Southern Africa Telecommunication Networks and Applications Conference (SATNAC), Spier Estate, Stellenbosch, 6 September 2010

Welcome Address:
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Madam Minister, Chief Executive Officers, senior researchers and practitioners, distinguished guests, conference delegates, ladies and gentlemen … welcome to Stellenbosch, one of the most beautiful towns in South Africa. As you would have seen, we have the mountains, the vineyards and – as you no doubt know – one of Africa's leading tertiary institutions, Stellenbosch University. We are glad to be associated with this prestigious event, now it its 13th year, and it is a pleasure for me to say a few words this morning.

I find the theme of this conference very interesting – "The Future: A Society Enabled by Innovation and Applications". Looking back just 10, or five or even one year ago, it is hard to believe how quickly we have become connected to each other in different parts of the world. A decade into the 21st century, the future has clearly arrived – the future of technological wonderment predicted by yesterday's science-fiction writers.

But whose 21st century is it? Not everyone has arrived in the 21st century, regardless of what the calendar says. In large parts of the world, people are still battling with basic challenges – getting enough food to eat and clean water to drink, a roof over their heads, peace and security in their streets, a decent job with a fair salary, and quality education for their children. Only a minority has arrived in the digital age. Most people still need a bridge to a better future.

To my mind, this is what your conference theme is about. This is the challenge of our time – not only to innovate and invent and discover knowledge, but to apply it to the benefit of society … and in the process, never to forget the marginalised, the downtrodden and people trying to find a way in.

I find it very encouraging that the Southern African telecommunications and IT community is clearly up to the challenge, as we have seen with the World Cup. A cursory glance at the conference programme confirms this. My congratulations to the organisers and all the participants.

In the knowledge economy of this Information Age, the most important thing for us as knowledge practitioners is to find ways of applying our knowledge to the benefit of society. At Stellenbosch University, we are doing exactly that. As one of the top research-intensive

institutions in Africa, we want to be of service to society. We have positioned ourselves to apply our proven expertise in a purposeful manner and on a large scale to address some of the most pressing needs in South Africa and the rest of the continent.

We believe that by helping to eradicate poverty and related conditions; and by promoting human dignity and health; democracy and human rights; peace and security; as well as a sustainable environment and a competitive industry, we will change the world. We call this the HOPE Project of Stellenbosch University.

At the public launch of the HOPE Project recently, we unveiled an exciting bit of technological collaboration, which I would now like to share with you. Stellenbosch University has a strong partnership with Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in the USA, the oldest technological research university in that country. We concluded an agreement last year to ensure capacity building in science and engineering, and to encourage the youth to focus their studies on the global challenges of our time and enjoy the connectivity that is now possible.

Following discussions with Dr Shirley Ann Jackson, the President of Rensselaer, on how we can take university exchange to the next level, the "Virtual Bridge" between Africa and North America was born. Constructed of moving photons rather than steel, this bridge makes use of high-capacity fibre-optic cable to move information from Stellenbosch, via Cape Town, all the way up to London, across the Atlantic, into the NYSERNET loop that spans New York State, and straight to Rensselaer.

Our two universities – along with other partners – are now hard-wired for shared computation and data exchange at 10-gigabit-per-second speeds. Researchers are designing complex computational research projects on which to collaborate. Scientists and engineers are now able to partner in trans-hemispheric research as if they were sharing the same physical laboratory. The Virtual Bridge demonstrates what can be achieved through innovative collaboration between those who share a common vision – that of applying science to the benefit of society.

Before I route the discussion back to you, let me just repeat that you are most welcome here. Enjoy your time in Stellenbosch, and may you have a fruitful conference.

Thank you.