



CONNECT Interview: Dr. Matthews Mtumbuka

Dr. Matthews Mtumbuka has recently been announced as CEO of the UbuntuNet Alliance. He spoke with CONNECT about his background and his plans.

What is your background and what led you to the UbuntuNet Alliance?

My background is in engineering and information technology. For the past eight years, I worked for a major mobile operator, Airtel Africa, where I was in charge of information technology in Malawi, then Rwanda and, over the last three years, coordinated IT Operations and Governance across the 14 countries in Africa where Airtel operates. My first job was with Shell Oil Europe, based in Aberdeen in Scotland, and my educational background includes an undergraduate qualification from the University of Malawi and a PhD from the University of Oxford, where I was a Rhodes Scholar from 2002 to 2005 – all in engineering. I have enjoyed a progressively expanding career. It has always been my desire to lead large scale engineering/technical organisations that have an impact in Africa. In this way, I can make a major contribution to Africa. That is why once I had learnt enough in Europe, during my seven years in the UK at Oxford and Shell, I resigned to come back to Malawi, to Africa. So, when this opportunity came up, I was very excited to go for it. I am also very passionate about academia so this sounded like the perfect match.

What is your highest priority for the coming six months?

We have a major project coming up with one of our main development

partners. My number one focus area for the next six months is to ensure that we complete the actions that enable us to satisfy the prerequisites for this project. This will put us on a good footing to expand our network and make it robust and resilient with good redundancy on many of the links. Secondly, we have some governance matters to refine including a review of our constitution among others. A third area is community which, as we operate in a membership-based organisation, is a big feature of what we do. I will ensure that over the next six months our community values are well embedded because that will help us work more effectively and efficiently with the NRENs who are both owners and our customers. And, of course, our focus on driving actions that in the long term give us sustainability will also remain an ongoing priority during this period.

Where do you see NRENs from the UA region in 2025?

I see them as being much bigger than they are now. At least half of our NRENs are still in the formative stages. I expect them all to have matured and have achieved a stable performance by then. As of now, most of them provide broadband to end users as their primary and main product. I envision that by 2025, at least 40% of their products and services will be Value-Added Services (VASs) leveraging the existing broadband offering. VASs will thus be a key thrust for us going forward. We will create VASs as a strategic building block for the sustainability of the Alliance.

Is there a leadership methodology that you believe will be most suitable for the UA?

Participatory leadership will be the central methodology. Of course, given the large scope of our work in terms of geographical reach, range of projects and scale of operations, we would use a range of leadership methodologies but all gravitating towards and reverting to the participatory approach. A participatory approach is the default methodology because of our nature as a membership organisation. We have to start with the needs and requirements of the end user via engagement with the NRENs. If we can accurately manage that process, the bottom-up approach, then sustainability of the Alliance is automatically secured and guaranteed.

Any final inspiring words?

I am very excited to join the NREN community. The scope of what we can do to impact the education and research community is nearly limitless. It is gratifying to see many keen partners eager to work with us. I see a very bright future ahead of us and with the great teamwork that I already see at the secretariat and from the NRENs, as experienced at the recent Annual General Meeting in Entebbe in Uganda, I have no doubt that we will digitise and greatly transform the education and research sector in the medium to long-term period.