



Chapter XVIII

**Information In and On Africa:
Past, Present, and Future**

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Talking about Africa's right to information means talking about communication in Africa and in the Third World generally. In Africa the channels of communication were underdeveloped or inappropriate as a consequence of the continent's colonial past. The resulting lack of information was, among other reasons, an impediment to national development in African states after their independence. Until the 1980s, the principal means of communication were newspapers, books, telephones, radio and TV. However, with the development of modern technology, the proliferation of satellites, the advance in the computer industry and, most recently, with the advent of Internet new forms of communication were added. This contribution outlines the initiatives and discussions from the 1960s to the 1980s on the relationship between economic development and access to information in the Third World generally and in Africa in particular. The second part deals with the new communication technologies, the areas of application in Africa and their possible impact on Africa's development. The author takes a rather pessimistic attitude as far as the advancement of sustainable development in Africa through information technology is concerned, unless such technology is applied to local circumstances.

"Nevertheless, one gulf will not be easily bridged - that is the division between the information rich and the information poor. Justice and equity demand that we find ways of overcoming it. If more than half the world is denied access to means of communication, the people of developing countries will not be fully part of the modern world. For in the 21st century, the capacity to communicate will almost certainly be a key human right." — Nelson Mandela, October 3, 1995¹

INTRODUCTION

Information is not only power, it is also a prerequisite for development. Since information can only be obtained through communication, it is essential to possess the appropriate means of communication. Therefore, talking about Africa's right to information inevitably means talking about communication in Africa and in the Third World generally. Yet, with respect to Africa the channels of communication were underdeveloped or inappropriate as a consequence of the continent's colonial past. The resulting lack of information was, among other things, an impediment to national development in African states after their independence.

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This article first outlines the initiatives and discussions from the 1960s to the 1980s concerning the relationship between economic development and access to information in the Third World generally and in Africa in particular. The second part deals with the new communication technologies, the areas of application in Africa and their possible impact on Africa's development.

COMMUNICATION AND DEVELOPMENT: DEBATES AND INITIATIVES (1960S-1980S)

Communication in Africa: a Historical View

With the exception of the coastal regions, pre-colonial Africa was basically unexplored by outsiders, the map of Africa was mostly blank. This was changed during the period of colonization until the end of World War I: the African hinterland was opened up in the name of Christianity, civilization and commerce, and the various colonial powers established their presence by drawing artificial boundaries.

The African continent was thus carved up into different zones of influence. Each colonial power successively started establishing a certain infrastructure such as roads, railway lines, telegraph and telephone communication lines. These installations were, in the first place, set up to facilitate control and exploitation of the resources in the various colonies. In practice this meant that roads and railway lines were built from the interior of the country to the coast and to its harbors. Telegraph and telephone lines were installed in such a way that the colonial administrators could stay in contact with their home capitals for political and military reasons. These infrastructural measures were not aimed at furthering the development of the colonized African countries and their peoples.

In this context a large majority of African countries gained their independence during the first half of the 1960s. There soon came into existence a movement which aimed at bringing together all these new states to master the common challenges. Following the idea of Panafricanism, the Organization of African Unity (OAU) came into existence in 1963. According to its charter, its main aim is to promote the unity and solidarity between the African states and their peoples (Cervenka, 1969, p. 231-234). Having taken note of what authors in the field wrote in those days - that "telecommunications form the cornerstone of

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