

Policy Statement delivered at the Monrovia City Hall at the one-day ICT and Telecommunication Policy Forum

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Fellow Cabinet Ministers and other Officials of Government, Distinguished Representatives of Civil Society Organizations, Members of the Draft Committee of the ICT and Telecommunication Policy, Representatives of Service Providers, Commissioners of the Liberia Telecommunication Authority, Representatives of Institutions of Higher Learning, Officials and Staff of the Ministry of Posts & Telecommunications, other invited Guests, Proxies and other Dignitaries, Members of the Fourth Estate, Ladies and Gentlemen;

As Government drives its national reform agenda to ensure the well-being of its citizenry as a post-conflict priority, it has become imperative that every sub-sector of the economy presents a clear plan and strategy on how its programs will contribute to the socio-economic well-being of the nation and its people. The reform process of the ICT and Telecommunication sector of Liberia is therefore a manifestation of that objective.

Distinguished colleagues, sector actors and my dear audience, it is important to give you an overview of the status of the ICT and Telecommunication sector.

In order to adequately provide a substantive overview, we need to know **Where We Are as a Sector, recap the events on How We Got Here as a Nation and then establish the necessary roadmap to navigate us to Where We as a People and Government Want to Go from here**". This is our passion; this is our desire and this is our devotion and calling.

Generally, our remote and immediate past as a sector has been less satisfactory, yet the path to our destiny remains littered with challenges. We need national backbone that will make communication faster, easier and reliable. Yes, we need communication services that will be available in the towns, villages, and hamlets of Liberia at an affordable cost for all of our peoples.

Prior to the civil war in Liberia, there were efforts to advance the provision of services nationwide. However, the infrastructures and the distribution mechanisms were

inadequate to effectively serve the nation. Monrovia and the provincial capital were the only areas that had access to fixed telephone lines. By December 1989, there were 25, 000 lines serving 2.5 million people with most part of rural Liberia not connected. All infrastructures in Liberia including those in the Telecom Sector were destroyed.

As normalcy gradually returned to Liberia our Telecom sector was either locked up under monopoly or subjected it to a host of entry barriers. These barriers ranged from exclusivity rights to the lack of political will as well as the failure to open up the communication market to competition.

Without a clear national vision, dozens of acceptance “notices” were issued to potential mobile operators. Not only did those “notices” seeking to committing the sector to accommodate potential operators far exceed the maximum number of players that the market could have absorbed, the process left the sector lopsided and even failed to establish the fair value of spectrum as one of the scarce natural resources. Admittedly, the process was at the expense of the nation but in favour of the operators!

The signals were alarming and some of our partners including the World Bank had to intervene to help mitigate the otherwise vexing problem. Eventually, three new Mobile operators were admitted in the sector adding to Lone Star, thereby breaking the monopoly.

Against this backdrop, Government initiated sector reform with the following objectives as part of a comprehensive reform package:

1. Establish new regulatory regime in the sector to address undervalued license;
2. Promote the acceleration of services to un-served and underserved areas
3. Induce investment in the sector
4. Establish a Board of Trustees to oversee the management of the Universal Access Program and the Universal Access Fund;
5. Put in place a mechanism for the divestiture of the resuscitated LTC by 2011.

5. Establish the framework to integrate GOL offices/systems (e-Govt) nationwide;
6. Encourage the development of information super-highway (Internet Backbone) for globalization and convergence
7. Accelerate the creation and management of the domain name for Liberia;
8. Establish an Execution Coordinating Committee to oversee, manage, monitor and evaluate ICT projects and programs to ensure access
9. Represent Liberia at all ICT and Telecommunications policy matter

Distinguished audience, the enactment of the 2007 Telecommunication Act leading to the establishment of the Liberia Telecommunication Authority as a permanent regulatory authority of the sector is in pursuit of these policy objectives.

However, the commonly asked question is: **“Does the LTA not usurp the Functions of the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications?”**

The answer is no! Among other things, LTA shall do the following:

- Standardize the existing licenses of unequal terms and conditions for operators providing the same service and to redeem the fair value of spectrum
- License new telecom operators in the context of the policy
- Define standards for promoting universal access
- Analyse market trend and provide update to the Ministry of Posts & Telecommunications
- Ensure that there exist a technically adequate and economically efficient interconnection regulations
- Promote fair competitive environment
- Ensure that public interest is protected
- Represent the country at all functions, national and international, on regulatory matters.

