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AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT FORUM

(ADF)

**The Challenge to Africa of Globalisation
and the Information Age**

Addis Ababa

Ethiopia

24-28 October 1999

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1. INTRODUCTION

The African Development Forum (ADF) is a process-oriented initiative led by the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) to establish an African-driven development agenda that reflects a consensus among major partners and that leads to specific programmes for implementation at the country level. The ADF was born out of the conviction that Africa cannot achieve sustainable development unless the policies, strategies and actions are designed, managed and owned by Africans themselves.

While the economic performance of many African countries has improved over the last five years, this improvement remains fragile. There is need to deepen and sustain it, with emphasis on policy reforms and good governance, taking into account the intensely competitive global environment which requires a shift in planning and delivery of development to larger regional units. New forms of partnerships are needed - partnerships where Africa takes the lead in forming a new, shared vision of the continent, setting the development agenda and implementing it with appropriate support from the international community.

The aim of the ADF is therefore to present the key stakeholders in the African development process (governments, civil society, the private sector, researchers and academics, intergovernmental organisations and donors) with the results of current research and opinion on key development issues in order to formulate shared goals and priorities, draft action programmes and define the environment that will enable African countries to implement these programmes.

The Forum will meet annually on a different development issue.

2. FIRST AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT FORUM (ADF)

The first African Development Forum (ADF) was held from 24-28 October 1999 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, under the theme "The Challenge to Africa of Globalisation and the Information Age".

The issue of globalisation and the information age has been chosen for the inaugural ADF because of the importance of defining African-owned and African-led strategies to engage with the global information economy.

Information and communication technologies (ICTs), the Information Age, knowledge societies and the information economy pervade all aspects of everyday life in most parts of the world, except in most of Africa. What has become the central feature of modern life globally is hardly felt in Africa, other than in areas around some capitals. If Africa remains on its

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present course, with the lowest teledensities in the world, with the fewest computers of any region, isolated from the information and knowledge available at the fingertips elsewhere, it has no chance to compete globally.

With its large rural population Africa represents the largest untapped market for new communications services. It also represents a major challenge to innovators who must identify and adapt products that will help Africa leapfrog some of its most fundamental development challenges.

The ECA has long advocated a development-serving information superhighway in the context of the African Information Society Initiative (AISI), which it is implementing along with a wide range of partners.

Against this background, the first ADF addressed four substantive themes:

- Strengthening Africa's information infrastructure;
- Africa and the information economy;
- Information and communication technologies (ICTs) for improved governance;
- Democratising access to the information society.

The ADF was attended by more than 600 representatives from governments, the private sector, civil society, bilateral and multilateral organisations, from both within and outside the continent.

The structure of the conference included both plenary and working group sessions.

3. KEY ADF INPUTS

Delivering the opening statement at the ADF, Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi noted that the ongoing process of globalisation would be a major determinant of the destinies of African countries. In that context, he warned that "if present conditions remain unaltered and the trend we see were to continue, then being more enmeshed within the globalised economy would only mean that by force of circumstances, Africa would be made to stay on the margins of the global economy". Adding that such an eventuality would lead to the growth of such extra-legal business activities as drug trafficking, he said the challenge of Africa should also be viewed as the challenge of members of the global village in general.

Prime Minister Meles also offered two proposals that would enable Africa to benefit from the globalised economy. First, it had to develop a vibrant

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domestic private sector as a practical necessity. It appeared obvious, he stated, that unless the domestic private sector leads the way with enthusiasm and confidence, it is unlikely for foreign investment to take part in our economies with any degree of effectiveness. Secondly, political stability and the rule of law could not be fostered without a clear role for a strong, robust state - a role which is not incompatible with the need for states to be legitimate and democratic.

In his opening remarks, the United Nations Under-Secretary-General and Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), Dr K Y Amoako, stressed that the most important issues facing Africa required a more ambitious approach to the policy process. Stressing the need for enhanced policy analysis and application in Africa, Dr Amoako called for alliances and networking, as no policy centre is big enough to know the whole picture. Policy experience must be shared, across sectors and across the boundaries of academia and policy circles. Successful experience must be marketed and Africa must have "its own answers, its own policy dynamics, just as is the case of every other region".

Policy analysis, noted Dr Amoako, was a growing business involving leaders in all sectors. As such, the ADF represented "the diverse, rapidly growing policy community of Africa". The ADF, a mechanism with distinct style and operations, was an attempt to organise the African policy community, working in alliance, starting with the national experience and ending with national actions, and, over time, covering some of the most fundamental challenges facing Africa's policy makers.

