Workshop on "Intellectual Leadership and the African Information Society Initiative: What Role for Africa’s Academic Community?"

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International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI)
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Academia Online Discussion

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The discussions during the first few weeks were very active, covered a wide range of issues and concerns through a total of 45 e-mail messages. The French translation of this summary will follow shortly.

Discussion members not only articulated problems but also shared different and innovative models and ideas to challenge the existing structure and overcome impasses in some cases. This is exactly why the Academia’s contribution is so important to advance the formation of information society in Africa.

1. Objectives of the mailing list

The general aim of the online discussion is to determine how universities and other higher education institutions see their involvement in the development of information societies, and in which areas? What measures should be taken for the involvement of Africa’s academic community in the information society beyond the mere usage of ICTs? How can higher education institutions provide a leadership role to ensure that they become innovative contributors?

The issues to be discussed includes

a. Teaching and human resource development
b. Research
c. The development of skills and capacities amongst communities, schools, libraries and other organs of civil society
d. Technology transfer from universities to other sectors of society

Many participants noted the importance of this forum, as it provides an opportunity to know each other and to jointly evaluate the similarity and complexity of the problems faced in Africa. Through this forum, African intellectuals can jointly strategize upon the way forward. It was reinforced by a list member that the list should come up with practical solutions to real and pressing issues affecting our continent.

2. Questions posted and responses

a. What does the African Information Society Initiative (AISI) mean for you personally and collectively as intellectuals or academics?
Some participants confided that they were not aware of AISI, but recognized the importance in ICT development in the continent. One participant noted that we need to periodically extract best practices that are shared on the lists and apply and mainstream them in relation to ICT usage and application in Africa within the framework of AISI. He also noted that there are a number of isolated projects and initiatives and there must be a way of coordinating these efforts at the continental level.

Another list member lamented that the most critical hurdle in the ICT development in the continent is lack of appropriate and integrated ICT policies in many countries. For example governments maintain monopoly of telecommunications services and restrict access to ICTs and information by closing Internet cafes and imposing high tariffs which are beyond reach for ordinary citizens. The rationale of so doing by governments is to ensure access, maintain subsidy for rural areas and keep the cost down. But he counters this model by proposing that the government can simply improve tax (which US calls the Universal Connectivity Fee) to address these concerns, if equity is in question. He urged this group to take the lead and bridge the gap. Another member reinforced the point and encouraged other members to participate in the ICT policy and plan formulation. With stronger partnership with governments, the academia can contribute innovative ideas and assist the implementation of the plans.

In response to the discussion thread on ICT and the role of governments, one participant noted that the change of governments in many countries negatively affect the development of ICTs, as the new governments cancel initiatives and projects started by the previous regimes. She proposed that Academia act as torch-bearers to ensure continuity and sustainability of ICT initiatives. She continued that Academia can strengthen the link with the private sector to create a win-win situation; the academia provides the leadership and research and hands over technology to industries which in turn commercialize it and fund research in academia. By so doing, universities and research institutes could reduce the risk of abrupt funding cuts due to the change of governments and keep independence from the political dynamics.

A list member pointed out that AISI has not had much impacts on Africa’s information society, as it has remained as a mere statement. It was countered with the list of online resources which highlight recent and expanding activities of NICI development, partnerships as well as outreach activities within the framework. The same participant emphasized the importance of access to information and knowledge dissemination, for which Academia should play more active roles, with stronger linkage with AISI. The research and analysis on Africa’s realities and priorities could be presented to decision makers and citizens. One good example is found in Senegal where the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) has undertaken an initiative to support local researchers. Through these initiatives, it will be possible to have Africa’s voice heard, where more often than not others’ voices are heard more loudly.
b. What do you see as your personal responsibility or contribution to the AISI if any?

Many contributions echoed that African intellectuals have a major role to play in various ways. One of them could be ideas to develop ICTs in Africa at a faster rate with more coordinated efforts. Another is to assist governments to visualize, plan and strategize on how to build capacity. African Academics can also sustain the use of ICTs by collaborating with content developers and with the private sector. Collaboration on local manufacturing and assembling of computers and other hardware, for instance, so as to avoid purchasing ICT products and services from abroad, could help.

