

ICT Policies in Africa

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INTRODUCTION

During the last 20 years, information and communication technologies (ICTs) have greatly provided a wealth of new technological opportunities, with the rapid deployment of both the Internet and cellular telephony leading the way (Sarkar De, 2005). ICTs can serve as potent agents of change (Yamuah, 2005). These technologies have invaded every country that is willing to accept and adopt them. The most important differentiating factor currently is policy. Policy makes a great difference regarding how countries are able to take advantage of the technological opportunities available to them and exploit them for good. Countries with progressive policies are seeing these technologies spread quickly. However, countries that are yet to formulate and integrate ICT policy have been plagued by slow growth of technology and the consequent lessening of support for economic and social development (Sarkar De, 2005).

Most African countries economies rely mainly on agriculture and a few mineral resources. It is time for African governments to embrace the new trend and agent of change—ICT and develop policies that will enhance the use of ICT as an instrument of socioeconomic development. This important vision which is lacking in most African countries, could be the turning point from poverty and misery on the continent to better the levels of life and happiness (Yamua, 2005). This paper dwells on ICT policies in Africa. It gives the definition of policy and ICT policy, x-rays ICT policy formulation, objectives of African ICT policies, sectoral applications of the policies, ICT policy implementation and future trends of ICT policies in Africa.

BACKGROUND

Simply put, policy is a plan of action (Kumar, 1993). A policy is a public statement of intentions and behavior

norms that is usually, but not always, formalized and made explicit by a sovereign government, institution, corporation or other organizational entity (Horton, 1997; cited by Olatokun, 2005). Such official statements set forth a goal, a vision, a direction, organizational values and norms or other kinds of guiding principle(s) that a group, enterprise or nation intends to follow and adhere to in the pursuit of its everyday endeavors (Olatokun, 2005).

Policies are intended to regulate the conduct of people in systems, but policies themselves are often conditioned by the sociocultural dynamics of the human systems for which they are intended (Olatokun, 2005). Policies are usually put in place by various governments. However, different stakeholders and in particular, the private sector make inputs into the policy process and affect its outcomes (APC, n.d.).

Information and communication technology (ICT) is any technology, which enables communication and the electronic capture, processing, and transmission of information (Parliament Office of Science and Technology, 2006). ICTs have become very important to contemporary societies. Whether one is talking on the phone, sending e-mail, going to the bank, using a library, listening to sports coverage on the radio, watching the news on television, working in an office or in the fields, and so forth, one is using ICTs. However these ICTS do not operate in isolations from one another (APC, n.d.).

ICT policy is an official statement which spells out the objectives, goals, principles, strategies, etc intended to guide and regulate the development, operation and application of information and communication technology. According to the APC (n.d.), ICT policy generally covers three main areas—telecommunications (especially telephone communications), broadcasting (radio and television), and the Internet; it may be national, regional (and or subregional) or international; each level may have its own decision-making bodies, sometimes making different and even contradictory policies.

Even when promulgated as distinct policy statement, ICT policies must take into account other policy areas, such as education policies, information policies, trade and investment policies, and cultural and linguistic policies. The mere establishment of written national ICT policy, however, has value in itself. It conveys, at a minimum, the message that the government is forward-looking and intends to pursue the utilization of ICT in society. Governments should aspire, of course, to more by putting the policy content into actual practice and becoming a role model in applying ICT in their administration and services (UNESCAP, 2007).

An ICT policy framework is recognized as an important step in order to create an enabling environment for the deployment of ICTs and their uses to social outcomes. The lack of an ICT policy has been attributed as a key factor behind the poor infrastructure and of ICTs in many developing countries in Africa. While many developing countries in Africa have moved ahead and formulated an ICT policy, very little progress has been recorded in policy implementation (Njuguna, 2006).

ICT policies and strategies are essential tools to define Africa's response to the challenges of globalization and to nurture the emergence of an African information society. This is especially important given the rapidly growing international focus on ICTs and development (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, 2001).

AFRICAN AND ICT POLICY FORMATION

The Organization of African Unity (OAU) in 1996 adopted the African Information Society Initiative (AISI) as the guiding framework for ICT efforts in Africa (Mutume, n.d.). AISI was adopted in May 1996 at the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) Conference of Ministers. It has, since then, provided the framework for ECA's programs on Harnessing Information for Development (Bounemia and Soltane, 2001). AISI was to provide the framework for the African information technology renaissance and to be African information society by the year 2010 (Ya'u, n.d.).

At the time ECA launched/adopted AISI in 1996, the main constraint to African information society developments was the lack of infrastructure to support communication and access to information within the

countries. Since that time, all African capital cities and several secondary towns have received connectivity (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, 2001). The key policy challenges for Africa now are (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, 2001):

1. Extending access
2. Applying the technologies to solve development problems
3. Collaborating to build market size and exploit economics of scale
4. Articulating an Africa vision in international negotiation on information society issues

The policy process must:

1. Involve broad groups of stakeholders including representatives of user communities and civil society
2. Identify issues that can best be addressed beyond national borders
3. Recognize the need for a stronger African voice in global negotiation

AISI gives strong support 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 (Sesan, 2004).

Through the active support and encouragement received from AISI, several African countries have formulated ICT policies. For instances in 2000, 13 of the 54 African countries had ICT policies; however, the number increased to 16 in 2002. Essentially the number of countries without ICT policies was reduced from 21 to 16 within the same period (AISI, 2003, cited by Sesan, 2004).

Examples of some African countries with ICT policies are:

- Ghana – Ghana ICT4D National Policy: <http://www.comminit.com/ict/policies/ictpolicies-2.html>
- Ethiopia – Ethiopian Science and Technology, National ICT Policy: http://www.telecom.net.et/-estc/_policy/index.htm

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