Dr Salim Ahmed Salim, Secretary-General of the Organisation for African Unity (OAU), emphasised the linkage between governance and sustainable economic development. "Good governance and democracy or the respect for human rights cannot thrive on empty stomachs", he stressed. "Democracy must deliver on bread and butter issues, otherwise democratic transitions will be reversed and the continent will slide back into situations where the politics of poverty gives rise to the poverty of politics". While linkages between good governance and sustainable economic development might not necessarily be perfect guarantees for sustaining democracy and a culture of political tolerance, they were nevertheless "thresholds" in creating acceptable African norms and behaviour".

In a keynote address on the theme of the conference during the opening plenary session, the Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations, Louise Frechette, noted that despite the opportunities offered by globalisation, hundreds of millions of people were living in desperate poverty, while countries most in need of trade and investment were being bypassed. "Many people experience globalisation not as agent of

progress, but as a disruptive force capable of destroying jobs and traditions in the blink of an eye"; she warned. "So even as we welcome the good that globalisation has brought and can bring in the future, we must also lament the ills that too often come with it. Our challenge is, therefore, to make globalisation work better in producing equitable growth".

Ms Frechette identified the spread of information and communications technologies (ICTs) as "perhaps the most important force spurring globalisation along". These ICTs were "a tremendous force for integrating people and nations into the global economy. They can promote openness and transparency, leaving polluters and dictators fewer places to hide". She also spelled out the tremendous power of information as "the new global asset, the new business capital, the very premise of progress" She envisioned the promise of the technologies for closing the rural-urban gap, alleviating natural disasters, promoting open societies and good governance, telemedicine, distance learning, and the integration of women into the work-force. Yet, she warned, access was crucial.

Noah Samara, CEO of WorldSpace Corporation, told participants that information affluence was "the need for every need...the sine qua non to development" and that "information is the predicate to everything we know. It is ubiquitous. It is the building block behind the human DNA, the chair you are sitting on, the building you are in, the car you drive".

Asserting that information was behind wealth was ignorance behind poverty, Mr Samara lamented the gap between rich and poor, asserting that it had been made starker by the power of ICTs. While these technologies had liberated lives, created stock markets and improved economies, they had only touched a fraction of the world's population. "Nearly 2,5 billion people have never made a phone call", he said. "Yet Manhattan alone has more phones than all those combined in sub-Saharan Africa". While there was a radio station for every thirty thousand people in most OECD countries, the average for the developing world was one radio station for every two million people. In addition, there was more Internet service providers in Estonia than in the whole of sub-Saharan Africa.

Worse than the hardware, said Mr Samara, was the scarcity of information, which "directly undermines the ability of a nation to not only keep its citizens informed and educated, but to simply keep them alive. Eleven million people will die of AIDS this year in sub-Saharan Africa. Forty million children will be orphaned. Either one of those numbers, by any definition, represents the population of an entire country. This is the horror we do not really comprehend".

In response, Dr Amoako spelt out the vision of an African renaissance, of an Africa that would be far more dynamic, and characterized by marked, if uneven, progress. "We will be more like Asia than we have admitted: We will have our tigers and we will have our disappointments", he said. "Overall, in the decades ahead we will live in a predominantly urban Africa, an Africa of business, media and science. An Africa in which governance is more localized and more shared with civil society. This will be an Africa of significant gains in social well being, particularly as science comes to our rescue to cope with health and environmental crises. In sum, we can vision an Africa in which the great majority of people are better off and in which Africa as whole is far more significant to the rest of the world".

The new possibilities for leapfrogging afforded by science and technology offered a sound basis for this optimistic vision, added Dr Amoako. "In the 20th century we were intelligent observers of nature. In the 21st century we will be changers of nature. In the 20th century nations depended upon natural resources for wealth. In the 21st century and probably well beyond, wealth will depend upon the ability to master the three revolutions of physics, information intelligence, biomolecular science, and the ways they converge".

Dr Amoako predicted that in the years ahead, vast improvements in artificial intelligence would be accompanied by far greater use of human intelligence. There would be a shift in education from rote learning, to development of real understanding. Education would be a lifelong affair, starting in the first year and lasting through old age. Far more human brain capacity would be cultivated and used than in the past.

