

Africa's Information Society Initiative: an action framework to build Africa's information and communication infrastructure

Draft of Keynote address by
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By all development indicators, the Africa region stands apart as the one region of the world that has not turned on economically. The latest ECA figures show that GDP growth still does not keep pace with population increase, and per capita income continued to decline throughout the region in 1995. There is no question that the turn around has to come: Africa must become part of the global economy, and on terms as fair and competitive as possible.

I see the information revolution as a tremendous opportunity for Africa: it has the potential to provide Africa with the means of becoming competitive within the global economy. Not only is it central, I don't think there is a choice. The information gap gets wider every day. The tools of the information revolution are the entry tickets to the global economy.

The truth of the statement that Africa will be further marginalized if it does not join the information and communications revolution, and that it will have new opportunities if it does, hits home more and more each day. **The world is marginalizing Africa:** the Internet Society in its annual meeting in Montreal next month has only one small item on connectivity in Africa on its agenda of some 300 presentations; **and Africa is marginalizing itself:** not thinking and acting globally means retention of local and parochial views, many of which lead to the conflicts which scar the Africa region. Information and communications are the pre-requisites of global awareness; their use can help us maximize meagre resources more effectively. The information revolution can make us more efficient in meeting basic needs. Leaders of developing countries must take responsibility to ensure that their countries are not left out of the information revolution.

On the opportunities side on the balance sheet, the information and communication revolution offers African nations opportunities for meeting many of the challenges it faces.

While jobs are few and far between now, the information society offers the possibility of creating new information-based jobs;

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- While the delivery of health care services is in constant crisis, the utilization of information technology allows the sharing of scarce medical resources with rural areas including instant access to expert diagnosis;
- Current education systems are constrained by lack of skilled resources, but distance education and virtual universities offer any

locale with a computer terminal access to excellent educational opportunities;

- While African culture goes largely unappreciated and unseen, the information superhighway can bring millions of visitors.
- Intra-African trade now amounts to only 5% of all African trade, but electronic connectivity can put African businesses in instant touch with trade opportunities in Africa and elsewhere.
- New information technologies provide a low cost means for African countries and the African private sector to target potential tourists worldwide;
- In food security, information systems can improve efficient marketing of agricultural products.
- Women can improve their standard of living by access to information.
- The effects of manmade crises as well as natural disasters can be mitigated through early warning information systems.

These are only a few of myriad opportunities that African countries can take advantage of to deal with their development problems.

Building Africa's Information Society is central to the strategic vision I have elaborated for the Economic Commission for Africa, which I joined as Executive Secretary less than a year ago. I am very pleased to inform you that the ECA Conference of Ministers responsible for economic and social planning and development shares that vision. Just last week the Ministers adopted ***Africa's Information Society Initiative: an action framework to build Africa's information and communication infrastructure***. This framework will be the basis for ECA's programme of work in its focus area of Harnessing Information for Development, and will serve as the basis for the priority area of Informatics under the United Nations System Wide Special Initiative on Africa, where ECA is the lead agency, along with other partners in the United Nations system.

African leaders have to share this Initiative they have adopted with their people, including their politicians, their engineers, the business community, youth and civil society. It is also their responsibility to see that access to the information society and its benefits are equitable- *across regions and gender, between cities and rural areas*-, that its arrival does not mean the creation of new elites, of new inequities built around information as a resource.

The implementation of the action framework will take place on the country level, starting with plans, programmes and pilot projects reflecting national needs and priorities. ECA, along with its partners, will work directly with countries to elaborate plans, development programmes and draft projects. Once the framework is translated into plans and programmes at national level, decision makers have to take quick action to eliminate the present barriers to the Information Society in their country and create the enabling environment which will allow it to develop.

ECA will need tremendous support to assist African countries in implementing the African Information Society Initiative - from African States themselves, from our sister international organisations, from bi-lateral sources and from

the private sector.

The starting point of the action framework is the formulation and development of National Information and Communication Infrastructure Plans in every African country, always based on national needs and priorities, initially probably on a 5 year basis.

The implementation of the plans inevitably must begin with infrastructure development, without which little of the Initiative can be realised. It will be necessary to upgrade and develop telecommunication infrastructure and networks at national level as well as improving regional interconnectivity and provide gateways to international telecommunication networks. It is here where technological advancements offer Africa cost-effective and appropriate technologies to leapfrog over several generations of intermediate technologies still in use in the industrial world. On infrastructure, we will follow the able lead of the International Telecommunications Union.

There will be programmes for building national information resources, - *national sectoral infrastructure development*. Africa has tremendous amounts of information, but in most places, they are neither organized nor accessible. This information is in great demand for planning and decision making, for use by the private sector, for information exchange and for the development of all economic and social sectors. ***In building Africa's Information Society, the information content areas is as important as physical infrastructure.***

Human resource development is the *sine qua non* of the Initiative and the element that makes it sustainable. The Initiative calls for the building of new capacities through education and training not only for engineers and information systems specialists, but for planners and managers, for workers and students. It is particularly important that planners and managers be trained in information technology- not only in its use, but most importantly, in its possibilities; it is they who need the ability to adapt, adopt and exploit new technologies, and to manage change, as well as to create new information-based opportunities.

The tasks laid out are formidable. However, the information revolution is one that Africa can not afford to miss. The economic and social costs are less than any other preceding structural change, while the price of being left out is the insurmountable development gap between "information rich" and "information poor" nations. We ask your help in helping us to build Africa's Information Society.

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