Address by the Honourable Minister of Communications, Ms Dina Pule, MP, at the Innovation Africa Summit, 05 October 2012

Programme Director and Rector and Vice-Chancellor of the University of Western Cape, Professor Brian O' Connell

Ministers and Deputy Ministers,

Captains of industry,

Heads of academia,

Managing Director of Africa Brains, Mr John Glassey

Government and other officials,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It goes without saying that innovation is at the centre of engendering successful change in addressing major issues, whether they are societal, technical, scientific or commercial. The big question is how we channel and harness innovation to address the major challenges we face as a nation in South Africa.

Many small innovations operating in isolation have a very difficult task in making the desired impact on the many priorities we face in our society.

This then means that we need to focus on the nexus between 'creativity' i.e. unfettered free thought and the structures or 'architecture' needed to harness the inbuilt creativity that exists in many, many people whether they have high levels of formal education or not.

History abounds with examples of those who had no specialist training solving the major problems facing various aspects of science, business, government and the like. We should not forget that it was a humble carpenter who solved the problem of longitude through the development of an accurate clock.

Harrison's clocks, which now reside in Greenwich, serve as a clear reminder that innovation need not only address significant issues, but for impact, innovation needs to operate within a system i.e. an architecture.

Apple founder Steve Jobs famously said this of market research:

"You can't just ask customers what they want then try to give it to them. By the time you get it built, they'll want something new."

Jobs reinvented whole industries. Before the appearance of the iPod in 2001, there was little interest in MP3 music players.

The development of the iPod, iPhone and iPad into cult products are now legendary. Of course it has been recently discovered that Apple does conduct market research. It is this kind of innovation which we now seek to emulate, an organized chaos, if you will.

The major issue we face revolves around equity – equity in opportunity, equity in capacity building, socio-economic equity, human equity, gender equity and the like.

One thing that has become abundantly clear is that success in addressing equity in the 21st century will involve the social appropriation of ICT for local benefit.

If we need reminding of the absolute hunger for people to socially appropriate ICT for local benefit then we need look no further than the adoption of cellphone technology in Africa.

There are now more than 695 million cellphone subscriptions in sub-saharan Africa; a 400% increase in the last 10 years and it is still growing at an incredible rate each year.

The adoption of social media has exceeded much of the conventional industry, education and government wisdom, forcing a total rethink that encapsulates the involvement of people in the transactions between these sectors and their customers.

Nowhere is change more evident than in the unprecedented escalation of the capacity, mobility, affordability and accessibility of new forms of ICT. If we had held this conference just two years ago, one would have struggled to find an iPad or other tablet in the room. Today it is a given. For the populace at large, the cellphone is now standard fare.

And there can be no doubt that the biggest potential for useful impact of this technology is in dealing with inequity in developmental states such as ours which represent more than 50% of the global population.

Mobile technology has revolutionized access to health services, banking, education, entertainment and information for many Africans. One only has to think of the growth in mobile money platforms across the continent to name but one example of this.

The African population is on average much younger than that of the rest of the world. And whilst facing greater uncertainty and with much lower disposable income, its willingness to adopt and appropriate this new technology is amply demonstrated by the uptake of all types of mobile technology. This is often more than 100 percent.

South Africa's cellphone penetration rate has been pegged at 105 percent. Mobile penetration has in turn boosted internet access with the Internet Access in South Africa 2012 report indicating growth of 25 percent, with an 8,5 million internet user base at the end of 2011.

It is expected that South African Internet users will exceed 10 million by the end of this year, accounting for approximately 20 percent of the population. The potential to address the service delivery challenges our country faces through ICT cannot be left unexploited.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

What we have found in South Africa is that we need to respond to the challenges and opportunities that this new technology brings, with new approaches.

Approaches that recognise that social and cultural aspects are vital to dealing with inequity, prosperity, new forms of developing a creative economy and building a more self-reliant and resilient socio-economic base.

