

TWIN PEAKS: WSIS FROM GENEVA TO TUNIS

Whither Africa in the Information Society?

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Abstract / This article looks at the emergence of ICT for development activities in Africa with the advent of the African Information Society Initiative (AISI), which is an action framework led by the UN Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) to address digital divide issues on the continent. The discussion is presented in the context of Africa's subsequent participation in the WSIS process, with the preparatory meeting held in Bamako, Mali in May 2002. Developmental concerns were central to the debates raised at the meeting and remained central in deliberations in Geneva. The article analyses Africa's participation and considers the gains resulting from the Summit and explores the prospects for implementation of the Plan of Action at country level. Furthermore, the article looks ahead to Tunis 2005 with proposals as to what the relevant considerations should be.

Keywords / Africa / AISI / ICTs / information society / WSIS

Overview

The advent of the information society through the introduction of information and communication technologies (ICTs) over the last decade has brought dramatic improvement and opened up opportunities for many African countries. Despite having one of the weakest communication infrastructures in the world by most standards, there is now greater access by citizens to information than ever before.

Liberalization of the telecommunication sector as a result of economic reforms attracted private sector participation in the delivery of valued-added services. The last 10 years have seen dramatic improvements in Africa's ICT sector. Internet users have, within a decade, surpassed 5 million users. In less than 10 years, the number of internet hosts increased from a mere 28,000 to over 280,000 in 2001. Mobile services have outpaced fixed telephones (ECA, 2003(a): 1). In 1997-9, the number of landline users in Uganda inched up from 54,000 to 59,000. Over the same period and with the introduction of competition, the number of mobile users exploded from 7000 to 87,000 (*The Economist*, 2001: 9).

Furthermore, through the African Information Society Initiative (AISI), led by the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), a fully-fledged ICT for Development programme was put in place to support emerging activities in African countries.

The African Information Society Initiative

The process of developing an African vision for the information age began in April 1995 with the African Regional Symposium on Telematics for Development organized by ECA, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC). This event brought together some 300 information technology experts, senior government officials and private sector leaders from over 50 countries and resulted in further conceptualizing an African information infrastructure.

In May 1995 the 21st meeting of the ECA Conference of Ministers, which consists of the 53 African ministers of social and economic development and planning, adopted Resolution 795 (XXX) titled 'Building Africa's Information Highway'. In response to this resolution, ECA appointed a High-Level Working Group on Information and Communications Technologies in Africa to draft an action framework to utilize ICTs to accelerate the socioeconomic development of Africa and its people.

The High-Level Working Group consisted of 11 experts on information technology in Africa. The group met in Cairo, Dakar and Addis Ababa and communicated further by electronic mail. This resulted in 'Africa's Information Society Initiative (AISI): An Action Framework to Build Africa's Information and Communication Infrastructure'. The document was submitted to the 22nd meeting of the ECA Conference of Ministers in May 1996 and adopted by Resolution 812 (XXXI) titled 'Implementation of the African Information Society Initiative'. This initiative is currently supporting and accelerating socioeconomic development across the region. Driven by critical development imperatives, it focuses on priority strategies, programmes and projects, which can assist in the sustainable build-up of an information society in African countries.

The four major development goals that were articulated by African leaders that formed the basis for AISI were:

- Improvement of the quality of life for every African;
- Economic integration of the region;
- Improved trade and other linkages with the global community;
- Utilization of information technology by all Africans

To achieve the strategic objectives of the AISI each member state needed to consider ways of making the following actions an integral part of their national plans and programmes (ECA, 1996: 4):

- Develop a master plan for building national information and telecommunication infrastructures and a two- to five-year plan for implementation;
- Establish strong regulatory bodies independent from operators and their ministries, to stimulate and regulate public-private sector partnerships and review fiscal policies (such as tariffs, duties and licence fees);

- Eliminate or drastically reduce import tariffs, taxes and other legal barriers to the use of ICTs;
- Establish an enabling environment to foster the development of information and communications in society, including measures which energize the private sector to play a leading market role in the provision of services and in the human resource development needed to use them effectively;
- Implement a policy for using ICTs in government services and develop national databases in all key sectors of the economy and national administration;
- Conduct needs analysis to determine requirements and set up information and communication services in key sectors of national priority, especially education, health, employment, culture, environment, trade, finance, tourism and transport.
- Identify and develop IT applications in areas with the highest impact on socioeconomic development at the national level;
- Take immediate steps to facilitate the establishment of locally based, low-cost and widely accessible Internet services and indigenous African content;
- Prepare and adopt plans to develop human resources in ICTs;
- Adopt policies and strategies to increase access to information and communication facilities, with priorities in serving the rural areas, grassroots and other disenfranchised groups, in particular, women and youth;
- Make special efforts to create awareness among those unfamiliar with potential benefits of the African information infrastructure, with particular attention to gender equity.