Intelligent public policies, he stressed, were critical to effecting the shift from simple agriculture and simple manufacturing to information-based economies that employ innovation and technologically advanced applications. Such policies should be goal focused, carefully monitored, long-term and intelligently led. They should address education - where the focus should be on qualitative gain, and in particular science and technology

4. THE WAY FORWARD

The establishment and management of the African Information Society is a complex task. There can, for example, be no sustainable infrastructure without adequate education, or reliable energy supply. There can be no adequate education for all, or sufficient re-distribution of limited energy resources, without widespread use of ICTs. There can be no widespread use of ICTs without an enabling environment which empowers the distant to come closer to opportunity, there can be no enabling

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environment without optimal governance, and this can only be achieved in an information society.

The basis for the African Information Society, therefore, is the development and consolidation of National Information and Communication Infrastructure policies and plans (NICI), which will be a cornerstone of Africa's response to the challenges of globalisation. It is the national level which provides the platform for making strategic choices as to the most appropriate modalities for decisions on, for example, regulation, infrastructural priorities and service distribution.

Some strategic activities will be implemented at sub-regional or regional level, or indeed at local level. It is often at the supra-national level that activities should best be implemented, such as several countries sharing access to global gateways. Similarly, regional mechanisms for the exchange of experiences and programmes can provide the most appropriate channel for Africa to play an active part in global fora. However, without well-equipped and properly functioning NICIs at the national level, which can also benefit from mutual contacts, there can be no African Information Society. The development of NICIs is an ongoing process by which stakeholder consensus on progress towards the African Information Society can be sustained.

Among the specific measures that would enhance the establishment of NICIs would be a regional mechanism for sharing information at regional and national level on capacity building in NICI development.

The various sectors participating in the ADF have taken full advantage of the opportunities provided for the elaboration of further action plans within and between sectors, at various levels. These reflect the depth and sincerity of the commitment of the players at ADF, and they are listed in some detail in the following section.

In addition, there are three key foci on which cooperative programmes and partnerships could unlock great strategic progress, namely in the areas of regulation, financing and education.

In each area of work there must be activities which enable capacity building and skill development among all the stakeholders and the various institutions. There must be systems to monitor, review and, if necessary correct, the extent to which certain commonly agreed goals are actually met within an activity - these must include the integration of women on the basis of full equity, and thus, where necessary, the adaptation of certain activities and practices to allow for this. There is here an on-going, essential role for the research community, who should also be actively engaged in developing viable indicators for measuring

needs, performance and impact of each activity. Similarly, the skills and knowledge of the Diaspora, and civil society bodies, including community-based organisations, in particular in outreach and needs response, must be mobilised.

Policies and regulations should create an environment which is conducive to innovation, competition and both inward and local investment. It is important to ensure that such investment meets national developmental needs at all levels and of all sectors. There is a need for strengthening and consolidating regulatory bodies which are inclusive in nature. They must be autonomous of government and operators, and actively involve all stakeholders, including consumer and user communities, and balance their diverse interests. Such bodies operate at the national level and will always have national characteristics. Cooperation at sub-regional and regional level is an essential part of the policy and regulatory framework.

The recent and present experiences in some sub-regions, such as southern Africa, could provide useful models for replication or emulation. Additionally, the recent emergence of continent-wide bodies for cooperation between media regulatory bodies could provide a useful point of reference for any initiatives in the ICT area.

Programmes in this area could provide the platform for ensuring that Africa takes a pro-active stance in advancing its interests in fora such as the WTO, ITU, ICANN and AFRINIC.

The process of investment in leading edge uses and access to ICTs will only be unleashed if new models of finance and financial instruments, such as risk analysis, can be further developed. This is in particular essential in enabling adequate investment in such areas as E-SMEs (e-commerce services, TeleCentres and CyberCafé SMEs set up by young entrepreneurs) so that financiers can be assured about perceived risks and the SMEs remain viable and accessible.

This process can be advanced by the establishment of task forces and pilot projects to work on new financial models, and to examine investment models for such emerging initiatives as in education and telecommunications.

Furthermore, global private sector investment in research and development should be mobilised in cooperation with local companies and local research institutions.

