

Empowering Communities in the Information Society

Keynote address by

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very happy to have the opportunity to address the conference on Empowering Communities in the Information Society. The questions you are addressing over the next three days are exactly those we at the Economic Commission for Africa have been grappling with as we elaborate our programme in Harnessing Information for Development and launch the African Information Society Initiative. These are our concerns: How can the Information Society be relevant to rural areas? How can it take into account needs of the poor, the illiterate? Women? Youth?

We at ECA are firmly convinced the Africa has no choice but to enter the Information Age if we want our countries to be competitive in the global economy. At the same time we are deeply concerned that the Information Society be an equitable one. Its arrival should not mean the creation of new elites, of new inequities built around information as a resource. The information revolution is not about pipes and computers, but about people and how they live. All of Africa's people are stakeholders in the Information Society. Information empowers and information frees people at all levels of society, regardless of their gender, their level of education or their status, to make rational decisions and to improve the quality of their lives.

Thus, our concern is that the information society and its benefits are equitable- across regions and gender, between cities and rural areas; that

communities that in the past have been disenfranchised, both economically and politically, can use the information society for their own empowerment.

What is information empowerment? How can information empower formerly powerless communities?

Looking only at its economic aspects, some of the things that information, utilizing information technology, can do are:

- * Bring jobs to keep rural residents from migrating to cities and exacerbating urban pressures.
- * Give local producers access to market information and potential customers;
- * Give local businesses access to government information and services,

without a trip to a provincial or national capital, which they need to develop and be competitive in rural areas;

* Train workers, through distance education, in new industries established where costs are lower;

* Reverse the brain-drain: city-dwellers might consider returning to work in the rural areas where they grew up if they could consult health specialists, find information, and learn new skills.

Thus, information technology can be a tool to help enhance the individuals participation in society as consumers, workers, managers and owners.

Let me draw an analogy from a South-South perspective that we can then apply to the African situation to illustrate the importance of policy choices now, when African countries have the possibility of entering the information age. And please pardon me if I fall back on the rather tired highway metaphor that so many of us have been using.

This is a tale of two highways: one in Asia and one in Latin America. The highway in Asia is intended to link a capital city with another city often used as a weekend resort. It is hard to deny that the road was built by the elite for the elite. It is a beautiful, very smooth and very limited access highway. It has fences and walls on both sides. Neighbor has been artificially separated from neighbor. Families must make long detours to the infrequent crossover points when they want to visit relatives who used to be only a short stroll away. When built there was a high toll for using the highway which effectively shut out not only horse carts, of course, but all those who could not afford the toll. Rural incomes went down along the highway. The people could only sigh as luxury cars whipped past them on the way to a restful weekend.

Now let us look at a transport network in Latin America. Great care had been made to take the roads to where the people lived, in this case in the Andes. Feeder roads lead from village down to the main roads. With access assured by careful public investment, there is a flow of social and economic services which adds tremendous value to the lives of the people. Schooling and health services have become commonplace. Farmers have doubled their incomes because of better access to markets. The people in the rural areas routinely help to maintain the roads which have become so vital to their lives.

There are actual cases: one where the common people were harmed by the highway and one where the people were helped. The point here is that there is no such thing as "the" information highway any more than there is only "the" asphalt highway. There are many choices we can make in laying the foundation for an encompassing global information age. Some of those choices will wall off poor people just as surely as the highway in Asia created physical walls. Other choices will incorporate people and they will flourish.

Will Africa's information highway look like a restricted speedway or an integrated feeder road system? In my own country, Ghana, the setting up of Internet by a local firm has been widely lauded. But this firm offers Internet services for \$100 per month payable in US currency, -three months of the

average income of a journalist and a fortune for most students. In order that the Information Society is inclusive rather than exclusive lies at the level of policy choice, which is where most African Governments are now.