Another issue is how to provide ICT access not just to Academia but also to the general public at large. With the technological advancement, reduction of hardware cost and introduction of open and free software, there are ways to enhance access to information, if not to all. The list member wonders if a petrol station could provide space for computer facilities and training, with possible support from oil companies.

In the same vein, another commented that Africa has become so diversified and fragmented that we need to look for more revolutionary ways of reaching a greater majority of people. Especially worrying is the deteriorating quality of basic education across the continent. Those students will build the society of the future and therefore the Academia should protest when governments introduce measures that have a negative impact. The role of women should also be looked at, as their workload has increased but their roles in their societies have been eroded in so many subtle ways.

Related to this point, a list member highlighted the importance of awareness raising and mobilization of various key stakeholders, such as leaders, intellectual and civil society on these questions, in the same way as AIDS activists mobilized the public.

In responding to this week’s question, one participant posed a question on how the African intellectual can create ICT knowledge and information rather than be the consumer. As a continuation to this question, another participant quoted Mr. Bill Gates on his remarks regarding how technology should come after meeting basic needs in Africa. Then this list member posed a question on who should decide what knowledge is useful for nation building and stated that Academia should be the repository of such knowledge and contribute to its dissemination.

One participant shared projects related to education and culture. They include the Ecole du Patrimoine Africain, the web site of the Musée Historique d’Abomey (History museum), a database of African art, code named Numibia, and the UNESCO project for creating the Internet site on the Nubia Museum in Egypt.
There was a thread of discussions on privatization and the role of government. One participant charged that privatization discourages the production of local knowledge and takes away the profit of poor countries. The case of RASCOM and Africa were given as examples. Another participant responded by saying that what is happening in the African market has nothing to do with liberalization, but to do with the transfer of monopolistic power to a group of people whose concern centers on immediate profit. With small and delicate markets in our continent, it is a strategic and long-term partnership which can make a difference. In this regard, an example of Telia of Sweden and Sonera of Finalnd was mentioned.

Another key issue shared by participants focused on how to expand core group of highly qualified ICT professionals. An example of Indians in Silicon Valley and the role Bangalore plays in India’s Information society was mentioned in this context. The participant proposed the creation of 2-3 top-quality ICT training institutes in different parts of Africa, drawing upon expertise from all over the world and training students across the continent. South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria, Mali and Senegal were nominated as host countries of such institutes.

In order to materialize the vision of establishing such training institutes, he shared with the list an innovative and successful model of the African Institute for Mathematical Sciences (AIMS) near Cape Town, South Africa. With a view to improving the quality of mathematics and science education in the region, an academic from Cambridge University set up the institute in collaboration with various South African universities. One unique aspect of the initiative is that the teaching will be done by professional mathematicians from all over the world who volunteered to take up short courses. Currently there are more than 100 mathematicians registered in the project. The list member poses a question of if we can apply the same or similar model to the above proposed ICT training institutes. It would enhance the quality of teaching as well as networking potentials. However, a similar initiative was started by one list member and proposed to establish such centers in Sierra Leone and Nigeria, but there was no positive response.

The list also touched upon the attitudes of academia and interesting remarks on delayed introduction of ICTs to institutions of higher education. She reported that some new ICT initiatives were discouraged and blocked by senior professors and personal interests override national ones.

Referring to the discussions on other mailing list, one participant pointed out the absence of the academia in the process of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS).
3. Shared links and resources

1) African Information Society Initiative (AISI) site with latest initiatives and events, in addition to complete documents on AISI.
http://www.uneca.org/aisi/

2) National Information and Communications Infrastructure (NICI) policies, plans and strategies
http://www.uneca.org/aisi/nici/strategies.htm

3) ECA's Third Committee on Development Information (CODI III), recently held on the theme Information and Governance. Reports of particular interest include
http://www.uneca.org/codi/

4) AISI Media Awards
http://www.uneca.org/aisi/mediaaward.htm

5) Information and Technology Centre for Africa (ITCA)
http://www.uneca.org/itca/

6) Other AISI related documents and reports, such as PICTA and iConnect Africa, have been posted on the mailing list website. Please share with us useful and relevant information and links on the Resource page of the mailing list website.
OSIRIS with a monthly newsletter, Batik
http://www.osiris.sn/

7) the web site of the Musée Historique d'Abomey (History museum)
http://www.epa-prema.net/abomey

8) A database on African art, Numibia
www.numibia.net