African Internet Governance Forum 2021: Call for session / workshop proposals

Introduction:

The 10th African Internet Governance Forum (AfIGF) will for the second-year running be held virtually from 22-24 November 2021 as the continent continues to respond to the global COVID-19 pandemic. The theme of AfIGF-2020 was: *Unlocking Africa's Digital Opportunities During and Post COVID-19*.

The Multi-Stakeholder Advisory Group (MAG) is therefore opening **the call** for the submission of main and plenary session proposals for the 2021 AfIGF programme. Stakeholders should submit these proposals by no later than 31 August 2021.

Text of the call:

The MAG shall this year accept and review proposals that fall under two broad categories, namely:

1. The main thematic focus areas

Session proposals under this thematic stream should demonstrate alignment to the foundational areas outlined in Digital Transformation Strategy for Africa 2020-2030 (DTS) whose overall objective is to harness digital technologies and innovation to transform societies and economies to promote Africa's integration, generate inclusive economic growth, stimulate job creation, break the digital divide, and eradicate poverty for the continent's socio-economic development.

Applicants are encouraged to align sessions to some of the key recommendations outlined in the AfIGF 2020 report.

Below is a list of the foundational areas, with short outlines of key issues in the DTS and recommended implementable actions from last year's convening. Proposals can either build up as an assessment of some of the key issues highlighted or identify new areas of intervention within the foundational areas over the past year.

- **Enabling environment, policy, and regulation:** The DTS emphasises that public policy, legal and regulatory frameworks need to be up-to-date, flexible, incentive-based, and market-driven to support digital transformation across sectors and the continent's regions. Key policy issues that were on the agenda of last year's AfIGF included exploring data protection policy making and implementation, consideration for Community Networks and the determining factors such as electricity supply, spectrum allocation and the existing regulatory environment. Key policy recommendations included the need for the harmonization of policies, upholding multi-stakeholder participation and representation coherence across at all sectors.

- **Digital infrastructure:** The DTS highlights that affordable, accessible, and reliable infrastructure is the foundation to achieving an inclusive digital transformation. Key issues discussed at AfIGF 2020 included the financing of infrastructure to reduce the costs to connectivity and the need for transparency in the use of universal funds and development of alternative connectivity plans such as community networks. Some of the key recommendations included the need to unify broadband infrastructure to ensure a reliable and affordable internet connection and deployment of "white-space" technologies to promote access to rural areas. Another key recommendation was the need to improve accessibility by focusing on progress in the development of services in line with the needs of target populations.

- **Digital skills and human capacity:** The DTS highlights that investing in digital capabilities of citizens underpinned by both technological and human capacity offers the most robust strategy for the future. AfIGF 2020 acknowledged the importance of digital literacy and skills development to digital transformation in reaching inclusivity, gender balanced and sustainability in the digital

environment. Some of the recommendations in this regard included the need to invest in building digital skills among the youth in response to the evolving cyber issues and ensure increased utilisation of technologies by the young people to facilitate their participation in social, economic and political developments, and discourse.

- **Digital innovation and entrepreneurship:** The DTS identifies innovation as being at the heart of the digital revolution which is driving social, commercial, and political change across the continent. It notes that digital entrepreneurship takes advantage of innovations in their various forms as hardware, software, applications, and networking fields. AfIGF2020 acknowledged that the use of Artificial Intelligence on the continent is an economic opportunity which would develop the digital economy and increase inclusion across different layers of society. Key recommendations of the AfIGF 2020 included calls for states to understand how evolving technologies have created new business models and value and the need for careful consideration of the digital taxes to ensure that they do not impede digital economy growth. In addition, AfIGF 2020 also recommended the strengthening of regional collaboration among states.

- **Universal access and meaningful connectivity:** This category of proposals must explore the status of information and communications technology (ICT) and internet infrastructure for universal coverage during the pandemic. It can also assess the establishment of mechanisms for regulating market competition to support lower pricing and encourage diversity; the promotion of local access initiatives, such as community networks, for enabling the increased connection of marginalised, unserved, or underserved communities.
- The provision of access by private actors (e.g. big tech companies) raises questions for policymakers to consider, as does the gatekeeping power these companies have been entrusted with. Policymakers have so far done very little to approach and engage with tech companies to address these challenges. Policy makers are urged to Develop regulatory and policy frameworks to govern provision of access, protect personal data, combting disinformaton, de-risk market concentration and promoting home grown businesses.

2. Other focus areas

Session proposals under this thematic stream should focus on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on internet and technology use and governance on the continent.

The thematic clusters under this category are derived from areas outlined by the MAG of the Global internet governance forum. Proposals can be aligned to the following categories with the intention of either identifying gaps or amplifying best practices, to inform recommendations for better development, use and governance of the internet and technologies during the pandemic.

- **COVID-19 and the digital economy:** With the digital shift of work, business and trade, the COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the importance of digitally enabling every citizen, business, and government by ensuring universal access to digital tools and services. This category of proposals must assess the continent's economic growth or potential under the current environment with a focus on catalytic issues including but not limited to digital infrastructure, digital government platforms, digital financial services, digital skills, and digital entrepreneurship. Proposals may also assess trends emerging with digital incubators and start-ups, tech hubs and data centres and their potential contribution to the digital economy.

- **The impact of COVID-19 on social inclusion and human rights:** The pandemic has amplified the importance of internet rights and freedoms with the shift of citizens' daily communication, education, transacting and access to basic services from face-to-face interaction to online. This category of proposals must explore the extent to which the various states, private sector actors and other stakeholders have been implementing appropriate measures to safeguard digital rights and freedoms through laws, policies or practices that unduly limit them.

- **Other relevant topics within the context of Africa:** This could include proposals around data policies, Africa Single Digital Market, emerging technologies such as Artificial intelligence among others.