

WELCOMING REMARKS

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FEDERATION OF THE DISABLED (SAFOD)**

**WEBINAR ON ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY BUSINESS
INNOVATIONS**

28-29 SEPTEMBER 2021

SALUTATIONS

1. Mrs. Alexia Manombe-Ncube, Deputy Minister for Disability Affairs in the Presidency, Namibia
2. Mr. Mussa Chiwaula, Director General of SAFOD
3. Our partners from Loughborough University with whom we have jointly organized this webinar
4. Representatives from Government Ministries or Departments
5. All Webinar Participants from the academia, research institutions, businesses, disability organizations, and other sectors
6. All Protocols Observed

Ladies and Gentlemen, on behalf of the Southern Africa Federation of the Disabled (SAFOD), it is a great honor and privilege for me to be here today and participate in this webinar on business innovations.

As you will hear from my colleagues, this event is build-up on the SAFOD's AT-Info-Map Project which was initially funded by Google.org for a period of three years (2016-2019). The goal of the project was initially confined to mapping the availability of different types of Assistive Technology (AT) in 10 countries in Southern Africa.

However, it is pleasing to note that we have built on this project to now be able to create and expand a multi-sectoral platform on which various stakeholders can seriously dialogue on matters related AT, and how we could sustainably increase the access to AT for persons with disabilities in both Southern Africa and across the globe.

Indeed, AT is very important as far as the development of our countries, regions, and sub-regions is concerned. AT provides creative solutions that enable individuals with disabilities to be more independent, productive, and included in society and community life. It is, therefore, very much linked to our development policies and programs at national levels, sub-regional and regional levels, and to the achievement of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Hence, as you can see, AT really affects not only persons with disabilities but also the development in general. The fact that AT will enable persons with disabilities easily access the physical environment and other facilities and services means therefore that their contribution to the development of the nation will be significantly enhanced. That is why we must start to encourage the discourse about how best to integrate AT in our policies, legislation and national programs.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I am glad to note that this webinar comes at a very opportune time when some countries like Botswana, where SAFOD headquarters is situated, has just ratified the United Nations Convection of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and is pondering on enacting a disability law.

It is, therefore, high time that our policymakers were also well informed about how best to domesticate or implement Article 9 of the Convention

which focuses on Accessibility. The said Article specifically stipulates that to enable persons with disabilities to live independently and participate fully in all aspects of life, States Parties shall take appropriate measures to ensure to persons with disabilities access, on an equal basis with others, to the physical environment, to transportation, to information and communications, including information and communications technologies and systems, and to other facilities and services open or provided to the public, both in urban and in rural areas.

In this vein, the webinar also comes at an opportune time when many other countries in our region, despite ratifying the convention, are still miles away in the process of domestication of the same. Failure to domesticate the UNCRPD in most these countries has been one of the major reasons why they have failed to devise strategies that enhance the increase of access to AT.

Ladies and Gentlemen, one of such strategies is how Governments and other strategic partners could create an environment that encourages positive business innovations among AT suppliers and practitioners to help the increase of AT access. Time has come when we should start exploring how best we sustainably stimulate business innovations within the global supply chain systems, right from manufacturing to the consumers.

For example, there are so many new start-ups out there with promising innovations but have failed to grow because the environment our policymakers have created for them has not been conducive. It is my hope that this webinar should be able to identify more practical and innovative ways on how we could ensure that the ambitions or visions of such new startups are not frustrated.

But such a discourse will not be meaningful if we lack basic understanding of how businesses such as AT suppliers are organized within the global supply chain system, and the bottlenecks that negatively impact their businesses resulting I low uptake of AT by persons with disabilities, especially in Southern Africa. We need a more critical exploration of how sustainable business innovations can facilitate the increase in access to the AT.

Ladies and Gentlemen, in this context, let me take this opportunity to acknowledge the support that we have received from Loughborough University in organizing this webinar. Without them, this webinar might not have been possible.

I also recognize the presence of the deputy minister for Disability Affairs in the Presidency in Namibia for accepting to participate in this event as the keynote speaker. SAFOD has always enjoyed working with her and her team from her office, including the whole period we have been preparing to co-host the AT Expo in Namibia.

Most importantly, I must also acknowledge everyone present here, including SAFOD's national affiliates, for taking your precious time to participate in this webinar. We do not take it for granted that you have left other equally important engagements.

To all of you, thank you for being here, welcome, and enjoy the webinar.

I thank you all, and God Bless you.