We have also learnt that we need to move past the 'doing to' and the 'doing for' paradigm into a 'doing with' approach and that the new forms of ICT can facilitate. Social media engagement is one example of this.

There can be no doubt that that these new developments in ICT are ideally suited to making this the African Century. We have recognised that in dealing with the opportunity we have been presented with by these tremendous advances in mobile ICT, we need to aggregate policy across traditional government service departments, education, business, civil society and organised labour.

We also need to establish and provide a collaborative aggregation framework at the community level to achieve a positive impact against our national and global goals.

That we now need a concerted and integrated approach across government, business, education, civil society and organised labour is made very clear by South Africa's slipping in e-readiness rankings, as indicated by the World Economic Forum's 2012 Global Information Technology Report. We are now ranked 72nd from a position of 47th just five years ago. This in spite of advances in certain areas of ICT.

Quite certainly Albert Einstein's definition of insanity, 'doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results', has poignancy in the context of both reality of the inequitable situation and the obvious intention of this forum.

Our e-Skills Institute has sought to address this through the establishment of provincial Knowledge Production and Coordination Hubs at our local Universities.

This recently commenced process provides a formal space for Government, Business, Education, Civil Society and Organised Labour to come together to coordinate efforts and create new applications more relevant to, more engaged with and more owned by local actors.

This process is designed to ensure that new technology is best fitted to local culture, local circumstances and local needs whilst being directly linked to the global environment and its innovation.

Such a process recognises that we must concentrate on building local astuteness regardless of formal educational qualifications and regardless of the complexity of the whole range of government service delivery options across a wide range of government departments.

This will maximise effective access by the community and develop our inbuilt practical innovativeness in a new world that does not recognise the stovepipes of government agencies, business, education and civil society needs.

We have recognised that new technological developments will allow us to aggregate effort across the stakeholder groups in Business, Government, Education, Civil Society and Organised Labour in ways that make sense and can make a difference at the local level where innovation has to occur in order for us to deal with our embedded inequity.

It is worthwhile remembering the impact that Land Grant Universities & Colleges had in developing the massive agricultural and rural development that occurred in the United States during the late 1800s and for much of the 1900s.

At this time the Government recognised that successful rural development was dependent on providing a focused approach around applied education and training. This ensured a sustainable approach, which built socio-economic benefits and developed social astuteness across the breadth and depth of society.

These Land Grant Universities established research and extension or outreach centres that built bridges between society, the economy, innovation and business development with education and government service delivery.

It can be successfully argued that this effort was largely responsible for providing the basis for the United States to become a successful industrial power.

The analogies between this approach and that which we now face in the emerging Information Age, reinforced by the huge uptake of modern cellphone technologies in dealing with equity, could not be stronger.

Our communities have demonstrated that they have an unquenchable thirst for these new forms of ICT and it is our responsibility to respond in new ways that make sense to them in developing their inbuilt creativity.

Clearly this means that we must develop new forms of collaborative intervention which can aggregate multi-stakeholder effort at the interface between them and our communities to help them build their own answers to deep seated and entrenched issues which are at the base of the huge inequities we need to deal with.

We are currently piloting this approach in six provinces in South Africa and we are very encouraged by the response, which now involves more than 50 organisations across Government, State Owned Enterprises, Business, Education, Civil Society, donor agencies and donor countries and international agencies.

Our initial feedback and evaluation from across these bodies has been more than encouraging and we are finding that everybody wants us to provide strategic leadership and legitimacy in this space.

A very positive aspect is that whilst Government is providing leadership everybody welcomes the 'hands off' but 'vitally interested' approach by Government, which ensures that all stakeholder groups can meet their own targets within the mandate of the South African Government's Strategic priorities.

In conclusion, I would like to extend a formal invitation to all present here today to attend the Second e-Skills Summit of South Africa scheduled to take place from 22 to 25th October 2012.

I thank you.