The need for more widespread education and life-long learning is paramount in development strategies, and ICTs have a key role to play in

the delivery of services to the education sector, as well as in direct education such as in distance learning. This includes the applications considered by, for example, SchoolNet and similar initiatives, telecentres, and women's and youth groups. In particular, emphasis must be given to the special circumstances, needs and demands of specific groups hitherto often excluded from educational opportunities from such as young women.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS RESULTING FROM THE ADF

The following are among the principal recommendations which have been made as a result of the deliberations in the various plenary and working group sessions:

The Information Economy

- Recognise the importance of analysing policies and approaches with regard to globalisation and the information economy;
- To join the information economy, Africa must combine the economies of scale with competition, improve the local skills to cope with the brain drain problem, encourage sub-regional cooperation with centres of excellence, establish stable framework for investment and communicate input to the globalisation process through international channels;
- There is also a need for significant negotiating capacity in the global fora;
- Governments should recognize the need for reliable statistical indicators to facilitate the process of planning the information economy and monitoring impact and performance;
- Local content development and material in different languages needs attention;
- Governments should develop clear and integrated strategy and partner with the private sector to promote local access;
- Global multinational private sector should create partnerships with African SMEs;
- There is a need to address the lack of awareness and psychological barriers to using e-commerce in Africa, especially SME sensitisation to Diaspora opportunities and for Diaspora awareness raising.

Governance in Africa

- ICTS for improved governance can support four areas, namely reducing poverty, meeting basic human needs, improving public administration and enhancing democratisation;
- Key challenges to applying ICTs for an improved governance in Africa are the pervasive illiteracy, the needs for use of appropriate

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technologies such as radio in rural areas that count for 70% of the African population, the fast moving technology and the inability for institutions to catch up, and the creation and exploitation of local contents;

- In response, there is a need to establish good communication channels between decision makers and professionals, develop applications that fit priority areas for development - decision support systems, debt management, job creation, agricultural information and knowledge systems, human resource development and health, design systems for capturing indigenous knowledge, promote information and resources sharing among African countries through joint pilot projects, replications of best practices, and the establishment of regional and sub regional ad hoc frameworks, and develop South-South as well as international partnerships adapted to local context and empower national and local expertise.

Infrastructure

Specific commitment to and initiatives for:

- Mobilising local investment for ICTs and networks, from corporations to communities;
- Capacity building for inclusive and effective policy formulation and regulation;
- Capacity building and cooperation in African representation in regional and international arenas;
- Sub regional and regional harmonisation and cooperation, building on good examples;
- Expansion of existing and new African investment funds for rural and sub-regional development;
- Sub-regional cooperation on equipment selection, procurement, deployment and related areas;
- Greatly enhance Africa's effective participation and impact in Internet governance, at regional and international levels.

Democratising Access

ICT support for primary and secondary education - school networking and distance learning tools:

- Find ways to insure that by implementing Internet and ICT projects in schools in urban areas, we shall not be drawing resources from schools in poor urban and rural areas to create a new source of inequality among our people;

- Maintain a balance between in-service and pre-service teacher training in the use of ICT for the teaching of traditional subjects, rather than focus on teaching ICT for its own sake;
- Promotion and protection of indigenous knowledge through ICTs. This would generate content and protect IPR (Intellectual Property Rights); Building different capacities such as information brokers, women's groups, the disabled, youth and others to broaden access;
- Integrate old and new technologies, facilitate expression of our identities;
- Regarding community-centred applications, measures should be taken at the level of bodies which facilitate the cooperative model; Given the importance of telecentres within strategies for ICT distribution, methodologies must be developed for selecting location of telecentres;
- The development of Web page creation and design schools, providing basis for services exported to developed countries.

Youth

- On-line youth forum collaboration;
- Development of African Youth Action Plan through National Youth Forums;
- South-South collaboration;
- African content development.

Gender

ICTs are implemented in a context of gender inequality. For ICTs to be an empowering tool for development, it is essential that:

- Women participate effectively in ICT decision-making processes, including NICIs;
- ICTs applications, products and services are designed to meet the specific needs of African women;
- ICTs are used to strengthen women's entrepreneurship;
- Women entrepreneurs actively engage in the information economy;
- Young women are educated and trained in the fields of science and technology;
- ICTs are used in enhancing African women's impressive, existing capacity to speak out and support one another;
- Mechanisms are established to guarantee gender equity in ICT planning, projects and programmes;
- Appropriate research on the impact of ICTs on women, and their struggle for equality, take place.

Diaspora

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- African governments to send a strong message welcoming the participation and support of the Diaspora in meeting strategic goals by creating an enabling environment and incentives for investment and trade;
 - Create a virtual forum mediated by ICTs of African experts in the Diaspora to advise African decision makers;
 - African governments to communicate policy interests to supporters and friends mobilising support in such places as the United States;
 - Explore the modalities of using Diaspora expertise to support Africa's interests in global fora such as ITU, WTO, etc.

