

Pomp and Colour as Curtains Open on 14th AU Summit

By Wanjohi Kabukuru

The African Union (AU) and the UN Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) both headquartered in Addis Ababa are walking tall after the successful opening of the AU Heads of State and Government's Summit in the Ethiopian capital. For the first time in its entire history, the AU summit dedicated its theme on ICTs. This has been a milestone for the two organizations as slightly over a decade ago, they embarked on a highly ambitious undertaking dubbed the African Information Society Initiative (AISI). The main aim of AISI was to galvanise the continent to harness information communications technologies to leap-frog her development progress and agenda. At inception little was expected of AISI.

Wayback in 1995 AU gave ECA the mandate of spearheading the AISI agenda. In 1996 AISI came into being. This came about after the Conference of Ministers passed the now famous 1996 Resolution 812-XXXI which set in motion the operational framework of adapting ICTS within the member states. This then paved the way for member states to come up with policies and legislative agendas of the same. A quiet revolution has indeed taken place in Africa in ways that were hitherto unimaginable. In the last decade alone according to the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), Africa has recorded the biggest growth in mobile phone penetration, internet growth and related technologies. By 2008 mobile phone users in Africa had reached 370 million users.

Since AISI came into being it has left the drawing board on to the practical implementation of its key tenets. Currently it is estimated that more than three quarters of the 53 member states of ECA have national e-strategies in tandem with their development agendas. As the National Information and Communication Initiative (NICI) strategies undertaken by each member state took root in the continent, the transformation of the continent into an information society had began in earnest. In a multi-pronged strategy to highlight the importance of ICTs, member countries, civil societies, the media, bi-lateral partners and other stakeholders were all co-opted in a bid to make the continent an all-inclusive info-knowledge society.

It is perhaps on this background that the new AU chairman, Malawian President Bingu wa Mutharika dedicated his speech to ICTs. In his acceptance speech President Mutharika proposed a slogan for AU. In his proposed slogan, *"Feeding Africa through New Technologies: Let us act now"*.

Mutharika implored the African leaders: "I am convinced that information and communication technology can play a major role in the development of agriculture and food security on our continent." he said hastening to add: "This would enable our farmers to access important information on agricultural products, advanced technologies, research findings as well as markets."

Ever since AISI was mooted, ICTs have transformed lifestyles and trends in the continent. In the Sahel, pastoralists use ICTs in the form of GPS/GIS-based maps linked with mobile phones to communicate with other groups of livestock herders pasture, water points and suitable graze lands. The same GPS technology is being used in Kenya, Botswana and Guinea by conservationists, hunters and fishermen respectively to track wildlife, game management and police fishing grounds from poachers.

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