly believe in the great competencies of the local talents in each market where we operate and for that we continue to offer our employees opportunities that guide and supports them from a knowledge, competence, and skill development perspective — to foster an innovative, high-impact learning culture focused on continuous development.

Additionally, coaching and mentoring are critical elements of career development at Ericsson. We have best-in-class mentors who guide our people in Africa through every stage of their career, empowering them to seek more learning and growth opportunities.

One of the initiatives we launched in-light of our efforts to supporting young talents is our “Ericsson Graduates Program “, a

program that will offer fresh graduates a chance to join experienced Ericsson staff for on-the-job, online and classroom learning followed by recruitment to join the Ericsson world. The program also engages with young talents from Africa - the change makers - to explore and identify innovative ideas, that reflect and capture the needs of the continent with an ambition to accelerate the African markets' digitalisation journey.

The change makers attend multidisciplinary sessions with Ericsson specialists spanning across technology, business and entrepreneur to empower and enable them to ideate and work on their ideas in a well-rounded approach. Our ambition is to continue with this program and train and hire more fresh graduates in the coming period.

When it comes to empowering young talents and innovation, we can proudly mention the Ericsson Innovation Awards (EIA), a global competition that gives university students the opportunity to turn their ideas into reality by collaborating with EIA mentors. In 2018, a team from Senegal has been selected as the overall winner of the Ericsson Innovation Awards winning an amount of 25,000 Euros for their idea that addresses lack of school labs in Africa. This year we are excited to launch the same competition very soon and we look forward to receiving ideas from young students from Africa and across the world.

### **Accelerating the future**

As we look ahead, it's clear that Africa shows significant promise for economic, technological and infrastructure growth over the coming years. Yet, there are still many challenges we must overcome if we are to deliver real sustainable change for all.

While there are parts of the continent trialling 5G services, majority of countries remain focusing on 3G and 4G as smartphone affordability improves year on year. The development of advanced wireless digital infrastructure is an integral part of Africa's growing economy. Mobile broadband access has proved to be an essential driver of an inclusive information society that integrates digitisation in all critical aspects of life, such as education, transport, health, energy and even homeland security. Never has this been more evident than during the current Covid 19 pandemic.

Ericsson focuses on assuring best performing networks in Africa, while also offering the best digital services and solutions to our customers. Our aim is to create a unique customer experience evolving from networks adopting automation, artificial intelligence and analytics. One of our focus areas also is reducing time-to-market and flexibility in launching services for our customers towards their subscribers. From an operations perspective, we emphasis driving service delivery efficiency through adoption of advanced tools. We will continue our purposeful growth of mobile broadband, fixed wireless access and fintech services so that our service provider partners reach out to further communities across the continent.

### **Our promise to Africa**

Tackling the digital divide, continuing to build a robust ICT infrastructure, promoting sustainability, innovation, education and entrepreneurship will be critical for maximising the role of technology in boosting resilience and inclusive growth in Africa. By achieving that, Africa will experience a paradigm shift on all levels with new game-changers as e-health, e-government and e-education; the African society will accelerate into a much economically advanced nation. However, collaboration between the different stakeholders in the ecosystem becomes even more important than ever to achieve this vision.

Our promise and commitment towards Africa are to always support a world where digitalisation is transforming the ecosystem; enabling sustainable growth, economic development and opening up opportunities for all.

To accelerate our promise to Africa and achieve a true impact, we are looking forward to supporting our customers in their quest, bringing our latest innovation, leveraging our global skill and scale to the benefit of Africa's digital development.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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