Bamako-Geneva

The Summit with two peaks

Africa's developmental needs were central to the debates raised at the WSIS preparatory meeting held in Bamako, Mali in May last year. They should remain central in Geneva, and the media has a role to play in ensuring that this happens...

By Aida Opoku-Mensah

The Information Society, characterised by technological convergence through Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) presents some enormous challenges for Africa.

This is one of the reasons why the African Information Society Initiative (AISI), led by the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) upon the request of its 53 member states, was introduced.

AISI is an action framework (a continental digital agenda see www.uneca.org/aisi) that has been the basis for information and communication activities in Africa for the last six to seven years and is about giving Africans the means to improve the quality of their lives and to fight against poverty.

The advent of the Information Society in general, and its relevance to Africa's development needs were central to the debates raised at the Africa Regional Preparatory Meeting for the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) held in Bamako, Mali from 28 to 30 May 2002.

Organised by the ECA in collaboration with the Malian Government, the major themes of this event sought to position the continent and its unique needs vis-à-vis the digital era.

Participation of rural communities

The rural poor lack access to information vital to their lives and livelihoods and this has to be addressed. ICTs are able to improve and enhance two-way communications and can support participatory development, as well as allow the voices of the poor to be heard.

The current technological revolution allows for rural areas to benefit from ICTs through a range of options that can be operated individually or within small or local networks not requiring elaborate infrastructure. Senegal, for instance, through the national telecommunication company SONATEL decided to expand rural telephony and supported privately owned telecentres that sprung up throughout the country. This is one way of promoting the use of ICTs in rural areas.

Integrating African languages

As the use of the Internet and its resources spread, it is becoming clear that Africans need information in their own languages as a way to gain access to the Information Society. However African languages have been marginalised by the Internet revolution, and there are grave implications if this continues, including the loss of cultural heritage and intellectual property rights. One clear benefit of adapting local languages is that locally relevant information is most likely to stimulate demand for information services that can optimise the use of ICTs. There are some innovative initiatives being undertaken worth mentioning. The African Languages Technology Initiative (ALTI) of Nigeria, funded by the Open Society Initiative for West Africa (OSIWA) is one such example.

The project is a collaboration with the Department of Linguistics and African Languages, University of Ibadan, and according to Prof Francis Egbokhare of ALTI: "there are over 2 000 languages in Africa and within the next 100 years or less, over 90% of them and their accompanying cultures, folk wisdom, medical practices, fauna, verbal arts, etc. will be gone".

Egbokhare further adds: "Language is a huge resource, an encyclopaedia, and is our window to the world. ICTs provide us with an opportunity to tackle the problems of endangerment and language death pragmatically and cost effectively. "

This initiative highlights the role that universities and institutions of higher education can play in supporting the emergence of the Information Society through research and development activities.

Research and development hubs

The work being done through research (innovation and incubation) in other parts of the world involves the thinking and imagination of scholars, students, government and business officials, and other users in virtually every field, to help figure out how to harness computing and communications capabilities for human needs, interests, and aspirations. It is through such activities that Africa can define its real needs and how these needs are to be addressed. Research can play a critical role in generating knowledge about what particular groups and countries need, and about what approaches seem to be most effective in resolving specific problems. It can improve the quality of information on which effective policy must be based, as well as the solidity of the political process that stands behind formulation and implementation of that policy.

Recognising the significant role that higher education institutions can play, ECA and the Ford Foundation under the AISI framework are piloting research and development activities at the Addis Ababa University and the Inter-University Council of East Africa (IUCEA), to develop applications for e-government through the use of Open Source Software. The project is part of the Africa Learning Network (ALN) that includes SchoolNet Africa, Out-of-School Youth Network and African Universities Network.

Role of the media

Awareness on the Information Society is still very limited and yet addressing the role of ICTs in advancing Africa's development requires society to develop a better understanding of the new means of interaction being offered. Furthermore, apart from being an essential means for information dissemination, the mass media plays a critical role in spreading awareness in Africa on the importance and benefits of the Information Society. Newspapers, radio and television provide an easy, accessible and cheap means of carrying information to end-users.

However, the African media are lagging behind in their coverage of Information Society issues. A study commissioned by ECA on the state of ICT reporting in nine African countries (Cameroon, Ethiopia, Egypt, Ghana, Malawi, Morocco, Mozambique, Rwanda and Senegal) reveals that with notable exceptions, the media in Africa are far from being a promoter of the Information Society in Africa. The study provides a startling revelation of how ill-prepared African media are when it comes to reporting on these issues. Most editors interviewed from the selected media underscored the fact that there is simply no real capacity for reporting in this particular area, and this is a serious handicap. According to the editor of the Nation Publications in Malawi, Steve Nhlane: "We have not reached that stage as a nation where IT matters would attract serious attention from our readers, despite their

–Tunis

importance. Malawi as a nation is not yet computerised, so to speak."

This assertion is startling because the media should be at the forefront, asking questions and seeking answers on how Africa can address its poor information infrastructure and what governments and society at large are doing. This is perhaps one reason why there has been limited coverage on the WSIS process with hardly any news on countries' summit preparations.

Media and the WSIS process
Given that the media is a forum as well as a channel for communicating diverse ideas and information that undoubtedly helps the public at large to receive and impart information and knowledge, they are central to promoting debate on the WSIS process. Sadly, the African media have not really engaged in the process in the way that is possible and coverage, if any, has been restricted to events reporting rather than any in-depth assessment of what the main issues are or could be.

In collaboration with the Global Knowledge Partnership (GKP) and the Swiss Agency for Development and Co-operation (SDC), ECA organised

the first media forum during Bamako 2002. The main objectives of the forum were to discuss the role of the media in the development of the Information Society, to outline the challenges of globalisation and the knowledge economy, and to create a network of journalists for promoting Africa's digital opportunities. Some of the key recommendations included:
* the need for the introduction of new technologies at media training schools in order that practitioners can master the use of ICTs in their work;
* development of strategies for the creation of African content that finances and sustains the media; and
* encouraging "ICT media" to promote the Information Society in Africa.

As this media forum was an official pre-event of Bamako 2002, the recommendations on media and the Information Society were included in the declaration and are part of the official documentation from Africa for the WSIS Declaration at the Geneva leg of the summit.

ECA in collaboration with its partners is developing training modules on ICT4D for use by media training institutions on the continent aimed at editors as well as reporters.

According to Remmy Nweke, IT and telecoms

correspondent of the Lagos-based Champion Newspapers in Nigeria: IT training for media chiefs on the importance of ICTs and how they could assist or help the industry to grow as well as boost their businesses, especially with on-line publication is one of the key recommendations for rectifying the poor state of ICT for Development reporting in African countries.

Tunis via Geneva
For the summit that will be held in Tunis in 2005, we need to prepare ourselves and stimulate debate, raise awareness, discuss the complexities of the Information Society and probe for government positions on some of the key issues. How will countries benefit from the summit? How have preparations gone and what still needs to be done? Journalists themselves need to be proactive in asking these questions as well as seeking the right answers.

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