In other words, this policy clearly delineates the roles and functions of the various actors in the ICT and Telecommunication sector of Liberia and embodies pertinent

considerations geared toward maximizing the socio-economic benefits of the sector for the generality of the Liberian people. Key among these are the fundamental concepts of Universal Access (UnA) and Universal Services (UnS), in line with Government's overall policy of raising the standard of living of our people; those policy objectives provide the platform for LTA to implement.

Fellow compatriots, we also designate Liberia Telecommunication Corporation (LTC or Libtelco) as the National Operator. Among other responsibilities, LTC which will soon launch its pilot project to provide fixed wireless phone, fax and broadband internet services will also be required to provide secured network for government communication for our nation.

The goal of this policy is to integrate telecommunications and ICT services into overall developmental objectives, priorities, and programs to facilitate the implementation of our National PRS objectives.

The policy outlines strategies to ensure that ICT and Telecommunications services and systems are people-centered, universally accessible and cost-effective as well as helping to open new outlet of opportunities for career development and empowerment for our citizens.

Mindful of the dynamic nature of the telecommunications and ICT sector, we have set the national ICT and Telecommunications policy guidelines and objectives for five (5) years, covering 2009 to 2014.

The rationale for us as a nation to set up the 5-year program is to provide a comprehensive roadmap to support the World Summit on Information Society (WSIS) Target to connect the world by 2015. We can not however be successful in implementing the WSIS resolution without firstly connecting our people and then connecting our people to institutions as well as connecting institutions to institutions.

Hence, the first three (3) years of the FIVE-YEAR plan is concentrated on making the Poverty Reduction Strategy achievable, using ICT and telecommunication services as the driving force. We believe that an implementable multi-year plan will not only link

Liberia to the rest of the world but it will also accelerate development through effective allocations of national resources for socio-economic development. We shall collaborate with our colleagues at the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Ministry of Health and Social Welfare, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of National Security, to name a few, with support from the Ministry of Planning and Economic Affairs to ensure that the various e-applications and services that culminate into e-government work. Together, we will create the environment to accelerate the demand and make it citizens and users friendly. Through these services, application forms for Driver License, Birth and Death Certificates, Passport, Business Registration, and general inquiry about any given public service will be enhanced.

We must move away from papers, less papers to a paperless society in governmental communication strategy. We will also give our support to LTA to implement these policy objectives for the general good of the people. We will keep working to ensure that there is an active link between this policy with the appropriate action plan that shall help translate government's prescription for basic communications services requirement for its citizens and residents.

We shall create the enabling environment to give real-time meaning of information technology to our people. With that environment in place, a citizen in Buutuo in Nimba County or a citizen in Weasua, Lofa County or a citizen in Barclayville, Grand Kru County will have access to basic ICT services and relate to businesses, government offices and others with a constant but a reliable feedback assured. This is the new level of services that the policy seeks to provide. These services cover the four pillars of the National Poverty Reduction Strategy:

1. Enhancing National Security
2. Strengthening Governance & Rule of Law
3. Rehabilitating Infrastructure and Delivering Basic Services
4. Revitalization of the Economy

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, today climaxes the consultations process aimed at soliciting the inputs of stakeholders including institutions of higher learning, regulatory staff, service providers, civil society organizations, Government Ministries, Agencies, and Law Makers (particularly representing the Committee on Telecommunications) as well as Superintendents and Development Superintendents towards the formulation of our national ICT and Telecommunication Policy. We are therefore honoured by your participation and like to thank you for your interest in seeing the sector move forward.

Let me thank all institutions and professional bodies that took up their time to critique the draft ICT & Telecommunication document. Your inputs justified the reason why Government initiated the process of consultations. Consultation is a true asset in formulating a comprehensive policy framework for every other Sector and the people of our nation. Details and analysis regarding inputs received constitute the one-item agenda for this forum being convened today.

For those of you that did not send any inputs, I am of the conviction that the document represents your aspirations, wishes and goal for our country. There is no doubt that we are all in full gear to create the enabling environment for the growth and development of the ICT and Telecommunication sector.

Let me recognize the technical guidance offered by the World Bank and the provisional inputs made by our professional friends from Georgia Tech in helping us reach this far. Their inputs were invaluable and strengthened the work of the Draft Committee.

Lest I forget, this policy provides the unwavering principle and position of Government requiring that all practices and procedures in the sector, be it the role of service providers or that of the regulator must at all times be credible, reliable and transparent as we endeavour to provide services for our people and move our nation forward.

I thank you.