

# **AFRICA, ICT POLICY AND THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS**

## **Introduction**

Africa has a lot of catching up to do as far as the Information Society is concerned. With the physical boundaries that separated nations melting off due to the emergence of a boundless Information Society, any people-group, nation or region that does not line up with the expectations of the New Economy – which is primarily driven by Information and Communication Technologies – will experience lonely moments on the island of insignificance. This was well stated by Dr. Philip Emeagwali when he said, “Africa must get onboard... Right now! ... Africa will be either on to the Information Age or off to the dark Agricultural Age ... Africa is suffering from knowledge apartheid that forces its children to eat the crumbs from the dinner table of the information-affluent nations<sup>1</sup>.”

Africa’s active participation in the Information Society informs the need for each of the constituent nation to develop and implement national Information and Communication Technology (ICT) policies (and strategies), with special consideration for meeting the goals of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) – which United Nations’ member States agreed to in order to address the major issues that confront human existence and sustainable development.

## **Africa Takes The First Steps**

The African Information Society Initiative (AISI) is a common vision for Africa’s quest to bridge the digital divide. It was adopted by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa Conference of Ministers responsible for economic and social planning and development (Addis Ababa, 1996) and subsequently endorsed by various high-level Ministerial and Organisation of African Unity (OAU) Heads of States and Governments’ meetings including the 1997 G-8 Summit. Its vision was revised during the African Development Forum 1999.<sup>2</sup>

AISI serves as a mechanism for achieving the Millennium Development Goals in Africa, incorporating seven of the eight MDGs in the AISI framework document<sup>3</sup>, and recommends the mainstreaming of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). This informed the strong support that the AISI gives to the development of national ICT policies and strategies through its National Information and Communication Infrastructure (NICI) plan, which helps nations link to national, regional and global development goals – including the Millennium Development Goals.

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<sup>1</sup> From [www.emeagwali.com](http://www.emeagwali.com)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.uneca.org/aisi>

<sup>3</sup> *E-Strategies: National, Sectoral and Regional ICT Policies, Plans and Strategies*. UNECA, 2003

## **One Nation At A Time**

In 2000, thirteen (13) African countries had ICT policies but the number increased to sixteen (16) in 2002. The number of countries without ICT policies and strategies reduced from twenty-one (21) to sixteen (16) within the same period.<sup>4</sup> The 2003 report of the sub-committee on ICT and Governance presented at the Third Meeting of the Committee on Development Information (CODI III)<sup>5</sup> reveals that countries like the Central African Republic, Ghana, Nigeria, Mali, Niger, Malawi and Uganda are in the process of completing their national ICT policies; and went further to identify countries that have completed the ICT policy development process and are ready for implementation. These include Burundi, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Rwanda and Tanzania.

## **What Have These Nations Done?**

### ***Ethiopia***

Ethiopia's draft national ICT Policy document was adopted by the Council of Ministers and the first implementation plan for the period 2003-2008 was prepared. The Government is in the process of setting up a national ICT coordination office to manage the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the plan. It recently embarked on projects, such as the use of ICTs for the country's decentralization and capacity-building programmes. Activities such as installing video conferencing facilities and launching an educational satellite programmes have been considered<sup>6</sup>. These strategies help address education and other developmental issues identified in the MDGs.

### ***Mozambique***

The Government adopted the national ICT policy in December 2000 and the implementation strategy was launched in September 2002. The Commission on Information and Communication Technologies was established to coordinate development and implementation of the plan. The ICT policy identifies six priority areas: education; human resources development; health; universal access; infrastructure and governance. To address the challenges faced in each of these areas, the implementation strategy contains 37 priority projects, some of which are already being implemented. A National Transmission Network (marine cable), *telecentres* and *SchoolNet* are examples of ongoing projects<sup>7</sup>. The six priority areas clearly address Millennium Development Goals in the areas of education and health (goals 2, 4, 5 and 6).

### ***Tanzania***

Through its ICT Policy Task Force and a national e-think tank, the Government of Tanzania produced an ICT policy document that was presented and debated by key stakeholders in May 2002. Subsequently, the Cabinet approved the first National ICT policy in March 2003. Implementation of the policy has started

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<sup>4</sup> AISI Briefing Paper, No. 1 January 2003

<sup>5</sup> [www.uneca.org/codi](http://www.uneca.org/codi)

<sup>6</sup> *E-Strategies: National, Sectoral and Regional ICT Policies, Plans and Strategies*. UNECA, 2003

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.infopol.gov.mz>

and the regulatory and institutional instruments have been put in place to promote ICT for development. The goals focus on 10 areas, which include strategic ICT leadership, ICT infrastructure, ICT industry, human capital, legal and regulatory framework, productive sectors, service sectors, public service, local content and universal access<sup>6</sup>. These goals also reflect the need to meet the MDGs through the opportunities that ICTs provide.

### **Contribution To International ICT Policy Processes**

When nations from the north and south met during the World Summit on the Information Society, it became clear that national ICT policies and strategies influence global debates on international cooperation. By its nature, ICT policies and strategies encourage the active participation of the individual nations in global processes where issues that affect their implementation strategies and national development are discussed. This goes ahead to ensure that each nation's plans are brought to the fore while considering international ICT policy processes. For example, the Digital Solidarity Fund moved from being Senegal's suggestion to becoming a global consideration.

Recent developments and the nature of developing national ICT policies and strategies have revealed that ICT policy decision making processes are continually built on these national attempts, especially as the world moves towards bridging the digital divide – between and within nations and regions.

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