ADDRESS BY PRESIDENT CYRIL RAMAPHOSA TO THE 1ST SOUTH AFRICAN DIGITAL ECONOMY SUMMIT

GALLAGHER CONVENTION CENTRE, JOHANNESBURG

FRIDAY 05 JULY 2019

Programme Director, Mr Bruce Whitfield

Gauteng Premier, Mr David Makhura

Former President Kgalema Motlanthe

Minister of Communications and Digital Technologies, Ms Stella Ndabeni-Abrahams

Minister of Post, Telecommunications and New ICTS - the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mr Emery Okundji

Minister of Media, Information and Broadcasting Services - Republic of Zimbabwe, Ms Monica Mutsvangwa

Deputy Minister of Communications, Ms Pinky Kekana

Deputy Chairman of the Presidential Commission on 4IR and Vice Chancellor of the University of Johannesburg, Professor Tshilidzi Marwala

Vice Chancellor of the University of Witwatersrand, Prof. Adam Habib

Vice Chancellor of the University of Fort Hare, Prof. Sakhela Buhlungu

Group Chief Executive Officer of Telkom, Mr Sipho Maseko
Special Guest Speaker - Dr George Friedman

Distinguished guests,

Members of the media

Ladies and gentlemen


It is my singular honour and privilege to participate in this historic, inaugural Digital Economy Summit.

And it is very comforting to know that the Fourth Industrial Revolution has not yet reached the stage where a physical President has been rendered obsolete.

However, beyond Gallagher Estate, I wish to acknowledge our colleagues and friends who are gathered in Rustenburg in the North West this morning and are experiencing this Summit via a holographic broadcast.

You are indeed on the cutting edge of our adventures in the digital universe. You are most welcome!

Between Gallagher Estate and Rustenburg, I am very pleased to be part of this landmark event in the economic and social history of our country.

We are here because of the exceptional work done by the 4th Industrial Revolution Partnership for SA (4IRSA) which has laid the foundations for a deeper national dialogue on our digital future.
In years to come we will reflect on this Summit as having enabled us to imagine the South Africa and for setting us on a path of inclusive and shared growth and development.

At this Summit we will define and redefine our society and explore the future of a digitally enabled economy that is transformative, fair, sustainable and competitive.

Given the spectrum of participants in this Summit today, we are justified in asserting that our nation is forging a digital compact that is a critical contributor to our development as a nation.

This digital compact, with economic justice, social benefit and innovation at its heart, is an important component of the new social compact to which I referred in the recent State of the Nation Address.

Given what we know today about the potential beneficial impacts of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, we must embrace this historic confluence of human insights and engagement, artificial intelligence and technology, to rise to the challenges of poverty, unemployment and inequality.

This revolution must be harnessed and placed at the disposal of the programme of transformation on which our country embarked in 1994.

For the coming decade, this programme of transformation will be focused on growing the South Africa we want through the realisation of seven critical priorities that apply to all sectors of society.

We should look at them through the prism of the 4th industrial revolution and what the 4IR can enable us to do to address these seven priorities.

It will be our collective ambition to harness opportunities offered by the digital revolution to:
- Enhancing Economic transformation and job creation

- Improving our Education outcomes and skills revolution and ensuring healthy nation

- Consolidating the social wage through reliable and quality basic services

- Enhancing Spatial integration, human settlements and local government

- Advancing Social cohesion and safe communities

- Creating a capable, ethical and developmental state

- Working for better Africa and World

These priorities must be our life’s mission and we must set about it life by life; family by family; community by community; city by city, and province by province.

Our pursuit to achieve them must be driven by the insight penned so powerfully by the writer Ben Okri that we cannot expect to remake the world without remaking ourselves as individuals.

The renewal of our society must therefore be innate and internalised, instead of being experienced as remote and imposed.

This moment of renewal in our development trajectory intersects strategically with the advent of the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

We have in a short space of time and rapidly changing technology advanced from being a nation of late bloomers to one of early adopters.
Today, this Summit is a gathering of visionaries and dreamers; people who have immersed themselves in the future and who understand the power of dreaming - and acting to turn those dreams into reality. As Mr Jack Ma told us “the opportunities that everyone cannot see are the real opportunities”.

This is a collective of actors in the public and private sectors, academia and civil society who understand the power of setting their sights on the furthest horizons and are able to rise above the challenge and clutter of the present to create a better future.

This is the spirit we need to harness in the coming decade in which we will be counting down our achievement of the South Africa imagined in our National Development Plan’s Vision 2030.

As government, working with all sectors of society, we have set ourselves the task to pioneer new technologies and take quantum leaps towards the economies of the future, and to drastically improve our production levels.

These quantum leaps can be made real through 4IR whose programmatic implementation is led by our Presidential Commission on the Fourth Industrial Revolution, whose Deputy Chairperson is Prof Tshilidzi Marwala, an internationally acclaimed researcher in the discipline of Artificial Intelligence.

