

African Information Society Retreat on the theme

“Intellectual Leadership and the African Information Society Initiative: What Role for Africa’s Academic Community”

Addis Ababa, 14-16 June 2003 (*Draft*)

It is a painful truth to recognize that on the one hand the African academic community and the other hand the higher education institutions and research institutions (HERI) did not play the prominent role they have supposed to play in the emerging information society in Africa. It would be perfectly judicious and legitimate to investigate the underlying reason of this sad reality, which is not unfortunately limited only to information society issues. Other key areas are in the same situation. May be, in the very near future, sociology studies will reveal the ins and outs of the lack of ‘thought leadership’ from HERI Sector and academia when we speak about ICTs and information society. This is not our purpose in this short introduction, which intends to deal with the optimal modalities of a more deeply involving of the whole academic community and HERI, at country and regional level in Africa.

In order to reach this goal, the main thing the African academia has to do for itself and for the society achievement is to reassess and re-appropriate Information Society foundations and related ICTs global issues. This general objective may be implemented through the following not exhaustive strategic actions and processes:

1. formalizing information society and ICTs concepts, principles, theory, approaches, paradigms and practices for both perspectives, academic and socio-economic development;
2. socializing ICTs with strong respect of universal standards and the national and African cultural specificity; this will include topics related to democratizing the access to ICTs facilities, generalizing the use of African languages in ICTs, harnessing the defense against invasive and spam information, promoting e-government and e-administration, etc;
3. managing information as a strategic resource on his life cycle, from data to knowledge and wisdom;
4. reinforcing the learning with the tools and opportunities of ICTs to implement and democratize e-learning, collaborative research;
5. helping to build economic and policy vision and strategic plan on information society, knowledge management and ICTs for development including the promotion of ICTs industries, content production in African languages, e-business, etc.

The next main thing the academic community has to do is to introduce a fundamental change in education and research. Despite the pessimistic point of view on the capability of HERI to transform themselves, we are trusting in African academia and HERI to become full ‘learning/knowledge organizations’ and play leading role in accelerating Africa’s socio-economic development.

In this way, the technology must enhance learning to meet social needs for high quality education for all and world class research. We must find best ways to allow learner to choose or build the most appropriate learning environment, in the learning mode he is like,

synchronous or asynchronous, with the most convenient access to the best educational resources and content delivery systems. The HERI will be aware of the balance to find between ‘independent learning’ and ‘interactive learning’.

The learning paradigm must also include the open and distance learning issue and explore all major new developments in mass delivery, digital material production, individualization, ‘student support’, tutoring, interactive monitoring, assessment, etc.

ICTs themselves have to be seen by HERI and academic community as tools and as research target, opening large avenues for the collaborative work on very quickly evolving fields and disciplines.

On the other hand, the partnership between HERI, between HERI and other public or private institutions will guarantee the success in transforming and rebuilding HERI Sector in relation with information society perspectives.

It will be an imposture for academia to hope to lead to the success without building a mobilizing strategy for national and African languages emancipation. Education for all, ICTs universal access and information society directly depend on the use of native languages as main communication tools in the African cyberspace. The new achievements of ICTs may facilitate the set up of this strategy as never before XXIst century.

In a more specific topic as software policy, African academia cannot more bury its head on the sand. We have to play our role by giving living example by using, popularizing free and “libre” software also called open software. African HERI must encourage teaching, research and development programs on such software. We must support free software developers communities and enroll our young developers in the international teams. We must firmly fight against software licenses and the threats they put on economic development, scientific and cultural exchanges. African academia must promote free and “libre” software as a UNESCO mankind patrimony (<http://www.fsfeurope.org/projects/mankind>). It deserves this wider recognition for the following reasons:

- More liberty to use, customize and improve software for all purposes
- Less dependency on proprietary software and data formats
- Reduced costs and affordable software for citizens, enterprises and governments
- Universal access through mass software rollout without costly licensing implications
- Access to government and international sharing data without legal or technical barrier
- Ability to customize software to local languages and cultures
- Lowered barriers to entry for local ICT businesses
- Participation in global network of software development
- Excellent for teaching ICT professionals and for research.

Taking in account that many governments are developing national policies for promoting free and “libre” software (China, Thailand, Brazil, Argentina, Peru, Germany, France, UK and Finland) and many private companies are moving strategies to involve such kind of software (IBM, Sun, Intel, Hewlett-Packard, Silicon Graphics, etc.), African academia must clearly indicate the way, formalize the approach and help to implement free, “libre” and open solutions in all sectors.

To play its driven role as factor and agent of change for a sustainable information society in Africa, the HERI and academia must make a relevant and visionary option for Indian model of software development and throw out all models encouraging software piracy actions. This model, based on an excellent appropriation of ICTs fundamentals recommend to improve high quality for the university curricula, research and software tools development as the key of success.

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