ATU Tackles Emergency Telecommunications in Maputo Forum

In an increasingly troubled world full of constant disruptions, Emergency Telecommunications (ET) can reduce risks and avert loss of lives and livelihoods in the face of disaster. Disasters have the potential to inhibit development in countries and this impact is worse for developing nations with minimal resources. Highly critical in this case is the ability of emergency telecommunications to ensure that affected people have access to useful and timely information, make informed decisions, contact loved ones and most importantly, receive assistance.

The African Telecommunication Union (ATU) recognizes this functional value of emergency telecommunications. As such, between 5th and 7th of December 2019 together with INCM/ARECOM and the Ministry of Transport and Communications of Mozambique, ATU convened a forum in Maputo – Mozambique to tackle the subject whose discussions centred on the theme, "Using Technology to Save Lives: Emergency Communications for Disaster Risk Reduction and Management". The forum brought together 90 participants comprising of Member States: DRC, Ghana, Kenya, Sierra Leone, Malawi, Mozambique, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zimbabwe; Associate members: Apple Inc, Intelsat, and Motorola Solutions as well as intergovernmental organizations: ITU, WFP, and SADC and the private sector represented by CRASA, SATA, IARU and the SA Radio League.

Through the seven sessions at the Maputo forum, topical issues contiguous to the theme were tabled. This included Emergency Telecommunications Cluster program (ETC) and the centrality of emergency telecommunications during phases of disaster management.

Based on the forum recommendations, ATU is expected to; establish a working committee to spearhead disaster and emergency telecommunications promotion in Africa; develop a preliminary plan, with timelines, for regional collaboration in the area of disaster and emergency telecommunications. ATU is also expected to seek collaboration with ETC and ITU on disaster and ET preparedness; identify and advise on national and regional policies, frameworks and opportunities for collaboration by considering among other things, the elements of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030. ATU is also expected to oversee monitoring and evaluation of implementation of plans and actions.

As a product of the forum, Member States are expected to; develop a country specific National Emergency Telecommunications Plan (NETP), to implement the Common Alerting Protocol (CAP) and Early- Warning systems (EWS), localize/domesticate the elements of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030, ratify and/or apply relevant parts of the Tampere Convention as guidance for ET preparedness and appropriate actions during disaster and nominate a primary and secondary national central point for disaster and ET to ATU and the Regional Economic Community (REC) organizations. Additionally, Member States are expected to develop frameworks for monitoring and evaluation of plans and actions.

As the curtains closed on the Maputo event, the forum participants took part in a 4.7 km action march. They displayed banners and distributed flyers on emergency telecommunications (ET) tips. While this was fundamentally a symbolic action, its effectiveness on penetrating key messages right into the grassroots cannot be downplayed. In Maputo, words provided direction, words prevailed; but to begin the journey, every Member State and partner must find their seat at the table of action.