

## Cheaper access to internet is top of ATU's agenda

Over the last decade, the global ICT landscape especially in Africa has experienced a rise in connectivity and access to online media. OTTs (Over-The-Top), a class of real-time communications solutions that operate over the internet and is often used to reduce communications expenses particularly by consumers and business users, has been one of the key contributors to this growth.



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This together with the acceleration of the deployment of broadband mobile networks has also led to a steady increase in internet penetration.

African ICT regulators however continue to face several issues with OTTs. To resolve some of these issues and negotiate compromise as the continent seeks to map itself in the global ICT community, the African Telecommunications Union (ATU), a specialised agency of the African Union, charged with enhancing the development of the continent's ICT infrastructure last month held a special regional webinar forum to facilitate this engagement.

The forum which ran under the theme “Cooperation and collaboration frameworks: building sustainable partnerships with OTTs” brought together key regulators and private sector players.

Addressing the question of the role of the OTTs in connecting the unconnected and the nature of solutions OTTs could provide to Africa, forum participants agreed that indeed OTTs have both social and economic benefits. Through OTT platforms and social media networks, the African people are today able to access affordable content and services. This has especially gained more ground with the COVID-19 pandemic that has forced many institutions to operate remotely.

Founding partner and principal consultant at Cenerva, Prof. H Sama Nwana took the forum to remind tax authorities in the continent to ensure that regulatory action does not negatively impact on the availability and affordability of digital services.

“The Digital Economy sector is a growth engine and key ally to governments particularly as we look towards the post Covid-19 period, not a cash cow”, cautioned Prof. Nwana who also noted that taxing OTTs may lead to the adoption of regressive taxes that have the potential of reducing incentives for investments.

## **The issue of privacy remains**

On the other hand however, the huge amount of personal and sensitive information generated and collected every day by internet companies through OTT platforms which are in many cases characterised and used for different purposes has raised global privacy concerns. The protection of online privacy and personal data of internet users has now become an urgent need recognised by nearly all governments and international organisations.

“There is need to prioritise and accelerate digital transformation in Africa while also ensuring the establishment of effective policies and legal frameworks to combat the misuse of online platforms,” said Souhila Amazouz, senior policy officer at African Union Commission.

With Africa’s telecom industry growing exponentially, the necessity to foster a symbiotic relationship between telcos, Mobile Network Operators and OTTs therefore causing the need and possibility to have global collaborative framework for OTTs, also informed the forum’s agenda given that OTTs drive user demand for broadband access and for data.

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