At the continental level, the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) framework has identified ICT-related projects and initiatives to speed up subregional and regional connectivity and interconnectivity plans. NEPAD aims to strengthen the Regional Economic Communities (RECs), whose role should be to coordinate national efforts and harmonize national regulatory frameworks across the subregions. AISI is the framework for co-ordinating the support that United Nations agencies provide to NEPAD. AISI also serves as a mechanism for achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in Africa. Seven among the eight MDGs are contained in the AISI framework document.

The impact of AISI has been the increase in numbers of African countries developing national e-policies known as the National Information and Communication Infrastructure Plan (NICI). NICIs relate to regulations, enabling environment and procedures that may lead to development of NICI activities. NICI also encompasses development of human resources in the public/private and civil society sectors engaged in building infrastructure; creating applications and value-added services; carrying out training programmes and training users; acquiring and selling equipment as well as providing internet and other ICT services. Further, the developers, administrators, users and the population at large are an integral part of the NICI process and should be involved in its development from the beginning.

The success in implementing e-policies is evident in that the number of countries with ICT policies increased from 13 in 2000 to 16 in 2002, while

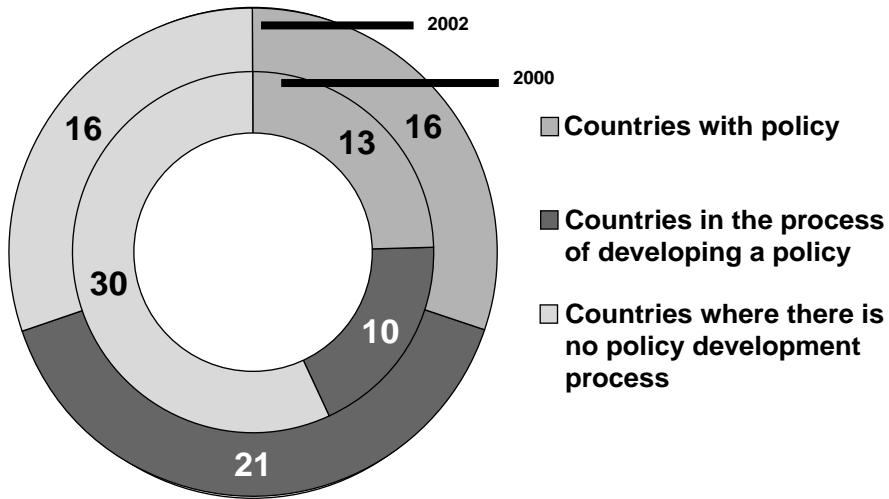
countries in the process of developing a policy jumped from 10 in 2000 to 21 in 2002. Thus, as shown in Figure 1, the number of countries without a plan was reduced from 30 to 16 in 2002.

This background contextualizes Africa's position with respect to building an information society and the kind of steps being taken by various countries to attain ICT4D (Information and Communication Technologies for Development) goals.

Against this backdrop, involvement in the WSIS process and subsequently in the Summit itself was a natural progression from what is currently being implemented on the ground. The Regional Preparatory Conference for the WSIS gave a unique opportunity to renew the commitment of member states and bilateral and multilateral development partners of Africa to the realization of the visions enshrined in the AISI.

FIGURE 1

Development of a National ICT Policy in African Countries



The Road to Geneva: First Stop – Bamako

In preparation for the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), the African Regional Conference was convened in Bamako, Mali, 26–30 May 2002. The conference was organized by ECA in collaboration with the government of Mali with support from key development partners. Participants were representatives of 51 African countries, and people representing African and global organizations, the private sector and civil society.

Fourteen pre-conference workshops were organized as follows:

- Local initiatives;
- NICI strategies;
- African languages and the internet;

- Media and an ICT forum;
- Gender and ICTs;
- Cultural diversity and knowledge ownership;
- African NGO consultation;
- Review and appraisal of ICT impact: the Scan-ICT Project;
- Private sector forum;
- Free software: the stakes for Africa;
- Law and the web;
- Local communities and ICTs;
- Training of least developed countries (LDCs) for their participation in WSIS activities;
- The national strategy of Mali.

The conference, dubbed Bamako 2002, was based on four main workshops:

- What the information society brings to Africa;
- What Africa brings to the information society;
- What Africa wants to preserve in the information society;
- How Africa can benefit from the information society: round-table on the digital divide.

Bamako 2002 undertook the following tasks:

- Conduct a regional assessment of the relevant challenges, opportunities and constraints faced by the region and resulting from global developments in the information society.
- Confirm the vision for an information-based society in the region and a strategy to achieve that vision.
- Establish a platform for dialogue and contributions that includes all major stakeholders.
- Share experiences and provide an opportunity to forge a better understanding of the concerns of the countries in the region, to prepare their positions and to identify the key themes for the Summit.
- Identify existing initiatives and networks in the regions and assess examples of best practices.
- Consider new initiatives and commitments within the region and its subregions with a view to overcoming the prevailing constraints and fostering further progress towards achieving the vision of an information society.
- Prepare contributions for consideration by the ensuing PrepComs.

