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Africa must connect!

Connecting Africa through effective use of information and communication technologies (ICT) has never been more urgent than it is now. The imperatives for connectivity are premised on several factors.

The first is that Africa needs to catch up with the rest of the world with respect to its information and communication infrastructure. Africa trails the rest of the world, in terms of the extent and quality of ICT infrastructure. In Africa, making an international phone call or accessing the Internet through high-speed networks is extremely costly, for the simple reason that countries are not connected to the global optical-fibre broadband infrastructure. This limitation, as a result, severely reduces access by ordinary Africans.

Another factor is that a lot of economic growth and opportunities will be created and sustained through the existence of sound, solid infrastructure. For instance, with viable and effective infrastructure, many countries can be part of business process outsourcing, estimated at USD 642 billion annually and expected to grow. This also includes call centres and other services that depend on information technology.

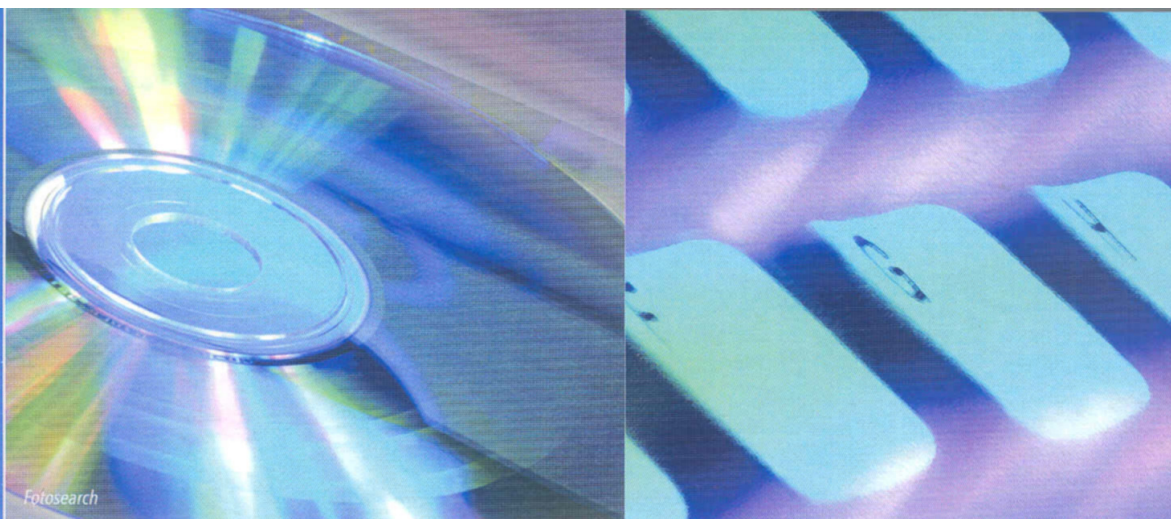
Furthermore, the distribution of telephony and Internet services is biased in favour of urban areas in most African countries, accounting for over 80 per cent of the services.

In rural areas, where over 80 per cent of the population resides, people have access to a paltry 20 per cent of the services. Therefore, urgent interventions are required to bring about equitable distribution of ICT infrastructure in every African country.

ITU and ECA recognized that the improvement of connectivity was one of the key development challenges facing Africa when, in 1963, the two institutions signed a memorandum of understanding to coordinate efforts in accelerating the development of telecommunications on the continent.

Infrastructure development and investment opportunities

Although the basic infrastructure to connect to the global information network exists in some African countries, affordable and equitable access remains a critical issue for economic empowerment and attracting foreign direct investment. Network roll-out is often not coordinated with other strategic infrastructure development initiatives, thus reducing the intended benefits. Adoption and diffusion of ICT is also hampered by lack of access to other amenities, such as reliable sources of electricity. Remote areas, and in some cases urban areas too, are characterized by irregular or non-existent electricity supplies.



The good news is that many African governments have prioritized the development of ICT infrastructure and activities are being undertaken in over 20 countries surveyed recently by ECA. These activities include:

- » Laying of fibre-optic cables to build national ICT infrastructure backbones, expand fixed networks, and provide transport infrastructure for data communications;
- » Expansion of the mobile network to under-served areas;
- » Power/energy supply projects;
- » Improvement of rural services through the creation of universal service funds;
- » Promotion of network expansion by private operators.

An example can be seen in Uganda, where the government has recognized the role of ICT in national development and in transformation programmes. In the budget for the year 2007–2008, one of the priority areas, which will have the first call on all new resources, includes ICT, alongside science, technology and industrial development. The full liberalization of the telecommunications sector in Uganda has led to more investors and the government has begun building a national data transmission backbone which links districts with fibre-optic cable to enable high-speed connectivity for voice and data exchange. The project also includes the linking of all government ministries and agencies. In the budget for 2007–2008, the government has allocated to the project the equivalent of USD 3 million.

In Kenya, the government intends to develop and support an expanded and efficient ICT infrastructure in order to improve broadband connectivity whilst also providing easy access to international and national networks. This will be achieved through investment in an undersea fibre-optic cable and the development of a national fibre-optic network.



The equivalent of USD 15 million has been allocated by the government in the 2007–2008 budget to *The East African Marine System* (TEAMS) project, which is due for completion in mid-2008. It is expected to provide Kenya's citizens with cheaper and faster Internet connections with the rest of the world.

Conclusion

The examples from Uganda and Kenya show that many African governments are giving priority to ICT infrastructure development as a means of stimulating economic growth and transforming other sectors of the economy. It is for this reason that in the ICT policy-making process, ECA has ensured that every national information and communication infrastructure (NICI) plan or strategy is based on the framework of the African Information Society Initiative (AISI). This offers a basis for the following issues to be considered: liberalization of ICT sectors; expansion of infrastructure and networks; establishment of regulatory agencies; creation of universal access funds; improving access for the poor, and linkages with the United Nations Millennium Development Goals.

Above all, there must be a concerted effort by all African governments to find pro-active and creative solutions for stimulating investment in ICT, including domestic funds. And they should work closely with the private sector in each country, especially in bridging the rural-urban infrastructure gap. ■

Editor's note

At a retreat for academics (organized in 2003 under the African Information Society Initiative by ECA jointly with the Ford Foundation) participants were privileged to hear a poem by Nigerian poet Remi Raji. His poem (reproduced on page 54 at the request of ECA) captures the dream of a connected Africa.