



'DIGITAL INNOVATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT'

WORLD TELECOMMUNICATION INFORMATION AND SOCIETY DAY



An ICT Lab at Kololo SS supported by UCUSAF

Celebrated every 17th day of May since 1969, World Telecommunication Information and Society Day (WTISD) also marks the anniversary of the founding of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), the United Nations specialised agency for ICTs. Uganda has been a member of the ITU since 1963, and is a member of the ITU Council, representing Region D (Africa).

Commemorated this year under the theme, 'Digital Innovation for Sustainable Development,' this day aims to help raise awareness of the possibilities that the use of the Internet and other Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) can bring to societies and economies, as well as of ways to bridge the digital divide.

Digital innovation is pivotal in driving sustainable development across various sectors, including education, healthcare, agriculture, and governance, more so in developing countries such as Uganda. This day, therefore, resonates with the Government of Uganda's agenda of socio-economic transformation that, among others, prioritizes ICTs as one of the key transformation pillars.

At policy level, the Ministry of ICT and National Guidance developed a comprehensive National ICT Policy and Strategy that provides a roadmap for leveraging ICTs to drive socio-economic development. This policy framework lays out strategies for improving ICT infrastructure, promoting digital literacy, and fostering innovation ecosystems that support the realisation of National Development Plan III and Vision 2040.

The government has invested in expanding ICT infrastructure across the country, including broadband internet connectivity and mobile networks. Initiatives such as the National Backbone Infrastructure (NBI) project have significantly improved internet access, especially in rural areas, thereby enabling more people to benefit from digital services and opportunities. This has been achieved through the establishment of Internet Points of Presence, as well as ICT infrastructure in areas deemed economically unviable by investors. The goal of these interventions is to improve



ICT Lab with Assistive devices for PWDs at Mbale School for the deaf



Through UCUSAF, more than 1,000 government secondary and tertiary institutions have been supported with both solar and grid powered computer laboratories to boost teaching and learning outcomes. The same programme is being considered for government primary schools.

the quality of service and experience in unserved and unserved areas.

The National Information Technology Authority of Uganda (NITA-U), under the Ministry of ICT and National Guidance, has implemented the National Data Transmission Backbone Infrastructure and e-Government Infrastructure Project (NBI/EGI) covering over 12,000 km of fibre optic cable across the country. As a result, all major towns have been connected to an optical fibre cable-based network, while ministries, departments, and agencies of government (MDAs) have been connected to the e-Government network. This has fostered the streamlining of e-Government services, enhancing efficiency in service delivery, and reducing bureaucratic hurdles.

The government, through the Ministry of ICT and National Guidance, has also established Business Process Outsourcing services to accelerate economic development through ICT entrepreneurship and expansion of private sector business opportunities.

Recognizing the importance of digital literacy for inclusive development, the government has implemented various programmes to enhance digital skills among its citizens. Interventions such as the National ICT Initiatives Support Programme (NIISP) and the Presidential Digital Talent Programme (PDTP) aim to equip youth with the necessary skills to participate in the digital economy.

The Uganda Communications Commission, whose vision is an inclusive economy, has implemented programmes under the Uganda Communications Universal Services and Access Fund (UCUSAF) aimed at bridging the digital divide in unserved and underserved communities. The beneficiaries of these projects include women, youth, and the elderly to empower them to improve their livelihoods through ICT usage. UCUSAF has not only empowered consumers in underserved and unserved communities with digital skills as an empowerment strategy, but it has also

distributed grid and solar-powered smart phone devices to at least 10,762 households in 63 out of Uganda's 135 districts as one of the measures of increasing access and usage of ICTs to foster digital inclusion.

The Uganda Government has further taken steps to support the growth of startups and innovation-driven enterprises by providing grants and support to innovative ventures, fostering a conducive environment for entrepreneurship through various initiatives and funding opportunities under the ministries of ICT and National Guidance, and Science, Technology, and Innovation.

Through the NIISP and in partnership with the Uganda Institute of Information and Communication Technology (UICT), an Innovation Hub was established at the UICT premises in Nakawa. The hub serves as a catalyst for home-grown digital solutions and aims to catalyze entrepreneurship and digital employment across Uganda.

Through key programmes such as Data Ladies, Leap Programme, MTN ACE Programme, 3D Computer Animation, Founder's Institute Training, ICT Bootcamp, and EduTech, alongside other initiatives which include digital skilling and training, mentorship and business development support, the Innovation Hub has become a significant player in the ICT innovation ecosystem.

The Ministry of ICT and National Guidance has also supported the establishment of regional hubs with modern ICT equipment, comprehensive operational manuals, and a dedicated team of qualified staff in public universities at Kabale, Soroti, and Muni. This is aimed at decentralizing opportunities while integrating a diversity of ideas and innovations from across the country.

To ensure that ICT interventions are evidence-based, UCC promotes and facilitates research through its department of ICT and Research. One of the department's flagship events is the National Conference on Communications (NCC).

Since its inception in 2010, the National Conference on Communications (NCC) has served as a dynamic hub where students, researchers, application developers, and industry experts can unearth fresh research opportunities, collaboratively brainstorm on solutions, and engage in meaningful dialogue about challenges and prospects in the communications sector. Eight notable conferences have so far been held in collaboration with prequalified academic institutions.

Lastly, in a bid to foster the uptake of ICTs, the government has integrated ICT into the education sector to enhance learning outcomes and prepare students for the digital age. Apart from incorporating ICTs in the academic curriculum at higher learning levels, there has also been significant strides in retooling ICT teachers in government aided academic institutions to bridge the teacher-student ratio.

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Students showcasing their innovations at NCC

and tertiary institutions have been supported with both solar and grid powered computer laboratories to boost teaching and learning outcomes. The same programme is being considered for government primary schools.

Further through UCUSAF, efforts have been made to develop and implement various initiatives aimed at ensuring universal access and usage of ICTs, specifically targeting special interest groups such as Persons with Special Needs (PSNs). Support to PSNs has taken the form of digital skilling, provision of assistive technology for learners, and collaboration with the National Union of Disabled Persons of Uganda (NUDIPU) to create an observatory to support research and policy makers to make informed decisions about persons with disabilities.

Despite the progress so far registered, much more remains to be done to address the current bottlenecks in fully harnessing digital innovations for sustainable development. Addressing the digital divide, promoting digital literacy, and ensuring cybersecurity are key to fostering safe and productive uptake of ICTs. To that end, stakeholder collaboration is highly recommended to ensure that Uganda reaps the full benefits of the digital revolution.



Digital skilling exercise in Northern Uganda



Some of the beneficiaries of the smartphone devices provided by UCUSAF project