The Bamako Declaration on WSIS is reproduced in Figure 2.

FIGURE 2

The Bamako Declaration on WSIS

We, participants in the Africa Regional Conference, representing African Governments, the private sector and civil society organizations meeting in Bamako, Republic of Mali from 28 to 30 May 2002, in the presence of many invited government representatives and observers from international, governmental and non governmental organizations, do solemnly affirm that:

- The Global Information Society should address the interests of all nations, most particularly, the interests of the developing countries;
- The creation of local content should be accorded high priority;
- Communication, forming as it does the basis of individual and societal existence, should be managed in a manner that secures the fair, balanced and harmonious development of all the people of the world with particular attention to the needs and aspirations of the most disadvantaged in society and those of African people in particular;
- All partners, public, private sector and civil society organizations, more specifically small and medium size enterprises, have a stake in the development of communications and should be fully involved in decision making at the local, national, regional and international levels;
- As a matter of vital necessity, global and regional available resources should be pooled in order to extend the benefits of ICTs to all inhabitants of the world.

In this connection, the representatives of African governments, civil society and the private sector, having noted the potential of ICTs to be harnessed for African development, maintain that the following principles should guide all the thinking, which goes into articulating a common vision of the information society. These principles are of particular importance to the developing countries, especially the African countries.

1. All citizens should be provided with the means of using ICT networks as a public service.
2. Every citizen should be guaranteed freedom of expression and protected access to information in the worldwide public domain as part of their inalienable right to freely accessing the information constituting the heritage of mankind which is disseminated in all media including new multimedia systems.
3. Technology supply should be diversified through:

- The removal of regulatory, political and financial obstacles to the development of communication facilities and tools so as to meet the specific needs of citizens in all circumstances;
 - The implementation of an operational plan of action geared to the cultural and linguistic specificities of all countries, in particular those in Africa;
 - The development of data bases on experiences concerning the introduction of new technologies that address the needs of rural areas and their capacity to pay;
 - The promotion of open source software packages that extend the life of investment and user training. Because they are provided free of charge, implementation of open source software programmes is done with minimum cost;
 - The use of voice and touch screen applications that enable a greater number of people to participate in the information society.
4. Investment and funding strategies should be pursued through assistance with content creation and democratization of access with particular emphasis to women and the youth.
 5. Multilingualism should be promoted and cultural diversity maintained as the driving force for the process of developing content for local and international use.
 6. The full participation of the civil society and the private sector should be elicited at all levels of local, national, regional and international decision making related to the information society. These should be pursued by:
 - Forging new forms of partnership based on complementarities among the various categories of public, private sector and civil society stakeholders;
 - Establishing and/or strengthening at the local, national, regional and international levels, institutions that will create greater coherence and achieve better synergy in developing the information society.
 7. Cooperation and collaboration should be enhanced through:
 - Networking on best practices and experiences as a way of building the type of knowledge needed for the harmonious development of new technologies;
 - The development of applications and content suited to local needs;

- The development of training plans that familiarize people with new technologies, their use and the legal framework of the information society;
 - The strengthening of decentralized cooperation as one way of leveraging the reduction of the digital divide;
 - The strengthening of networks that can increase individual participation in local, national, regional and international democracy.
8. Institutional, human and administrative capacity should be strengthened at the local, national, regional and international levels in order to achieve greater complementarities among all initiatives being taken to build the information society.
 9. Democratic debate should be instituted on the new institutional and regulatory arrangements being made to define the social, cultural, economic, technical and ethical challenges posed by the new information and communication technologies.
 10. All these principles and plans of action should be pursued within competent institutions so that the building of information society can be managed with the full participation of all the relevant stakeholders.

In this context, the **Africa Regional Conference** reiterates its full support for those global initiatives that have been adopted at the global as well as regional and continental levels.

It particularly requests the international community to give its full support to the African Information Society Initiative (AISI), the recommendations of the African Development Forum (ADF '99) and the ICT component of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). In this connection, the ICT programme of NEPAD should federate all the ICT initiatives of the continent and mobilize resources for funding of the major African projects.

It further requests that the various networks and foundations working to promote the use of new information and communication technologies and to narrow the digital divide, especially the Global Knowledge Partnership and the ANAIS network be given the support and resources they need.

