

Reporting ICTs: the debate



By Theresa Swinton

ICT Focus Magazine in Ethiopia is raising awareness about the WSIS process and the implications of this summit for Ethiopia. This magazine offers news analysis, product and company profiles, feature articles and columns analysing the newest technology on the market.

In the iConnect Africa newsletter, the AISI 2003 Media Awards issued various media organisations and journalists for their coverage of the Information Society and ICT development issues in Africa is reported on.

Association Yampukri, an NGO based in Burkina Faso, produced a documentary programme detailing how ICTs are being integrated into communities. Yampukri has trained 900 people, established a computer library and has published five training books.

Réalités Multimédia based in Tunisia publishes a monthly online publication which covers a diverse range of ICT issues. This publication looks at the WSIS conferences, Tunisia's contribution to the process and the technical issues around online security. This publication has been functioning for the past 20 years.

But despite these shining examples, few African journalists are paying attention to Information Society issues in Africa. At the Highway Africa Conference this issue created intense debate.

Mohamed Timoulali, Regional Advisor to the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) feels that media experts need to be implicated in, and create debate around, what kind of Information Society is needed in Africa.

"The problem that the African continent is facing is how to move into an Information Society when there is so much illiteracy. This is where the media needs to come in and create debate and understanding about ICTs," said Timoulali.

"It is important that in each country we have a vision and a debate which responds to the need of the citizens. What is missing is the analysis of ICT development."

Gracian Tukula, Deputy Editor of the Nation newspaper in Malawi, argues that many African journalists are not interested in ICTs and do not know what the Information Society is.

"Knowledge is fragmented, there is poor access to ICTs in newsrooms and no training programmes. We need to demystify the language around ICTs. If a journalist cannot understand the language, then the audience will not understand."

"ICTs have a crucial role to play in society but the environment and policy at company level is prohibitive. There are no clear ICT policies and limited ICT investment," said Tukula.

"Journalists should initiate a process of growth and understanding around these debates and media agencies should make a concerted effort to dedicate space to these stories. There is a lack of awareness about consumer rights, and it is the journalists' duty to report on the consumer concerns," said Timoulali.

In May 1995, the African Information Society Initiative (AISII) action plan was sent out calling for the development of National Information and Communication Infrastructure (NICI) plans in every African country.

The aim is to base this plan in national develop-

mental priorities such as health, education, employment creation, food security, land reclamation, water, debt management, industrial development, trade and tourism; to encourage regional co-operation between African countries and support regional development in the context of ICTs.

The three-phase plan focuses specifically on physical infrastructure of communication – improving interconnectivity in a region and the provision of gateways to international telecommunication networks; creation of a legislative and regulatory framework; the development of national information resources; ICT applications in key social and economic areas; links to national, regional and global development goals; and the development of human resources. At present 32 African countries are about to adopt the plan.

"Journalists are better placed to pass the message of ICTs to the community, especially the rural community," said Timoulali. "We must take this opportunity to do the necessary work, provide the necessary training and report what is being done and the successes and failures along the way."

Ultimately the viability of reporting on ICT development and analysing its impact on the African continent is conditional on government and media organisation's policies. Without adequate training or access to ICTs, it is difficult for journalists to report on the newest technologies. However, as the above cases show there is a need for this analysis and a need to create debate.

"There have been many failures in ICTs in Africa, but the journalists need to report on these failures as well. Only in this way can Africa move into the Information Society," said Timoulali.

Pipes & poles people



Tina James

Ahmed El-Gody



By Sim Kyazze

Tina James, a South African ICT consultant, tells the story of Minnie Barendse Kruger who had been struggling to get a Khoisan Cultural Village going in the Eastern Cape. Kruger set up a restaurant where traditional food is prepared, and the Barendse Griquas Trust stepped in and helped set up a multi-purpose Community Centre.

The centre hired ICT experts to design a website for the Khoisan Cultural Village with Eastern Cape youth. The website focus is the cultural heritage of the Barendse Griquas, collecting support information for craft manufacturing (especially of ceramics), and becoming a one-stop shopping centre for prospective visitors and buyers of the KhoiSan artefacts.

It has also embarked on collecting information to prepare an electronic record of KhoiSan art and crafts, craft manufacturers in the area, know-how information for manufacturing, information on indigenous food and simple promotional information about the area.

James said she was telling the story to delegates at the Highway Africa conference because no one seemed to know about it.

"Write about it," James said. "Flood the continent with the little stories and create connections."

James was particularly disappointed that the



efforts to use information technology to change people's lives in remote areas of the African continent, were not being reported.

"We should tell these stories, even if they are few. Even if they are not very good," James said.

James and others like her who track information policy debates, argue that stories like these cannot be seen in isolation, but in an entire context – a context which James calls "pipes, poles and people".

"ICTs in isolation (the pipes and poles) will achieve little in communities (the people)," James said, if the whole is not functional. If there are no telephones, James said, there is no communication; if there is no communication; there is no Internet access; if there is no Internet access; there is no online promotion; and if there is no obvious need for online promotion from the community, then everything would be in vain.

"So you have to look at a universal access policy," James said, "focus on possible ICT applications to integrate and synergise sectoral and ICT policies and ensure that funding allows policy implementation."

All this requires political will, which can only be generated if there is passion and enthusiasm at the grassroots and educating of the people about ICTs.

While much of Africa suffers from lack of coherent government policy on ICTs, Egypt seems to have no such problems, according to Ahmed El-Gody of the

Modern Sciences and Arts University.

"Government wants to be part of [the Internet]," El-Gody said. There is a ministry in charge of Information Technology in Egypt, and the government wants to encourage any and all 'e-s'; e-business, e-revenue, e-learning, e-travel, e-and so on."

The country has propelled its e-readiness along with some audacious moves over the last few years. Telephone penetration is up to 47% today, after the government cut tariffs, privatised some of the telecommunications providers and set minimal installation fees. What is more, in Egypt, the Internet is a free plug-and-play affair, as long as you have a telephone, and as a result, the country has over 2.2-million users and growing very fast.

What is amazing about the Egyptian situation is that while ordinary people are excited about the Internet and what it can do in their lives, the media is very suspicious of the Internet and ICTs as a whole and as such, telling the information policy story in the country has been a dismal failure.

El-Gody said that it took Egyptian newspapers seven years to get onto the Internet and even today, only 17% are on the Internet, with many executives suspicious that ICTs are equivalent to westernisation.

"Journalists write on things that they don't actually believe in," El-Gody said of this love-hate relationship. "They don't think that the Internet can help

them." But they write about it occasionally because the government is very enthusiastic.

Somewhere between Tina James' despair about the untold info policy story in South Africa, and Ahmed El-Gody's tale of the double-sided reportage of the same in Egypt, is the actual African info policy story.

The story that has to be told along the entire assembly line: from the community to the policy level. And there is no one to tell this story but the media.

For example, radio being what it is across the continent (currently the fastest growing medium), can give a huge boost to the story if it's told seriously.

Experts have argued that the basic problem with most IT shows and articles in Africa is that they are arcane and industry-centred, and are not people-centred. Indeed, a recent study carried out in nine countries for the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) found just one story in 1 000 stories studied on ICTs had mentioned an ordinary African citizen!

As James said, "if you are going to tell your [info policy] stories, you will have to add the 'So What?' to the 5Ws."

