



MINISTRY
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**MINISTER FOR THE PUBLIC SERVICE AND ADMINISTRATION
HON. INKOSI MZAMO BUTHELEZI, MP**

**OPENING ADDRESS INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON THE THEORY AND
PRACTICE OF E-GOVERNMENT (1-4 OCTOBER 2024)**

Trust and Ethical Digital Governance for the World We Want

CSIR International Convention Centre: 1 October 2024

Distinguished guests, esteemed colleagues, and friends, it is a great honour to welcome you to South Africa's capital, Pretoria, for the **17th International Conference on the Theory and Practice of Electronic Governance (ICEGOV)**.

I extend a warm welcome to delegates from over fifty countries. On behalf of our President, Cyril Ramaphosa, I trust you are already enjoying our hospitality.

This gathering marks a significant moment, as it is only the second time ICEGOV has been hosted on the African continent, the first being in Egypt in 2008. We are privileged to host this event in South Africa, a place rich in diversity and experience, and we look forward to sharing our insights and learning from each of you as we explore the future of digital governance together.

The idea for this conference took root in 2022 during discussions between our Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA) and colleagues from Denmark, a nation renowned for its leadership in digital governance. Those conversations laid the groundwork for what we will discuss here—conversations that are vital as we navigate the complexities of governance in an increasingly digital world.

The theme of this year's conference, ***"Trust and Ethical Digital Governance for the World We Want,"*** resonates deeply in our current context. We stand at a crossroads where our choices in digital governance can either pave the way for a fairer, more ethical future or exacerbate the inequalities and mistrust that permeate our societies, both online and offline.

Ladies and gentlemen, we are convening during uncertain times. The recent discussions at the 79th United Nations General Assembly highlighted pressing global issues such as the climate crisis, pervasive inequalities, and the lingering impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. These challenges serve as a stark reminder of the importance of focusing on the future and moving beyond mere short-term solutions.

In addressing these, it is imperative that we bridge the digital divide, ensuring equitable access to broadband, internet, and Wi-Fi across all communities, particularly in developing regions. The use of mobile devices in Africa is on the rise, but challenges persist in many parts of the continent.

As governments, we face the risk of falling behind in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly in this post-pandemic era. This conference presents an invaluable opportunity to delve into how ethical digital governance can empower us to confront these challenges head-on. We must also be mindful of a developmental agenda that ensures Africa, and especially the African child, is not left behind in this digital transformation.

Digital tools have immense potential to address the multifaceted problems we face globally, from inequality to access to essential services. However, if misapplied, these same tools can exacerbate existing issues.

Therefore, it is imperative that we collaborate to ensure technology serves everyone fairly and responsibly. The inclusion of fundamental governance principles such as fairness, accessibility, and inclusion must guide our proceedings.

Accessibility for those who suffer from impairments must be a priority, as digital tools hold the potential to significantly transform the lives of people with disabilities. AI has the power to improve the lives of millions globally, but we must ensure it is developed and applied ethically.

A few years ago, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) outlined four potential futures for our digital landscape. These scenarios range from an optimistic vision where individuals are empowered to more concerning futures dominated by governments or corporations. In some of these scenarios, artificial intelligence (AI) plays a significant role, sometimes aiding but in other instances, threatening individual rights and privacy.

We are already witnessing alarming trends where AI is deployed in ways that compromise personal privacy. Governments and corporations are profiling citizens, often without sufficient regard for fundamental human rights.

Therefore, the necessity of ethical digital governance is imperative. We must establish frameworks that ensure AI and other technologies are utilized in ways that uphold human dignity, rights, and freedoms.

Training institutions—such as our education, research, and development sectors—must prepare a generation of young people to read and interpret big data, guiding the information that AI models rely on. This is why the DPSA is entrusted with managing data within the public service, ensuring it is done with integrity and accountability.

As public servants, policymakers, researchers, and business leaders, we bear the responsibility of shaping a future where digital governance benefit everyone. We must

reflect on whether digital transformation will enhance democracy and human dignity or foster deeper divisions.

While it is essential to create the framework shaping the ethics of digital governance, we must also remember the adage, "*Information is power*," and with that power comes great responsibility towards the over 8 billion people who cohabitate this Earth. It is crucial that we never underestimate the human touch needed to interpret and give life to statistics and information generated by Artificial Intelligence.

Colleagues,

Fortunately, there is good news to share. The UN's latest e-Government Survey indicates that countries in the Global South, including South Africa and Mauritius, have made significant strides.

South Africa has now joined the "Very High" E-Government Development Index group—an achievement that reflects the dedication of our government and partners.

Yet, our journey does not end here. Our aim is not merely to be part of this group but to lead in ensuring that digital transformation prioritizes people's rights and needs.

By 2026, we aspire for at least ten more African nations to join this prestigious group alongside us. Africa, the diaspora, and many other developing nations are on the rise, and we will not be left behind in this digital transformation.

Building robust digital infrastructure is essential for creating a modern, efficient public service. Let me emphasize—digital public infrastructure is the backbone of a modern, effective, and inclusive public sector.

In South Africa, our Presidential Commission on the Fourth Industrial Revolution has spearheaded advancements in our digital capabilities, particularly in AI. However, this journey is not solely about adopting cutting-edge technologies; it requires a fundamental rethinking of how we govern in a digital era.

As we enhance our digital capabilities, we must also safeguard the rights of our citizens. South Africa is committed to a human rights-based approach in our digital governance strategies. We must ensure the careful management of personal data, the security of digital systems, and equitable access to technology for all.

To achieve ethical digital governance, we need clear regulations, responsible technology design, and international collaboration. Governments, businesses, and civil society must unite to cultivate a digital world that respects human rights and fosters fairness.

As South Africa prepares to assume the presidency of the G20 from Brazil, we are dedicated to making ethical digital governance a central focus of our leadership. We intend to carry the lessons learned and discussions from ICEGOV into the G20, ensuring our collective insights lead to tangible action.

Let us leave this conference not only with newfound knowledge but with a shared commitment to practical steps that will shape a more equitable, transparent, and inclusive digital future for all.

Together, we must build the frameworks, policies, and infrastructure necessary for a world where digital innovation is guided by ethics, fairness, and respect for human dignity.

Together, we can lay the groundwork for a digital world that serves all people—not just a privileged few.

Colleagues, I wish you all a productive and insightful conference, and I warmly welcome you once again to South Africa - a place where innovation meets opportunity.

May this gathering inspire meaningful action and collaboration that will shape a better digital future for us all!

Thank you.