In view of the preparations for the World Summit on the Information Society, the Africa Regional Conference of Bamako has considered:

A. What the information society could bring to Africa:

In that context, the *Africa Regional Conference* requests that:

- Africa should benefit, in the framework of NEPAD from the immediate, massive and coordinated mobilization of all development partners to provide such financing as would guarantee public service, universal access and content creation that address the essential needs of the people of Africa;
- The *establishment* before the second Prepcom meeting of the Geneva Summit of:
 - a) a training fund that would familiarize participants with all the issues concerning the development of the information society;
 - b) a 'high level scientific committee' that will make recommendations to the second Prepcom meeting about the challenges facing the information society particularly when it comes to developing countries, especially those in Africa;
 - c) an information and advisory structure that would facilitate the participation of African civil society organizations and SMEs in the preparation of the World Summit;
 - d) a solidarity fund to secure the full and effective participation of African civil society organizations and SMEs in the preparatory process;
- The study and promotion of relevant solutions adapted to the environment for ICTs, especially in the rural areas;
- The development of solutions and the promotion of ICT initiatives to sustain local African creativity;
- Establishment of public access points and the creation of an African backbone using innovative communication infrastructure;
- A set of concrete proposals for ICT use in education and training in Africa should be developed for submission to the second Prepcom meeting;
- The full and effective involvement of civil society and local stakeholders in developing new ICT applications should be secured;
- Pilot studies should be promoted for replication at the local, national and regional levels with the view to securing access to new ICTs at affordable cost, particularly in the rural areas.

B. What Africa can contribute to the information society

In this connection, the *Africa Regional Conference* particularly requests that:

- The rich cultural diversity of Africa should be showcased and widely disseminated in cyberspace;

- Support should be provided to the ICT activities of the African Language Academy;
- A special fund should be set up for digitizing African archives and libraries which form the cultural heritage of the continent and can be part of Africa's contribution to the information society;
- Among other things, African fora and seminars should be organized with the objective of collecting and showcasing local experiences for the benefit of all stakeholders;
- Systematically, the specific features of Africa should be taken into account in international decision-making.

C. Narrowing the digital divide

In this area, the *Africa Regional Conference*:

- Is of the opinion that narrowing the digital divide must go with the development of telecommunication infrastructure suited to the need of African people and citizens;
- Welcomes the regional and global initiatives being taken to narrow the digital divide particularly from ECA, ATU, ITU, the G8, the UN ICT Task Force, UNDP, UNCTAD, the Francophony Agency, OECD, the World Bank, the Commonwealth Telecommunication Organisation, bilateral and multilateral cooperation agencies, NGOs and civil society organizations;
- Invites the traditional partners of Africa to heighten the priority to narrowing the digital divide in their development policy, particularly with the European Union under the Cotonou Agreement;
- Invites partners to study how best to optimize the cost of access to ICTs with the view to identifying the rules for organizing the international connectivity market and the sharing of markets at the national level.

The Conference further requests that:

a) *African States should:*

- Contribute fully to the preparations for both phases of WSIS, namely Geneva 2003 and Tunis 2005;
- adopt policies to stimulate the building of ICT infrastructure and providing universal access particularly in rural and remote areas through innovative and Africa-friendly solutions;
- fully involve African civil society organizations in the formulation of the operational strategy and implementation of the ICT component of NEPAD;

- remove duties levied on ICT hardware and software until the second phase of WSIS takes place in Tunis in 2005;
- formulate coherent national and regional policies and strategies for ICTs development (taking into account the multimedia convergence) which are likely to attract private national and international investments;
- adopt the ‘African charter’ on radio broadcasting as a framework for the development of policies and legislations regarding information technologies and broadcasting in Africa;
- set up national committees bringing together the three components of the information society, namely the public sector, the private sector and civil society;
- actively involve the youth in national and regional ICT activities;
- ensure better gender balance in ICT use while instituting specific programmes that address the need of women particularly those aimed at rural and disenfranchised areas;
- recreate the ‘African news exchange’;
- establish a multilateral African television network;
- invest in African media content as well as new technologies;
- develop independent production.

b) *The World Summits in Geneva and Tunis should, respectively:*

- adopt in Geneva, in December 2003 a plan of action for developing infrastructure suited to the needs of people and citizens of developing countries, with particular attention to African and other least developed countries (LDCs);
- adopt in Tunis, in 2005 any other additional plan of action for narrowing the digital gap that would address the needs of developing countries, particularly those in Africa.

c) *Bilateral and multilateral funding agencies should:*

- pay particular attention to financing infrastructure facilities and content suited to the needs of the people and citizens;
- pay particular attention to the involvement of the representatives of the civil society in all decisions relating to ICT development.

d) *Development partners:*

- pay particular attention to human resources training and development, particularly teachers and students so as to promote content and infrastructure development with the view to facilitate the emergence of an African service industry based on ICTs;

- contribute to the forging of innovative and constructive partnerships among donors, public authorities, the private sector and civil society in order to develop ICTs and content and build the infrastructure.

