KEYNOTE SPEECH BY TEKI AKUETTEH (MS.) THE FOUNDER & EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE AFRICA DIGTAL RIGHTS HUB ON THE ON / OFF – IMPLICATIONS OF DIGITAL CONNECTIVITY ON HUMAN RIGHTS AT THE 2022 ANNUAL CONFERENCE OF THE GENEVA HUMAN RIGHTS PLATFORM ON THE 18TH OCTOBER 2022.

- Your Excellency, the Ambassador, Permanent Representative of Switzerland to the UN Office and other International Organizations in Geneva;

- The Rector of the University of Geneva;

- The Director of the Graduate Institute;

- The Director of the Geneva Academy;

- The Executive Director of the Geneva Human Rights Platform; and

- The Organizers, Speakers and Participants of this august forum.

It is with profound humility, that I stand before you today. While I do not profess to be an expert on the issues that I will raise during this speech. It is meant to challenge us all to the betterment of our connected world.

I am tasked to speak on the theme for this conference, which I believe is one of critical importance to the ever-pressing needs of our societies today. Digital connectivity is not just a luxury but a fundamental facet of our society. The past few years have underscored the importance of digital connectivity to the survival of our planet and the human race.

Permit me, therefore, to share a few stories culled from around the world on the necessity and impact of digital connectivity.

"The pandemic has exposed inequalities across Africa and within our respective countries. With regard to education, the scale of the digital divide and its implications for remote learning are striking. According to the 2021 Ibrahim

Forum Report, 89% of learners in sub-Saharan Africa do not have access to household computers. 82% lack internet access and at least 20 million live in areas not covered by a mobile network. Furthermore, wide gender disparities in ownership of and access to digital devices have also limited technology's role in providing solutions, leaving many girls behind.'' – This is a statement from the Mo Ibrabhim Foundation News published in September 2021 on Navigating the Digital Divide in Africa's Class Room.

In April 2021 the New York Times's Shira Ovide, writing on the early concerns of the impact of the pandemic on big tech stated *"…In the last year, the five tech superpowers — Amazon, Apple, Google, Microsoft and Facebook — had combined revenue of more than $1.2 trillion, as I wrote for The Times on Thursday. It was a strange and amazing year for Big Tech. I can't believe it, but some of the companies are growing faster and are more profitable than they have been in years. The pandemic has made the tech giants and their bosses unfathomably rich…"*

"I am an Ewe from the Volta Region, in Ghana (emphasis mine) *but my nursing profession brought me here. During my registration for both the voter and national ID, the registration officers I met at the two different* registration centres (emphasis mine) *… all doubted my presence here* [Widana, Pusiga District near Ghana-Togo border]. *They said what shows that I am not Ewe from Togo staying in Ghana. I had to explain everything about me and finally showed them my nursing staff ID card before they continued my registration".*

"My name, either the Sani or Alhassan is also found in the communities just across the river [boundary] you see there. Because of that when I was registering for voter and national ID card it took me a long time and many questions from

the registration man if I was not from Burkina Faso. I gave them my birth certificate at the centre but they still asked me several questions if I am truly a Ghanaian".

These are the stories of Gbolonyo and Alhassan, 26- and 24-year-old woman and man respectively from Ghana during a focus group discussion with the Africa Digital Rights Hub on access to IDs by people living in border towns. Interestingly these IDs by a recent Government directive, are mandated for access to SIM cards and connectivity that enables them fully to engage the digital society.

The benefits and impact of digital connectivity is glaringly seen across the world today. The increased economic growth and benefits, the reduction in poverty, the access to healthcare and education, the access to information, the strengthening of democratic values and principles, the upholding of human rights, the transparency and exposure of societal ills and human rights violations, can be felt in Africa, the Americas, Antarctica, Asia, Australia and Europe.

Clearly, no part of our globe has been spared from the impact of digital connectivity. If for nothing at all, it has also brought to light and limited the physical boundaries that once defined us and our societies. However, whiles digital connectivity has brought us closer, it has also exposed the ills and hypocrisy of our societies today, continuing to undermine and further aggravate the inherent nature of human rights regardless of race, sex, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, or any other status.

Digital connectivity continues to expose the widening digital divide between the haves and the have nots. It exposes the inequalities in the development and use

of digital tools in the world today. While many economic opportunities abound under this new dispensation, it is becoming more and more obvious that it may not be realized by my country and my people if we continue to approach these issues in the same way we have over the last two decades. And this applies to majority of the world's population.

In paraphrasing Eleanor Roosevelt, I ask, **where after all can fundamental human rights be recognized and guaranteed**? Human rights will lose their meaning when we fail to safeguard the protection of all physically or virtually, connect or not connected – whether on or off the grid. And in today's world where it is increasingly becoming impossible for us to live outside the connected space; then more than ever, we have an obligation to ensure that there an equitable distribution and access of this critical resource to everyone, irrespective of who they are or where they come from.

This is indeed a tall order in a world where the language of connectivity is formal thereby eliminating the majority voices of the informal. How many uneducated and informal populations can effectively engage in the connected world without barriers. And while technology itself can enable us reach everyone, we continue to fail at ensuring that the interest of all is recognized and respected irrespective of the language they speak.

Also, whiles the word 'connectivity' seemingly emphasizes the state of bringing the world together, it has ironically become another tool of inequality, discrimination, abuse and economic woes just to mention a few. Infrastructure to enable connectivity in developing countries continue to lag. And while these communities make significant contribution to the development and use of digital technologies globally, the wealth created rarely trickles into their

economies further worsening the ability of these communities to create and share wealth equitably.

The interconnected nature of human rights to humanity itself cannot be understated. And as Nelson Mandela once stated, "To deny people their human rights is to challenge their very humanity." Therefore whether on/off, we must continue to ensure that the fundamental human rights of all are recognized and guaranteed irrespective of platform, race or creed.

Digital connectivity is real is having real impact on the lives of people around the world. It is impacting our right to life, liberty and security. It is impacting our right to freedom and dignity. It is impacting our right to non-discrimination. It is impacting our right to economic freedom. It is impacting our right to privacy and protection from arbitrary interference in our lives. It is impacting our freedom of movement and right to nationality. It is impacting our right to own property. It is impacting our freedom of association, thought, conscience and religion. It is impacting on our right to education, freedom of expression and the list of human rights impacted by digital connectivity is endless.

Today is it difficult to mention any fundamental right and not identify how it has been positively or negatively been affected by digital connectivity. Unfortunately, however, the effect of the negatives will erode the essence of humanity if we do not make a conscious effort to bring everyone along and ensure a fair, justiciable and equitable distribution of the benefits of digital connectivity to all.

Bringing everyone along therefore means the following:

1. A fair and equitable distribution of the wealth created by the digital infrastructure;

2. A fair and equitable access to the digital infrastructure irrespective of language, culture, race, sex or other geographical boundaries; and last but not the least;

3. The development and implementation of policies and regulatory frameworks that guarantee the protection of human rights in our societies.

The time to evaluate the impact of digital connectivity on humanity is now. And in doing so, we must ensure that this critical resource is available to all and not a select few.

In conclusion permit me to quote the words of an illustrious African – Osagyefo Dr. Kwame Nkrumah **"…The task ahead is great indeed, and heavy is the responsibility; and yet it is a noble and glorious challenge - a challenge which calls for the courage to dream, the courage to believe, the courage to dare, the courage to do, the courage to envision, the courage to fight, the courage to work, the courage to achieve - to achieve the highest excellencies and the fullest greatness of man. Dare we ask for more in life?"**

Thank you.