DRIVING AN INCLUSIVE DIGITAL ECONOMY

<u>Interview with Uganda Communications Commission Executive Director, Hon Nyombi Thembo</u>

1. **How is UCC contributing to Uganda's growth as a digital economy?**

   As the regulator of the communications sector, UCC is mandated to drive the development of a modern, dynamic ICT industry in line with national policies, laws, and regulations. The Government of Uganda has long recognised ICT as a critical enabler of socio-economic growth and therefore prioritised its development.

   Thanks to the favourable legal, policy, and regulatory environment, plus the strong investment climate that government has fostered, the ICT sector continues to expand steadily. It is currently growing at an average rate of 14.8% per year and contributes about 9% to Uganda's GDP. According to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), a 10% increase in broadband penetration can yield up to 1.4% growth in GDP, underscoring the transformative power of ICT in driving national development.

   This is in line with our vision - "an inclusive digital economy" - where quality ICT services are accessible and affordable to all irrespective of gender, social status, geographical or other barriers.

2. **What regulatory reforms has UCC introduced to support innovation, fair competition, and improved service quality in the ICT sector?**

   UCC implements policies and strategies that foster a supportive investment climate and encourage digital innovation. One of the key initiatives is the e-Booster Programme, which provides funding and technical support to develop and scale digital solutions addressing everyday challenges.
   On fair competition, UCC's mandate is to balance the interests of both operators and consumers. Ensuring a level playing field promotes innovation, improves service quality, and keeps prices competitive. To strengthen this regulatory function, UCC recently commissioned a study to assess the state of competition in the sector. Conducted by

Salience Consulting, the comprehensive market definition and market power assessment examines market structures, identifies key players and their services, and analyses barriers to competition. The findings will help enhance competitiveness, foster a healthier business environment, and ensure that Uganda's telecom sector continues to grow in a fair and sustainable manner.

To protect consumers, UCC conducts regular quality of service assessments to ensure that operators meet standards for reliability, transparency, and fair service delivery.

3. **As Uganda expands its digital infrastructure, how is UCC addressing issues of affordability and rural connectivity?**

   UCC drives collaborative efforts with multiple stakeholders to reduce the cost of ICT products, services, and devices. As a result, internet pricing in Uganda has decreased by 50% over the last three years to an average of USD 1.35 (or UGX 5,000) for 1.5GB mobile internet bundle.

   To reduce the cost even further, UCC is working on the following strategies:

   a) Attracting new players into the market through a favorable regulatory regime.

   b) Promoting innovation among operators to come up with cost effective broadband delivery mechanisms and attractive data packages for consumers.

   c) Collaborations with industry stakeholders to continuously review the supply side determinants of internet pricing.

   d) Cross sector collaboration working with other sectors to build demand through supporting development of e-services.

   e) Continuously lobbying government to reduce direct taxes on broadband.

   But having connectivity/access or even lower internet costs yet being unable to afford the devices themselves is self-defeating.

   UCC works to reduce the cost of devices in partnership with relevant stakeholders, particularly government and the private sector. The establishment of local device assembly plants (two factories in Uganda so far) is a step in the right direction.

   In addition, telecom companies are implementing device ownership schemes targeting various categories of consumers.

   Furthermore, UCC/UCUSAF has been implementing a pilot project to distribute free smart devices to low-income households. Over 10,000 devices have so far been distributed across the country.

   UCC is also engaging the government, through the Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development, to reduce taxes on

entry-level smart devices so as to make them affordable for low-income earners.

Through such interventions, the price of smart devices has overtime reduced to approximately UGX 140,000. However, UCC is engaging stakeholders to get it lowered even further.

Meanwhile, to enhance rural connectivity, UCC requires telecom operators to ensure 90% geographical coverage within five years. The remaining 10% is covered through UCUSAF's infrastructure funding program.

4. **How is UCC safeguarding consumer rights in an era of increasing cyber-risks and digital transactions?**

UCC is safeguarding consumer rights through a combination of strong regulatory enforcement, cybersecurity readiness, digital literacy initiatives, and effective consumer-protection mechanisms.

To strengthen national cybersecurity, UCC operates the Uganda Computer Emergency Response Team (UG-CERT), which monitors and responds to cyber threats in real time, issues alerts, and coordinates incident response across sectors. We also set and enforce cybersecurity guidelines and minimum-security standards to ensure that telecoms, digital platforms, and service providers protect user data and network integrity.

To protect consumers in digital transactions, UCC conducts regular quality-of-service assessments to ensure that operators meet standards for reliability, transparency, and fair service delivery. On mobile money and digital financial services, we work closely with the Bank of Uganda, telecom operators, and other stakeholders to curb fraud, enforce SIM-card registration guidelines, and strengthen the safety of digital transactions.

UCC also prioritises digital literacy and public awareness. We run nationwide campaigns on safe internet use, online fraud prevention, data protection, and responsible social media behaviour. Our child online protection initiatives, including platform and community awareness campaigns, ensure that young users stay safe online. In addition, our consumer help desk and toll-free line give citizens a direct channel to report service issues, fraud, unfair billing, or harmful content.

Finally, through UCUSAF, UCC expands connectivity to underserved communities, bridging the digital divide. Greater digital inclusion means more awareness, safer usage, and better access to the consumer-protection services that keep Ugandans secure in the digital age.

5. **What role is the Commission playing in promoting ICT skills, local content creation, and youth innovation?**
   UCC conducts extensive digital skilling programmes nationwide, including targeted initiatives for women, youth, persons with disabilities, the elderly, and the informal sector. To strengthen local content development, the Commission introduced the Uganda Film Festival, the Content Development Support Programme, and the Regional Film Competition—initiatives designed to promote excellence and professionalism in Uganda's audio-visual industry. We further boosted local content by introducing broadcast quotas to ensure greater visibility and market for Ugandan productions.

   One of UCC's flagship initiatives for youth empowerment is the National Conference on Communications (NCC), where we partner with universities to identify, nurture, and support tech innovations. Beyond this, UCC is actively championing the growth of Uganda's digital creative economy by supporting content creators, promoting responsible and culturally relevant local content, and expanding broadband infrastructure to increase access and opportunity. Through these efforts, our goal is to equip young Ugandans with the skills, platforms, and a safe digital environment they need to innovate, create, and thrive in an inclusive digital ecosystem.

6. **How is UCC collaborating with private-sector players to advance national development goals such as Vision 2040?**

UCC collaborates closely with private-sector players to advance national development goals, including Vision 2040, by fostering a conducive regulatory environment that supports investment, innovation, and competitiveness. We work with telecom operators, broadcasters, tech companies, postal and courier firms, digital platforms, and educational institutions to extend quality communication services across the country.

Through UCUSAF, for example, we co-fund rural connectivity projects with telecom operators, support innovation hubs, and expand digital infrastructure in underserved areas. We also partner with industry players to strengthen national cybersecurity readiness, promote digital literacy, and grow Uganda's local content ecosystem.

These partnerships ensure that the private sector continues to serve as a major engine of Uganda's socio-economic transformation, helping to deliver a secure, inclusive, and innovation-driven digital future aligned with the goals of Digital Uganda Vision, the Digital Transformation Roadmap and ultimately Vision 2040.