e) *Intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations should:*

- actively and effectively promote and implement concrete projects in their respective areas of competence so that African people and citizens can fully benefit from ICTs;
- in particular:
 - *ECA* should continue to pursue the implementation of AISI in terms of the formulation and implementation of National Information and Communication Infrastructure (NICI) policies and strategies and the related sectoral plans;
 - *ITU* should pay particular attention to Africa in the implementation of the Istanbul declaration and plan of action on the digital divide by taking into account those priority areas set out in the Yaounde Declaration;
 - *UNESCO* should mobilize all its national committees with the view to secure the participation of all stakeholders, especially civil society organizations, in the WSIS preparatory process by requesting them to submit proposals that will help the preparatory process along;
 - *UNITAR* should mobilize its teams and partners to propose training plans in consultation with local stakeholders (within the context of the international centre for training local stakeholders), associations, international organizations and academic institutions in the member countries concerned.
 - *The Executive Secretariat of WSIS should:*
 - take special care to secure the participation of African civil society in the preparation of the Summit by:
 - keeping all African NGOs permanently informed in their working languages of progress made in the preparation of WSIS;
 - securing the participation of civil society representatives in all the national, regional or global events leading up to the World Summit;
 - make sure that the bureau of the **Africa Regional Conference** is able to monitor all the preparations leading

to the Prepcom and the World Summit in close collaboration with the bureau of the PrepCom.

D. Instituting new forms of cooperation

As a way of narrowing the digital divide, participants in the Africa Regional Conference request that the local initiatives and experiences of local authorities in the more advanced countries should be shared with the local authorities of African countries. For that to happen, the Africa Regional Conference requests the competent bodies of local authority, particularly the World Federation of Local Authorities and the International Union of Local Authorities to commit all their members to developing decentralized forms of cooperation that will narrow the digital divide.

In this regard, the **Africa Regional Conference** welcomes the initiatives taken by the cities of Lyon, Geneva, Bamako and Tunis to promote e-governance locally and commends the Lyon initiative to organize the *World Summit of Local Authorities on the Information Society* to be held before the Geneva Summit in 2003. The Conference urges all bilateral and multilateral funding agencies and private corporations to give this initiative their full support.

Noting the personal commitment of H.E. Mr. Alpha Oumar Konare, in promoting the harnessing of ICTs for development, the **Africa Regional Conference** requests President Konare to be so kind as to accept to preside over, as Africa's candidate, under the aegis of NEPAD, the preparatory activities leading to the Geneva Summit of 10–12 December 2003 and the Tunis Summit of the year 2005.

The **Africa Regional Conference** expresses its appreciation for the support extended by the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) and The Fondation du Devenir to make this Regional Conference a success. It would like to single out the Swiss authorities and the European Union Commission for their financial contribution, which proved crucial for the organization of this first Regional Conference in the WSIS preparatory process. Its appreciation goes to the Telecommunication Development Bureau of ITU, UNESCO, UNDP, UNITAR, the Agence internationale de la francophonie, the World Bank, the GKP, USAID, France, Sweden and the Republic and Canton of Geneva for their contribution.

Last but not least, the participants would like to express their appreciation to the Malian Authorities for convening this Regional Conference and the Secretariat of Bamako 2002 for organizing this event, which has enabled all African States, civil society organizations and businesses to plug fully into the WSIS preparatory process (Geneva 2003, Tunis 2005).

Bamako, 30 May 2002

The Bamako 2002 recommendations were very much part of the WSIS process. After adoption of the declaration, the conference also called for the creation of the Bamako 2002 Bureau and requested ECA to serve as the Bureau's secretariat for Africa's participation in WSIS activities to Geneva and Tunis. These included:

1. National consultation processes to consolidate African views on the information society held in Ethiopia, Ghana, Mali and Niger;
2. Stakeholders' workshops such as to define the immediate and future roles of African academia in information society and their participation in the WSIS process. Furthermore, a workshop on strengthening civil society participation in the WSIS process was held in Addis Ababa in November 2002.
3. On-line discussions with key stakeholders on themes such as ICTs and governance; the role of African civil society in ICT policy development. The African civil society in particular were able to mobilize themselves with respect to their participation in the WSIS preparatory process as a result of the Bamako and Addis meetings. As one discussant asked during the on-line debate, 'What are we negotiating for in the WSIS process? What do we expect to get from the five priorities? Are the priorities African or are they ones that we Africans want to be part of? It is therefore important for us to be ready to help our governments in developing powerful arguments to back up what we consider as our top African priorities' (ECA, 2003: 42). Another comment was: 'Africa should come together in a strong way to present a common position in all the priority areas. We have peculiar problems in Africa and this should be adequately addressed in whatever decision that will be taken at the summit' (ECA, 2003(b): 43). Also discussion lists on the role of academia and media in the information society were created.

Any Achievements?

There are two schools of thought regarding the achievements of the Summit. There are those who view the event as a talking shop, which will not have significant impact on the lives of ordinary people. For others, this event, one of two, heralds the advent of the information society and the recognition that the world has finally come to realize the importance of ICTs.