In constructing national information and communication infrastructure plans, such as South Africa is doing now, especially with its recently adopted White Paper on Telecommunications Policy, the concern with equity has to be prominent at the level of policy development.

At the Economic Commission for Africa we have just launched the African Information Society Initiative: an action framework to build Africa's information and communications infrastructure. The Initiative was adopted just last week in Addis Ababa by the Conference of African Ministers of Planning and Development. It was drafted, at the request of African countries a year ago, by a working group of African experts in information and communication technologies. Two of the experts, by the way, were South African. This framework will be the basis for ECA's own programme of work in its focus area of Harnessing Information for Development, one of five focus areas for our entire program of work. The African Information Society Initiative will also serve as the framework for the priority area of informatics under the United Nations System wide Special Initiative on Africa . ECA is the lead agency for the informatics part of the United Nations Special Initiative, working closely with UNESCO, ITU, the World Bank and the International Development Research Centre, all of whom are present at this Conference.

The implementation of the African Information Society Initiative will take place at country level, starting with a national Information and Communication Infrastructure plan, and it will be elaborated through programmes and pilot projects reflecting national needs and priorities. ECA, with its partners, will work directly with countries to assist in drawing up national action plans, to develop programmes and to draft projects to help develop equitable and relevant information services and systems.

The concern for information with equity is a central one of the Initiative. These are some of the things our Initiative says on this score:

Information and communication technologies offer the possibility of information-based industries being set up in rural areas: jobs, without the need for people to migrate to cities, without all the attendant urban ills with which we are familiar. The information age can break the link between jobs and urbanization. The challenge is to create the conditions that enable

people to make a living where they are in rural areas.

Information and communication technologies can no longer be seen as a luxury for the elite but as an absolute necessity for the masses.

All disenfranchised groups must have access to information - women and the poor; rural dwellers: to make rational choices in the economy and to exercise democratic and human rights.

The Information society can be very useful in distance education, in extending the reach of education facilities, particularly for informal learning, to community level.

NGO's are very useful voices in making known the needs of the poor and disenfranchised, and in developing their capacity to make use of the services

offered.

African countries need to greatly increase accessibility to telecommunication networks and services to the global information infrastructure, in particular for people in rural and isolated areas, using affordable telecommunication systems.

The technologies are already there that can bring empowering information to isolated communities. Satellite Communication Systems, such as VSAT, global mobile low Earth Orbit (LEO) satellite systems which are coming and which will greatly cut communication costs in rural areas, fibre optic cables for telecommunications, solar power supplies. And for those who are unfamiliar with technology: community telecentres or telecottages to assist them and give them access to information and communications technology, using simple interfaces, touch screens, and voice based systems in local languages.

Given the action framework, the policy and the technology, the question remains: who is to introduce the information services that will so benefit the rural areas, poor urban communities? The concept of social entrepreneurship may offer some possibilities.

This falls into the debate about liberalization of telecommunications and related information services: is it only governments, increasingly strapped for funds, which can ensure that needed information services reaches the urban and rural poor, or could the private sector realize profit in markets previously regarded as unattractive? With a little creativity, the private sector could recognize opportunities to serve the previously unserved.

An interesting example is that of the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh which is trying to create 35,000 commercially viable telephone companies in rural Bangladesh in tandem with a multinational telecommunications company by lending funds to very poor women to buy cellular phones and by helping each these women to set up this system. This kind of entrepreneurship may be part of the formula needed to focus on spreading as widely as possible the impact of the informatics revolution to empower communities in such areas as higher education in Africa, in secondary education, in community health programmes, in applied science and technology, in rurally-based cellular phone systems and in ways which help small enterprises.

In conclusion, let me say that we started our work at the level of regions to push the frontier- to ensure the Africa appeared on the map of electronic connectivity, to end the gap between information have and have not nations. But the effort can not end at the capital city. Civil society must pressure

Governments and the private sector to ensure that all the citizens in African countries can improve the quality of their lives by using the tools of Information Age.

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