Conference on shaping an environmentally sustainable and inclusive digital future in Africa

Opening remarks by

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H.E Dr. Yeshurun Alemayehu, State Minister, Ministry of Innovation and Technology, Ethiopia

Mr. Oliver Chinganya, Director, Africa Center of Statistics, ECA

Ladies and Gentlemen

Good morning,

It is my distinct honour and pleasure to welcome you this morning to this conference focusing on shaping an environmentally sustainable and inclusive digital future in Africa. Allow me to begin by thanking H.E Dr. Yeshurun Alemayehu, State Minister, Ministry of Innovation and Technology, Ethiopia for honouring our event with his presence. I would like to also thank Mr. Oliver and the ECA team for co-organizing the session with UNCTAD. Today we will discuss key findings for Africa from UNCTAD's Digital Economy Report 2024, which highlights the urgent need for sustainable strategies throughout the life cycle of digitalization.

The process of adoption and implementation of digital technology in our everyday activities is taking place in parallel with growing concerns related to the depletion of raw materials, water stress, climate change, pollution and waste generation. The rapid pace and expanding scope of digitalization make it

increasingly important to understand the relationship between digitalization and environmental sustainability.

Over the past two decades, the number of Internet users has jumped from 1 billion to 5.4 billion. With this surge, the demand for smartphones has more than doubled, with annual shipments rising from 500 million to about 1.2 billion in the past decade. While African countries are still lagging behind considerably in terms of digitalization, the number of Internet users surged from 15 million in 2005 to more than 400 million in 2023, according to ITU.

This digital growth comes with a growing environmental footprint, with a greater demand for raw materials, water and energy, higher emissions of greenhouse gases and more waste at the end-of-life phase.

The production phase of digitalization has the greatest combined negative impact on the environment. For example, a two-kilogram computer requires 800 kilograms of raw materials. The production of digital materials requires minerals such as aluminum, cobalt, copper, lithium, manganese, natural graphite and nickel, whose reserves some of which are highly concentrated in Africa. However, the unsustainable exploitation of Africa's natural resources is making trouble. Nature is issuing red alerts, as evidenced by the many catastrophes we are experiencing today.

The rising demand for digital devices is exerting pressure on the extraction of raw materials, contributing to Africa's growing carbon footprint through energy-intensive data centres, and escalating the generation of e-waste. Additionally, the rapid increase in electronic devices like phones and computers has led to a rise in electronic waste (e-waste). While per capita e-waste in Africa is low compared to

global figures, more than 60% comes from imports, placing pressure on waste management systems and increasing environmental degradation.

The continent has an opportunity to establish robust recycling industries. By creating systems for proper disposal and recycling of e-waste, we can recover valuable materials like metals and reduce environmental harm. African countries should establish strict regulations for e-waste management, including enforcing producer responsibility schemes where manufacturers are accountable for the lifecycle of their products. To fully reap the benefits of the digital economy, African countries should work together to build ecosystems that foster digital integration at both regional and continental levels. Countries that export critical minerals should be able to decide on the best agreements for them, based on their development interests. By addressing environmental impacts early, African countries can simultaneously grow their digital economies and become leaders in sustainable development through innovative waste management and resource-efficient practices.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

UNCTAD and ECA co-organized this event to highlight the urgent need for systematic shifts in the ICT sector to protect our planet and ensure the well-being of all. Our aim is to explore ways to achieve economic prosperity while conserving our planet and promoting intergenerational equity. Additionally, the event seeks to generate actionable policy recommendations and foster strategic collaborations to address the dual challenges of digitalization and environmental sustainability in Africa.

As I conclude, there is a need for new business models, policies and strategies that maximize the positive impact of digitalization on sustainability while minimizing the negative impacts. Digital development should be assessed in light of several critical challenges:

- The need to reduce overall consumption and optimize the use of scarce resources without jeopardizing the prospects of future generations.
- The need to curtail carbon emission and tackle the climate crisis.
- And the need to turn the accumulation of digitalization-related waste into an opportunity for recovery, recycling and reuse in a circular economy.

I thank you all for participating in this conference, which I am sure will be fundamental for the development of robust recommendations on shaping an environmentally sustainable and inclusive digital future.

I wish you a fruitful event.