Africa's presence during this Summit was visible from two fronts. First it was the continent that had the highest number of leaders in attendance. The presidents of Ghana, Mozambique, Nigeria, Rwanda and Senegal were in Geneva as well as the vice-president of the Gambia and a host of ministers. Many ICT4D activist felt this was positive and if anything, the Summit would further serve to sensitize these leaders to the importance of information society issues. Indeed, some of the speeches made at the Summit reflect some degree of political willingness to consider ICTs and take the issue seriously. During his Summit speech on 10 December 2003, President Paul Kagame of Rwanda stated:

It has become abundantly clear to us in Africa that ICT is an indispensable tool in the achievement of our development outcomes, as well as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). . . . ICT has been integrated into our development strategy; as a catalyst for economic growth and social transformation.

The event was also an occasion for African countries to showcase to the world that they were not, as some might think, being left behind. It was also a fertile ground for countries to solicit support and seek partnerships in the information society. In a press conference held on 10 December in Geneva, Ghana's Minister for Communication and Technology, Albert Kan-Dapaah, took the opportunity to solicit for investments in the sector, stating:

. . . the current state of communication infrastructure in our country requires that a major facelift is undertaken to promote nondiscriminatory modern high speed communications backbone that would facilitate the transportation of traffic from one point to another. Public/private partnership is being urgently solicited in the development of the backbone.

Senegal's President Abdoulaye Wade used the occasion to launch his Digital Solidarity Fund concept as well as reinforce the objectives of NEPAD, as the country leads and is responsible for the infrastructure cluster of this initiative, which includes ICTs. As a result, the final Declaration states:

We welcome the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) and encourage the international community to support the ICT-related measures of this initiative as well as those belonging to similar efforts in other regions. Distribution of the benefits of ICT-driven growth contributes to poverty eradication and sustainable development. (Declaration of Principles, Article 43; see Documentation Section)

Furthermore, President Wade gained tremendously from the Summit when the Swiss and Indian governments as well as the city of Lyon in France made contributions totalling 1 million euros to the Digital Solidarity Fund (DSF). Reacting to the initial support, Senegalese Minister of Communications Mamadou Diop Decroix said: 'We felt the Summit should not be allowed to finish with the usual declarations and felt it important to come up with concrete plans of action' (Mutasa, 2003). However, the Summit requested the establishment of a taskforce in early 2004 to come up with a framework to build the fund, and to finance projects to bridge the digital divide between South and North. The group, which will work under the auspices of the UN secretary-general, is to submit its final study document by December 2004.

President of the WSIS Preparatory Committee (PrepCom) Adama Samassekou called on African nations and other developing countries supporting Senegal's proposal to work together to produce a solid report to increase support from more countries. The taskforce review will be submitted for consideration in Tunis. Based on the conclusion of the review, improvements in the financing mechanisms will be considered, including the effectiveness, feasibility and creation of a voluntary DSF, as mentioned in the WSIS Declaration of Principles. Many saw this as an African achievement as African delegates emphasized that existing financial mechanisms were not sufficient to bridge the digital

divide. In support of the concept, ITU secretary-general Yoshio Utsumi said that about 1.5 million villages in developing nations are currently without telephony connectivity, and that it would cost just US\$1.1 billion to connect them, or US\$6.3 billion if internet access was included (Assefa, 2003). Bates Namuyamba, Zambia's Communications Minister, said Africa was particularly affected by the digital divide, and supported the fund for ICT development on the continent. Ghana's President, John Kuffour, called on development actors to support the DSF. The principle is that when the global village is a reality, this technology will be 'the indispensable infrastructure for social, economic, security and other aspects of proper development' (Nabwowe, 2003). Initially, when the idea of the fund was mooted many developed countries showed scepticism. For it to have gained this attention at the end of the Summit is a major coup for Africa and the developing world.

Another significant achievement was that the Summit opened up greater opportunities for incorporating ICTs into development work as well as a greater spirit of cooperation. According to the ECA executive secretary, K.Y. Amoako, 'We are walking away from the Summit with a consensus; a worldwide consensus about the importance of ICTs, about the progress that has been made, about the remaining challenges, strategies, and action plans and the resolve of the international community.' A few years ago it would have been difficult to obtain an agreement for a summit of this nature. The presence of bilateral and multilateral agencies, especially their participation in the ICT4D platform, illustrated the increasing role ICTs are playing in development cooperation.

The Plan of Action: Is There a Reality Check?

The specific targets for measuring the information society in the Plan of Action do provide a basis for countries to take stock of the implementation of their ICT programmes that should be assessed during the next phase of the Summit in 2005. The targets can be useful benchmarks for actions and for the evaluation of the progress made towards the attainment of the overall objectives of the information society, as stated in the document. However, there is barely enough time between Geneva and Tunis for concrete action at the country level followed by evaluation of progress. For countries already implementing e-policies this might be more applicable but it will be harder for those countries that are finalizing national strategies with very little on the ground.

