

# ON THE ROLE OF AFRICAN ACADEMICS IN TRANSFORMING AFRICA INTO AN INFORMATION SOCIETY\*

By

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## 1. Preamble

An information society is a knowledge society which takes advantage of the ready global availability of information to generate more knowledge. African academics, being at the forefront of knowledge generation, processing, and transmission on the continent, have a crucial role to play in efforts to transform Africa into an information society. In such a society, the way in which Africans live, work and learn would be radically transformed. Moreover, the continent would be able to leapfrog wide gaps in its development programmes that would have taken much time to bridge. It is therefore clear that Africa has much to gain if it could be transformed into an information society. However, the task of transforming African countries into information societies is an enormous one because of the massive debt overhang in many of the countries. This invariably limits the quantum of resources that each of the countries is able to make available for the implementation of activities in the information and communications technology (ICT) sector. As a result, almost every sub-saharan African country is today confined to the wrong side of the global digital divide.

## 2. Policy issues

In order to transform African countries into information societies, national ICT policies and strategic plans must be in place to serve as road maps to the envisaged outcomes. Such policies and strategic plans should be concrete, sustainable and visionary; moreover, their development and implementation should involve inputs from interested civil society groups, especially academics.

The ICT policy and strategic plan for each African country should, for example:

- provide for adequate and sustainable funding of the planned activities;
- promote human resource development;
- ensure the modernization and expansion of national communications infrastructure;
- foster a move towards affordable access to information technology products and accessories, through the local production of such equipment;
- ensure collaboration between the government and industry in the ICT sector;
- address the issue of bandwidth that severely limits access by Africans to the information superhighway;
- promote the use of ICT in all spheres of national life.

## 3. Capacity-building

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African academics must be at the forefront of capacity building (comprising training, research and extension services) focusing on various aspects of the information and communications technology (ICT). This task must include the evolving of new curricula that are compatible with the objectives of the national ICT policy and strategic plan. Institutions, be they universities or centres, should be funded to participate in the national effort of capacity building and knowledge generation. For example, there is now in Nigeria a regional non-governmental institution, called the *International Centre for Mathematical & Computer Sciences* (ICMCS) that focuses on capacity building in the mathematical and computer sciences in the country. In the field of ICT, the activities of the ICMCS include:

- promoting staff exchange and knowledge exchange nationally and internationally, particularly within Africa;
- participating in the development of information society technologies;
- focussing its capacity building activities in critical areas of ICT such as software engineering and maintenance, with particular regard to local needs;
- providing opportunities for graduate students to use the Centre's resources for their studies;
- providing postdoctoral opportunities to qualified persons;
- providing internship opportunities to undergraduate students; and
- organising conferences, workshops, seminars, exhibitions and demonstrations.

#### **4. Continuing education for academics**

Funds should be available to enable academics participate in ICT conferences, workshops and seminars on a regular basis. The network would ensure that academics are always at the cutting edge of global ICT developments.

#### **5. Regional cooperation through networking**

There is need for the formation of a network of African academics, as well as capacity building institutions, that are active in the field of ICT. This would

- promote regional cooperation in various aspects of ICT development as well as the exchange of knowledge and good practices among African academics; and
- accelerate the realization of the goal of transforming African societies into information societies; and
- be a veritable vehicle for advocacy for increased ICT activities on the continent.

#### **6. Asymmetries in society**

The digital divide among nations also manifests itself even more glaringly among communities within each African country: citizens are segregated into two principal groups, namely: the "information poor" and "information rich" groups. Persons who are categorized as "information poor" face a bleak future of increasing job insecurity, under-employment or even unemployment. This gives rise to the social exclusion and alienation of such persons, thereby weakening social cohesion. Academics have a duty to work towards a level playing field in regard to access by citizens to ICT resources. To this end, innovative ways of realizing this objective should be carefully worked out.