The Commission consists of 30 members from all spheres of society to ensure that all sectors of society contribute to and benefit from this transformative shift in our development.

The Commission is expected to deliver a blueprint and plan to deal with the 4IR and determine areas of development in the short, medium and long-term.
This plan comes with the embedded ambition of positioning South Africa not just as an adopter but a leader of 4IR in the world.

This is doable indeed, considering that earlier this year our country was ranked by the Dell Digital Transformation Index to be among Top 10 countries leading the digital transformation change necessary to compete in the 21st century.

This encourages us to identify more strategic 4IR niches where we can leverage our potential and translate it into tangible economic dividends such as the much-needed jobs.

The Commission will explore and advise on infrastructure and resources, research, technology and innovation, economic and social impact, human capital and future of work among others.

For the purpose of collective and inclusive engagement, the Commission will receive inputs from various stakeholders, and the 4IR working groups and platform across the country.

One such communication platform is 4IRSA and today’s Summit.

To ensure that we are able to make waves, government has committed itself to a skills revolution that will give us the human capital required in the digital economy.

As I undertook in SONA, we are introducing subjects such as coding and data analytics at primary school level to prepare our young people for the jobs of the future.

In 2018 Minister Ndabeni-Abrahams announced the “Building a Capable 4IR Army” capacity development programme to ensure that communities are
equipped to take advantage of new digital technologies, unlock future jobs and drive competitiveness.

One million young people will be trained in data science and related skills by 2030.

Through partnership with MICT SETA, 1 000 young people are being trained on Data Science, Digital Content Production, 3D Printing, Cybersecurity, Drone Piloting, Software Development and Cloud Computing.

With these technological innovations, we will develop systems to improve our resources efficiencies in various sectors such as health, utilities, crime prevention, education, transport and others to ensure better service delivery.

Though various support programmes such as the South Africa Research Chairs initiative (SARChI) and other targeted human capital development initiatives (such as DSIDE), the Department of Science and Innovation (DSI) is building essential capability in all technology areas underpinning the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

These include programmes in data science and analytics, blockchain and distributed ledger technologies, additive manufacturing, artificial intelligence, robotics, quantum technologies.

We have also committed ourselves to providing the infrastructure, including spectrum, will enable our digital ascendancy and bring benefits to all sectors of our economy.

Access to broadband and connectivity is a lever to socio-economic inclusion and an absolute necessity.

Government is alive to this challenge, hence its efforts through the Broadband Connectivity initiative to connect the 22 million unconnected people in the country.
The digital revolution calls on the state itself to be a risk taker; to be entrepreneurial.

The digital revolution is an opportunity to build an entrepreneurial state, where government’s own appetite for risk and innovation inspires large-scale entrepreneurship and unlocks economic potential.

Many global companies doing well now, such as google, enjoyed robust state funding at various points in their lives.

Therefore, an entrepreneurial state should not only provide funding but should also have capacity to determine the strategic direction of entrepreneurship.

An entrepreneurial state should have strong venture capital as one of its elements.

With our eye on the future, we welcome the recent forecast by Accenture that digital technologies can generate R5 trillion in value for South African industry and society in the next decade.

Accenture anticipates that this value will materialise particularly in agriculture, infrastructures, manufacturing and financial services, with R1.4 trillion created by 2026 alone.

However great the opportunities before us may be, we must remain vigilant in ensuring that economic value is derived from sound societal values.

The challenge before us today is to ensure that these technologies and ICT in general continue to be a source for good for everyone across the world.
Therefore, our multilateral relations should also reflect a manifestly enabling posture for the global digital economy, so that we leverage all the opportunities from this technological revolution.

This standoff between China and the US where the technology company Huawei is being used as victim because of its successes is an example of protectionism that will affect our own telecommunications sector, particularly the efforts to roll out the 5G network, causing a setback on other networks as well.

Telecom companies got together and wrote me a letter saying that this tussle happening between China and US around the company called Huawei is going to hurt us, because we can’t go to 5G and only Huawei can lead us to 5G.

We support a company that is going to take our country and indeed the world to better technologies, and that is 5G. We cannot afford to have our economy to be held back because of this fight. We are pleased that at the G20 Summit, China and US were able to meet and they said they will relax some of the constraints being imposed on Huawei, so that it can continue to deal with other various companies.

As we prepare for the deliberations of this Summit, let me firstly say how proud I am to see this particular battalion of our 4IR army.

You have distinguished yourselves individually and collectively as icons of excellence and your own achievement shows what is possible when individuals follow their passions and interests in a society that makes it possible for you to live your dreams.

Secondly, you are here as thought leaders and implementation leaders.
And the nation - from Rustenburg to Rapitsi and Riversdale - is positively anticipating your leadership and your shaping of our better future.

It is my wish that the legacy of this Summit will be a profound contribution to inclusive prosperity in our country into the future, and an equally profound contribution to a better Africa and a better world.

I wish you all of the best with this historic national conversation.

Thank you.

Issued by: The Presidency of the Republic of South Africa

Pretoria

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