The digital divide in many African countries is almost always between urban and rural centres. The ideal would be to benchmark and evaluate by 2005 the achievements in rural connectivity since Geneva and how much rural infrastructure has been developed as a result of national policies and plans. For instance, a country such as Rwanda that is currently implementing, has in the action plans section of the policy a section with time-bound activities with measurable targets on the development of national multipurpose community telecentres to be set up by key government agencies such as the Ministries of Local Government, Lands, Human Resettlements and Environmental Protection, Ministry of Gender and Women in Development (Government of Rwanda, 2001: 192). It would be useful to evaluate how far such activities have been

carried out. As the continent with the least developed infrastructure, emphasis should also be placed on numbers of villages, towns, schools, colleges and health centres in all countries with access to ICTs.

Currently, the national e-policies of many African countries are reflected in the Plan of Action's articles on aspects such as infrastructural development, involvement of all stakeholders, access, capacity building, confidence and security, creating an enabling environment, ICT applications, culture and local content. The Ghana ICT policy has 14 pillars (Government of Ghana, 2003: 24) targeted at:

- Accelerated human resource development;
- Promoting ICTs in education;
- Facilitating government administration and service delivery;
- Facilitating the development of the private sector;
- Developing an export-oriented ICT products and services industry;
- Modernization of agriculture and the development of the agro-business industry;
- Developing a globally competitive and value-added services sector;
- Deployment and spread of ICTs in the community;
- Promotion of national health;
- Rapid ICT and enabling physical infrastructure development;
- Research and development, scientific and industrial research capacity development;
- Legal, regulatory and institutional framework provision;
- Promoting local and foreign direct investment;
- Facilitating national security, law and order.

As a broad-based document, the action lines of the Plan of Action can be adapted to any country. However, what it lacks is specific guidance for countries as to how to fast-track their information society activities, nor does it really quantify the full benefits for them. The burning question here is will the fund proposed and initiated by President Wade and supported by other African leaders be of any benefit to countries as they roll out their ICT initiatives? Issues of sustainability have to be addressed and conditions developed as the funds are disbursed so as to avoid expensive white elephant ICT projects. Already, there are indications that the telecentres are not sustainable.

The worldwide telecentres movement started in Western Europe and spread into other industrialized countries where rural isolation, lack of purchasing power and low-quality telecommunications and information technology facilities were seen to be a hindrance to participation in the information economy (Oestmann and Dymond, 2001). Consequently, telecentres should be introduced as a multi-stakeholder partnership (communities, government agencies, local government authorities, private businesses and development agencies). All services must be effectively costed to ensure everyone is fully aware of the range available.

The Missing Links

Although issues of gender are integrated in the entire document and referred to eight times, there is still a case for it to have been singled out as a single action line. In a statement by the WSIS Gender Caucus issued on the last day of the Summit,

... women's perspectives can contribute to making the difference between an Information Economy where gambling and pornography account for the most profitable applications and a true Information Society that serves human development. In our view making that leap will require radical transformation of the ICT sector so that all people, including girls and women of all ages, participate fully; not only as consumers but as citizens. This vision requires dramatic changes in the policies, practices and values of the ICT sector and the governance of the sector.

The Gender Caucus also called for the WSIS Declaration and Plan of Action to acknowledge existing gender divides and recommend action to eliminate them. Even though it does not state this in the broad terms as requested by the Caucus, the Plan of Action makes the following references to gender:

In cooperation with each country concerned, develop and launch a composite ICT Development (Digital Opportunity) Index. It could be published annually, or every two years, in an ICT Development Report. The index could show the statistics while the report would present analytical work on policies and their implementation, depending on national circumstances, including gender analysis. (Article 28.a)

Promote the exchange of best practices on the integration of gender perspectives in ICT education. (Article 11.g)

Work on removing the gender barriers to ICT education and training and promoting equal training opportunities in ICT-related fields for women and girls. (Article 11.g)

Encourage the development of best practices for e-workers and e-employers built, at the national level, on principles of fairness and gender equality, respecting all relevant international norms. (Article 19.a)

Strengthen programmes focused on gender-sensitive curricula in formal and non-formal education for all and enhancing communication and media literacy for women with a view to building the capacity of girls and women to understand and to develop ICT content. (Article 23.h)

The Caucus refers to the need for women to be more represented in technology research, design and development and encouraged through appropriate, targeted education in this area. They urged that women become equal partners in conceptualizing, designing and implementing technology. However, the idea for developing a composite ICT Development (Digital Opportunity) Index with gender analysis should be taken seriously so as to provide the necessary indicators for women's role in the information society. Gender activists need to consider advocacy around this issue particularly in countries where national e-policies are being developed.

