KEYNOTE ADDRESS OF PERMANCENT SECRETARY MINISTRY OF COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY, DR. TUNJI OLAOPA, AT UNILORIN ODDC OPEN DATA RESEARCHY STAKEHOLDER WORKSHOP (7TH APRIL, 2014)

PROTOCOL

It is with great pleasure that I am here to join hands with University of Ilorin Open Data Research Group on this timely and laudable workshop aimed at increasing awareness and discussing the findings from Research on the emerging impacts of Open Data on developing economies.

I consider this workshop as relevant and timely. As Open Data initiatives spread across the globe, research is required to deepen our shared understanding of the potentials and practice of open data. Those involved in new programs and initiative in developing countries need to understand the full value and impact of open data in strikingly different social, economic and cultural contexts. However, researching open data is a formidable challenge. The publication and use of Open Data raises many issues, cutting across fields from budget transparency or urban governance, to innovation policy and natural resource management. Open Data also connects across many levels of activity, from community-led standard setting, to national government data collection, to grassroots use of datasets. We can only understand Open Data in general if we have a detailed understanding of how it operates in specific situations.

You will recall that line with its desire to transform Nigeria using the vehicle of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs), Government of President Goodluck Jonathan, GCFR established the Ministry of Communication Technology in July 2011. Since then the Ministry has pursued the key priorities of connecting Nigeria, (ICT Infrastructure Development), Connecting Nigerians (Universal Access), Local Content Development and ICT in Governance.

On these key Result Areas, significant achievements have been recorded by the Ministry such that today the ICT sector is the 4th pillar of the Nigerian economy and the fastest growing contributing about 7.8% of the country’s GDP as at 3rd quarter of 2013. With the GDP rebasing that was launched by his Excellency the President recently, the contribution is bound to be even higher.
It is in the context of this desire to ensure that Nigerians are connected and participate actively in the new economy as well as benefit from the opportunities that it presents, coupled with Government intent to make Governance more efficient and effective using ICTs, that the Ministry is championing the course of Open Data Initiative in Nigeria.

In this regard, the Ministry with the support of the World Bank and DFID organized an Open Data envisioning workshop- in 2012 followed by a stakeholder’s forum. A more comprehensive stakeholder’s engagement forum, workshop and data clinic was also held on the 29th January, 2014 at the Transcorp Hilton Hotel in collaboration with the World Bank. Subsequently there is now an Open Data Working Group to coordinate all Open Data activities of Government.

It is noteworthy that our collaboration with the World Bank, DFID and the Open Government Alliance had yielded very useful reports on Nigeria’s readiness for Open Data, Open Data Technology Road Map, Open Data Action Plan and a framework for leveraging Open Data for innovation.

As the open data movement has progressed over the last several years, governments have moved from focusing on transparency to providing direct access to data catalogs, together with tools for analyzing and visualizing data. More recently, government leaders are starting to fully appreciate the value of open data as a resource for stimulating economic growth.

This is an exciting development and a trend that shows no sign of slowing. In fact, the number of new businesses building their go-to-market strategies around the free-flow of public data is growing.

An example of this new movement is a Seattle-based company called Porch.com, which uses city work permits, licenses, and other residential construction information to create a searchable database, Portch.com, which is free to use, is a favorite of homeowners, professional builders, and others, who rely on the site to compare ideas and get a baseline for the costs of specific projects.

Another example is iTriage, a health care technology company started by two emergency medicine physicians. iTriage offers a portfolio of location-aware mobile apps designed to give consumers instant access to information about
healthcare providers and facilities right in their neighborhood. The apps mash up open health data, public-domain records about insurance products, and public directories of healthcare providers to deliver current, highly localized information. Consumers can use this information to make fully-informed decisions about what doctor they choose or which local clinic is likely to provide the best care.

Locally here the efforts of our young entrepreneurs at BudgIT come to mind. The young company has leveraged on the budget data that has been put out by the Ministry of Finance to create value and jobs.

Although the use of open data by private-sector businesses is now garnering headlines in the mainstream press, today’s flurry of economic activity did not happen overnight. Experts often point to the availability of open global positioning data in the 1980s as a watershed moment that accelerated the growth of an entire new industry of mobile mapping services. The total economic value of GPS-based products and services is now estimated at $90 billion annually.

Similarly, the decision by government agencies to open up weather data in the US sparked the growth of consumer websites like Weather.com. It subsequently led to the growth of companies that provided services to businesses heavily dependent on weather forecast data. Today, the cumulative value of products and services derived from open access to weather data is estimated at $15 billion.

The open data movement holds out the promise of improving transparency, accountability, citizen participation and economic opportunity. Worldwide, it is estimated that governments have already posted more than one million datasets on the Internet. Although just a small fraction of these current datasets are from developing countries, this is rapidly changing. Through the Open Government Partnership, governments from more than 55 countries have made concrete commitments to promote transparency, empower citizens, fight corruption, and harness new technologies to strengthen governance with a strong emphasis on open data as a means to achieve this.

As we herald the berthing of Open Data on our shores, let me use this opportunity to warn that Open data research has to contend with the fact that it is still morning as far as the evolution of open data as a mainstream policy is concerned. Of all the government datasets in the world, indeed, all the NGO
handled data, only a very small proportion is currently openly licensed and accessible online. Far from removing the need for research, this highlights the need to develop clear evidenced and research approaches that can equip diverse stakeholders to engage in informed dialogue and action to guide the future development of open data.

There is mounting evidence that open data can and is making a measurable difference in contributing jobs, consumer spending, and tax revenue to local economies. Nationwide, new business start ups have been decidedly sluggish over the past five years. Yet, cities that have active, government-sponsored open data programs have stayed well ahead in this curve.

It is clear that the benefits of open data extend far beyond greater transparency and revitalized civic engagement. The availability of government data has already spawned multi-billion dollar industries and the movement is still very much in the early stages of development. I am particularly happy that Nigeria and our academic institutions are taking open data seriously.

On this note, I wish to commend the University of Ilorin Open Data Research Group and all stakeholders present for your commitment to move this initiative forward in the right direction. I wish you all the best during the workshop.

Thank you.