By Nkenke Kekana

The Information and Communications Technology (ICT) sector is epoch-defining, it is the fastest consumer technology penetration in human history.

Therefore one must consider whether the globalisation of industries is a threat or opportunity. There needs to be levelling of the playing field between developing and developed countries. Developing countries require skills, basic infrastructure and political stability.

The nature of the labour market has evolved from the industrial age to the information age. There has been an economic impact of ICTs on the economy (including the labour market). ICTs can improve productivity, promote the creation of wealth and improve chances of attracting investment. ICTs have improved efficiencies in the work environment and have radically reduced the cost for companies of collecting, analysing, retrieving and re-using information. Despite the benefits, ICTs have placed significant challenges on the management of workforces.

Until the 1990s, telecommunications have been treated as a natural monopoly across the world and were administered by governments. Then economic and technological developments necessitated a review of the treatment of telecommunications.

WTO, ITU, EU and other international bodies reassessed the increasing importance of telecoms and their expanded role in the market. This resulted in telecoms reform and the design of the so-called optimal institutional structure.

There needs to be a rebalancing of international and local tariffs, improvement of management to increase efficiency, maximisation of cash flows to finance companies, a consistent effort to have efficient working lines, and the adoption of new technologies.

Nepad's main ICT development objectives include doubling teledensity to two lines per 100 people by 2005, with an adequate level of access for households; lowering the cost and improving reliability of service; achieving e-readiness for all countries in Africa; developing and producing a pool of ICT-proficient youth and students from which Africa can draw trainee ICT engineers, programmers and software developers; and developing local-content software, based on Africa's cultural legacy.

The responses and reactions to Nepad objectives were that an e-Africa Commission was formed to serve as the ICT task force of Nepad in pursuit of Nepad ICT development objectives. This can be realised through, among other things, embracing market liberalisation and competition so as to realise all the benefits associated with market liberalisation. If we can meet the challenge of computer literacy and access to computers, it is connectivity that is our next main challenge.

The inauguration of the SAT3/WASC/SAFE submarine cable has brought international connectivity to many more African countries.

But how ready is a country to gain the benefits offered by ICTs generally in terms of policy, infrastructure and ground-level initiatives? Too often developing countries tackle e-readiness by focusing on either the need to improve the e-commerce capacity of the business sector or the need to improve access to ICTs in disadvantaged communities. Laws must be tailor-made to address unique policy, infrastructure and ground level realities reflected within each country and the broader regional goals.

There are three powerful means of directly improving e-readiness and harnessing ICTs for social and economic advancement: firstly establishing the policy framework for action, then building the necessary infrastructure and lastly undertaking ground level projects.

The media can contribute much to the educational process: they should create awareness of the advantages that ICTs will bring to a country and its people; prioritise teaching of computer literacy and mobilise communities to take responsibility for their own development.

In conclusion, the assessment of e-readiness is the first step towards converting good intentions into planned actions that will bring real change to people's lives. Each country must take its own path to e-readiness. Access to computers through joint community projects sponsored by business should be expanded and access to the Internet increased through business-government partnerships and liberalised regulation.

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