The Summit gave little prominence to intellectual leadership and the role

of academia. In fact, the Plan of Action only refers to them once: 'Invite relevant stakeholders, especially the academia, to continue research on ethical dimensions of ICTs' (article 25.d). Undoubtedly, academia represent an unequalled source of knowledge, expertise and innovation. Realizing the limited role that academia played during the Summit, ECA in collaboration with the Ford Foundation have launched a WSIS African Academic Network to enhance and strengthen African intellectual capacity so that they can make significant contributions to the advancement of the African information society as well as incorporate and integrate African views, issues and needs into the WSIS 2005 process. The objectives for launching this network includes building research capacity of academia on key policy issues with respect to the information society in areas that are of significant importance to countries as they build their information societies.

Even though the media get special mention in the Plan of Action and were given a high profile in Geneva, there is still a wide gap in the understanding of information society issues by journalists. This fact is evidenced by a recent publication launched in Geneva by the ECA, titled *African Media and ICT4D: Documentary Evidence*. This is a baseline study on the state of media reporting on ICT and information society issues in Africa. The mass media should be playing a critical role in spreading awareness of the benefits that can be obtained from the effective use of ICTs in, for instance, medicine, so that rural communities that have to travel hundreds of kilometres for medical information can gain access to it from their villages. Journalists can explain how, through computers, X-rays can be taken of people living in rural areas and sent via email to capital cities where doctors can diagnose and prescribe treatment from this simple act. In the same vein, information could be published such as how farmers can use personal digital assistants (PDAs) to sell their produce, identifying buyers and markets in a relatively short space of time (see Opoku-Mensah, 2003: 1). The media in Africa are, with notable exceptions, far from being a promoter of the information society and are often ill-prepared for reporting on these issues. If the information society is to be accessible to all, media needs and capacity must be fully integrated into the equation.

Tunis, Here We Come: Conclusions

Between Geneva and Tunis there has to be a systematic way of following up on the Plan of Action as to how it is being implemented on the ground. Within this context how do we evaluate the role of various stakeholders in the process? How do we evaluate in Tunis the progress made since Geneva? What are the mechanisms for doing this? These are some of the questions that need answers and should be included in the proposed PrepComs running up to Tunis. The next conference has to be more action-oriented with clear indicators as to how the information society is benefiting economies, creating wealth for the world's poor, and saving lives. It also has to demonstrate the kinds of partnerships that have been formed to sustain the information society.

If Geneva showcased grassroots, civil society, media and government efforts, Tunis should focus on the private sector and academia and give

prominence to the role of private capital in support of innovative schemes. The private sector will always be the engine for driving the information economy and consequently its role has to be more pronounced. In the case of Africa, political will is still needed from governments to invest in the sector and not leave it to the international development and investment communities alone. There has to be more transparency and accountability from them as to how they are contributing towards building information societies in their countries. There can be no room for platitudes in Tunis. How much of the national budget are governments committing to the ICT sectors? How much infrastructure development has taken place? How were these achieved? These are the kinds of issues that should be looked at.

Another issue, which makes the information society a difficult and complex area, is that it needs to be integrated into other sectors. The Tunis Summit needs to further investigate how such integration is taking place. How, for instance, are ICTs being used for fight poverty and consequently how do the policies (poverty reduction strategies and ICT policies) merge? What is being done in countries? In other words, we must move from the rhetoric and often anecdotal instances of ICTs and their benefits to more concrete, quantifiable examples. During the Geneva Summit there was a workshop on developing indicators for measuring the information society. Such efforts need to be intensified in Africa. A pilot study conducted by ECA and IDRC with support from the European Commission and the Norwegian International Development Agency (NORAD) in Ethiopia, Ghana, Morocco, Mozambique, Senegal and Uganda points to the fact that such indicators will become useful tools for measuring the sustainability of the information society.

The involvement of the private sector and academia can support Africa-specific solutions. Here the issue of multilingualism and the preservation of cultural heritage comes up. As a continent full of hundreds of different languages, the challenge will be how these languages are adapted to further increase access to the information society, especially for rural areas. Even though the Plan of Action states the need to support multilingualism, there are political, economic, financial, social and cultural imperatives that have to be carefully examined at the country and regional levels. Consequently, how are countries going to tackle some of these issues? Of immediate concern is whether countries are standardizing their orthographies for IT use.

There are still some burning issues that will become more and more pertinent to the African information society agenda in the coming years. Intellectual property rights, for instance, were touched upon here and there during the Summit. IPR is important to African countries, yet it gets very little attention. Countries need to pay attention to the issues of IPR in general but with respect to the information society in particular. Consequently, African nations will need to find strategies for information management and efficient dissemination of intellectual property information.

Ultimately, Tunis should be the platform for providing emerging trends in technology for various parts of the world. In addition, it must also expose the negative sides of the information society. What are the potential dangers for developing countries where cybercrime is concerned? How will the developing

world have a louder voice in issues concerning ICTs at the international level? What is important is that the preparations for Tunis should have a multi-stakeholder approach, whereby the different themes and different stakeholders have as much say as possible. Therefore, in 2005 there should be a broader stakeholdership than there was in Geneva.

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