Preface

There is much to inspire us in the work of Jean-Michel Huet, whose insights into digital developments in Africa are timely and perspicacious. In a previous book, co-authored with Henri Tcheng, he already offered in-depth analysis on the major changes occurring in the global telecommunications sector (*Et si les télécoms n'existaient pas* ?, Pearson, 2009). With this work, he extends his analysis to all digital technologies and focuses on the future of the African continent. This timely work contributes to our understanding of this complex issue in a number of ways.

First of all, it explores the critical issue of Africa's economic and social future from a digital standpoint. Our geographical proximity and historical relations mean that our futures, on both sides of the Mediterranean, are closely linked. The population of the African continent is set to more than double to 2.5 billion people by 2050, while the population of Europe is set to fall by 4%. This demographic situation has created a considerable challenge for Africa in terms of growth, infrastructure development and social inclusion. Investment in telecommunications must continue to contribute solutions to these challenges, generating substantial ripple effects across the whole economy and furthering social development.

Secondly, this book offers far more than a mainstream analysis of economic development. It follows the footsteps of Albert Hirschman in The Strategy of Economic Development (Yale University Press, 1958), with the thesis that the specificity of economic development in emerging countries is the result of a series of imbalances. The author presents five digital 'leaps' that need to occur in Africa. These are significant leaps rather than advances resulting from gradual ongoing progress. Hence the leapfrog metaphor and the image of a frog jumping from one point to another. This is a well-known phenomenon within the telecommunications sector that has seen the African continent cut corners with fixed-line networks and surge ahead at an incredible pace to acquire very high-speed mobile

services that have allowed it to fully embrace digital technologies. It has thus gained access to global services such as Google and Facebook and developed its own innovation ecosystems without resorting to fixed internet as was the case in the early days of European and American internet use.

Thirdly, while the author's many examples convince us that the digital medium is an extraordinary development opportunity for Africa, he acknowledges that much remains to be done – especially in relation to digital social inclusion and service development. He therefore makes a strong and pertinent argument for Africa to chart its own course. At Orange, we operate in more than 20 countries and are committed to African digital entrepreneurs. So, as the African continent breaks new ground, influencing digital technologies well beyond its own borders, we know that in many sectors, Africa is seen as the laboratory for tomorrow's digital world. For example, this is the case for mobile payments.

It is clear that this book explores our shared digital future while avoiding the pitfalls of a Technology-solves-everything approach. This makes it a valuable tool for all those seeking to understand and participate in current developments.

Stéphane Richard
CEO of Orange