

# From Africa to



**“African journalists have a new political space created by a new political will... to assist in taking Africa out of its marginalisation and making it a real player in the Information Society.”**

By Lyndall Shope-Mafole

**T**he World Summit on the Information Society originated from a proposal from Tunisia at the International Telecommunication Union Plenipotentiary Conference in Minneapolis in 1998. It was outlined that participation should be from all sectors of society building on the experience from previous summits.

The WSIS is not an ICT summit but a summit about the application of ICTs cutting across and affecting almost all aspects of human activity.

It is vital, since it is the first time in history that heads of state of all countries will come together to discuss the challenges posed by the development of ICTS, the potential role of these technologies in meeting development objectives, improving the quality of life of people, agreeing on a common vision for the Information Society and planning to realise that vision.

The WSIS marks the formal transition from an

industrial society or economy to an Information Society and knowledge economy. It will give the tools to those who are willing and ready to consciously embark on building the Information Society in their regions, countries or communities based on agreed principles, a plan of action and timelines.

The role of journalists is to influence the direction of global policy in building the Information Society – through active participation in discussions – shaping the agenda of the Global IS – by identifying new issues or new ways of looking at issues – and acting as a catalyst for building the Information Society – through information dissemination.

Africa has up to now been almost completely marginalised from the global economy. The most significant role that African journalists or media in general can play is mainstreaming Africa in the Information Society.

We declare our common desire and commitment to build a new kind of society premised on the Charter



Rhodes students Roseleen Nzioka, Haru Mutasa and Natarah Nadesan.

# To Africans by

By Theresa Swinton

**A**s part of an initiative to mainstream media for the Information Society and the African audience, Highway Africa 2003 is sending five African journalists and five journalism students to cover the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in Geneva.

“We want to cover the WSIS from an African perspective and make the WSIS relevant to African audiences, so that African audiences do not have to hear about WSIS from a European or American perspective,” says Steven Lang, editor of SABCnews.com and editor of the Highway Africa News Agency.

“We are giving the news on WSIS an African spin.”

The news agency will send daily reports to Africa on the debates and issues discussed at the summit published in a specific section of the SABCnews.com website.

“We will not only be

representing the African perspective in Geneva, but also creating awareness in Africa,” says Lang.

With financial support from Belgian Technical Co-operation, the 10 journalists working in the newsroom were given a week-long training course at Rhodes University in Grahamstown before the Highway Africa conference, and attended and reported on the conference in the lead-up to their coverage of WSIS.

Rebecca Wanjiku, a journalist from the People’s Daily newspaper in Kenya, found the training and conference very beneficial and interesting.

“We learnt new things and I saw things with new eyes. ICTs are not all about technology and information but the freedom of access to information for everybody. The training course gave us the basics of looking at ICTs from an African perspective and in our own ways,” she says.

Media organisations in Africa and around the world will have access to the information on SABCnews.com and are free to use the material if credit is given to the Highway Africa News Agency.

“The distinct difference of this newsroom is that it will only be staffed by African journalists which means that the news platforms that will receive our news feed will be confident that they are looking at the summit through African eyes,” says Lang.

“This means that they will feel more comfortable about all the stories.”

Angella Nabwowe, a Ugandan journalist, feels that this coverage will, in the long run, be able to cater to the needs of the marginalised and illiterate communities in Africa.



The African WSIS news agency team: (from left) Natarah Nadesan, Emrakeb Assefa, Steve Lang, Angella Nabwowe, Haru Mutasa, Thrishni Subramoney, Wairagala Wakabi, Rebecca Wanjiku and Roseleen Nzioka. In front is Guy Berger. Photograph: Tshepo Ikaneng



# the World

of the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Millennium Declaration, characterised by universal access to and use of information for the creation, accumulation and dissemination of knowledge.

The common vision is to build an Information Society that is inclusive; where all persons exercise their right to freedom of expression and their access to and use of reliable information and plurality of opinions; as well as access to a wide range of content, including material reflecting national and regional cultures and content relevant to local communities.

The Declaration of Principles identifies 10 key principles for building the Information Society. They are:

- ♦ ICT infrastructure
- ♦ Access to information and knowledge
- ♦ Capacity building
- ♦ Building confidence, trust and security
- ♦ Enabling environments

- ♦ ICT applications
- ♦ Cultural identity, linguistic diversity, local content
- ♦ Ethical dimensions
- ♦ International and regional co-operation
- ♦ Role of governments, private sector and civil society

African journalists have a new political space created by a new political will, through the African Union and the New Partnership for Africa's Development (Nepad), to assist in taking Africa out of its marginalisation and making it a real player in the Information Society.

African journalists have a challenge to ensure that no aspect of the Information Society should lack an African element.

*Shope-Mafole is the Chairperson for the South African Presidential National Commission on Information Society and Development.*



## Africans



*To receive reports from the African team send your email address to [highwayafrica@ru.ac.za](mailto:highwayafrica@ru.ac.za)*

"I work for a radio station that caters to the needs of marginalised rural communities. As the Highway Africa News Agency I think we need to look at the broader perspective, and then focus on the marginalised Third World communities, where Africa falls."

One of the major problems faced by the African journalist moving into, and covering the developments in, the Information Society is lack of resources and lack of understanding around ICT development and the impact that ICTs can have on African audiences.

"The media have not taken the time to understand a lot of the technical jargon involved in the technology debate. When we do understand it, we do not bother to translate it more simply so that our audience can understand the issues, and we need to work on this," says Lang.

With the 10 journalists coming from different cultural backgrounds and African countries, the impact of the training course and their experiences in Geneva should bring about some change in the coverage of ICTs. It is this goal which has attracted funds for the Geneva trip from the Swiss Development Co-operation, the Netherlands Institute for Southern Africa and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung.

"At first the training course material was a bit confusing because we do not know much about ICTs in Ethiopia," says Emrakeb Assefa. "But I am privileged and excited about the change that I can make by being part of a group of committed journalists whose aim is to make Africa heard. Africa is normally sidelined but now we are telling the news about Africa, to Africans, by Africans."

The training workshop focused on African tech-

nology, policy, regulations and the WSIS process and focused on how to cover these issues from a distinctly African perspective.

As well as this training programme, three of the staff attended the WSIS PrepCom Three meeting in Geneva which also served as a good training platform for the coverage of the issues at WSIS, says Lang. See the reports at [www.highwayafrica.org.za](http://www.highwayafrica.org.za)

For the five journalism students this is the opportunity of a lifetime. "I am terrified and excited because I will be the only person coding for the website running off the SABC," says Natarah Nadesan, a South African student from Rhodes University. "The experience of working in the Highway Africa newsroom has really given me confidence, but I know that in Geneva we will be working around the clock."

"I am excited and proud to be representing Africa at the WSIS," says Haru Mutasa, a Rhodes student. "I am the only Zimbabwean in the team and it is going to be tough, but will be such a great learning experience. It already has been."

"It will no doubt be a milestone summit in Geneva and I'm happy that I'll be there from the very beginning. I plan to share whatever I learn when I return to the Durban Institute of Technology to enhance the Internet programmes we have started there," says Thrishni Subramoney.

The outcome of the WSIS conference and how the Information Society will impact on Africa and African audiences is unknown, but if the enthusiasm and dedication of these journalists is anything to go by, the future of ICT coverage and use in African media is beginning to look a little brighter.