Think Tanks

- Develop institutional capacity for training policymakers, analysts and researchers on the role and use of ICTs in development, and deliver this training nationally and regionally;
- Develop, at the regional level, methodologies for impact assessment of national policies relating to ICTs, and other policy issues, with a view to promoting transparency and accountability in governance and regional cooperation.

Private Sector

- Maintain a website, knowledge management portal, multiple archived mailing lists, Web-based collaborative tools to promote African private sector collaboration;
- Promote on-going dialogue and debate within the African private sector and the global private sector in order to enhance Africa's effectiveness in global fora;
- The ADF should commit to set targets for creating employment in the information economy, focusing on intangible goods and services;
- Establish new instruments to support the capital needs of the African private sector, including new venture capital funds and the restructuring of available financing from the regional and international financial institutions;
- Develop mechanisms that enable private sector contribution to the NICI planning process including a focus on the legal and regulatory framework required for the information economy;
- Redefine the knowledge, education and training required for the information economy.

A complete conference report, due for publication by the ECA in December 1999, will feature full reports of the various sessions, working groups and sessions, including their full sets of detailed recommendations.

6. INITIATIVES EMERGING FROM THE ADF

Based on the deliberations at the ADF, the following are concrete partnership initiatives which have emerged:

Schoolnet Africa

A working group has been established to move forward the implementation of Schoolnet Africa, a continent wide-initiative aimed at an African generation of critical thinkers who will play a major role in the global information society. The working group agreed to meet within 6 months to review a concrete programme of action.

Biz2BizNet

A group of 15 representatives of companies, business associations, and chambers of commerce have agreed to launch a Biz2Biz network initiative which commits itself to advancing the interests of Micro and Small Enterprises in Africa.

Beijing+5 Women's Networking Activities

An electronic discussion forum has been formed to focus on the impact of ICTs on women in Africa (to be launched at the African Regional Conference on Women in Addis in November 1999.)

Civil Society ICT Network Initiative

More than 40 non-governmental and community-based organisations made a firm commitment to set up a civil society network in ICT. This network will be dedicated to exchanging information, building capacity for policy understanding and enhancing the effective use of ICTs for development and empowerment.

Telecentre Network

People from 6 African countries agreed to build a network of telecentre operators and supporters to develop a manual, computer recycling strategies, identifying e-commerce opportunities at community level, improving services for disabled people and sharing evaluation methodologies and outcomes.

Diaspora

- Diaspora Database

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The Diaspora group will create a database of Diaspora groups already active and working for Africa's development as a means to linking needs to sources of support

- Diaspora, ICTs & Development in Africa

The Diaspora group will oversee the production of a special journal edition devoted to the various ways that the Diaspora can harness ICTs to promote Africa's development, an edited book on the same theme and an online journal.

- Mobilising Intellectual Capital

The group will also develop a distance learning system that intellectualises indigenous knowledge and get it to people in rural parts of Africa.

- Linking Diaspora with Africa via Telecentres

The Diaspora group will initiate a project to link Diaspora groups with their communities in Africa using multipurpose telecentres.

Malawi ADF National Plan of Action

The Vice President of Malawi, Justin Malewezi, has decided to form a Committee, from among the delegates of his country, to integrate the fundamental issues raised at this conference into a national plan of action. This Committee includes government, the private sector and think tanks.

African Distance Learning Programme

A task force for the African Distance Learning Programme (ADLP) has been convened. Provisionally the task force will include participation by Egypt, South Africa, Mozambique and Namibia and other interested countries. The programme aims at using ICTs for the provision of distance learning in Africa. The group recommends the drafting of a conceptual framework for the ADLP for completion by mid December 1999. This will include digital systems design, content design, communication and networking and local training and support facilities.

Global Access Information Agency (GAIA)

This project defined at ADF will reduce the price of information age services for end users in Africa. It is based on the recycling computers from developed countries, the development and use of free software and

Accompanied by Ashiek Manie, Deputy Managing Director of Intekom, I also visited the Organisation of African Unity (OAU). We were received by the Media Liaison Officer who was kind enough to present us with a brief overview of the history and activities of the organisation.

On a lighter note, spending a week in a historic city such as Addis Ababa was also a great experience and a few of the South African participants, including myself, used the opportunity to visit most of the landmarks of the city and surrounding areas.

The second African Development Forum (ADF), to be held in October 2000 in Addis Ababa, will focus on the Impact and Challenges of HIV/AIDS on Africa.

8. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the Ford Foundation for inviting and sponsoring me to attend the ADF.

Attending the ADF was a very stimulating and enriching experience and my work at the Programme for Development Research (PRODDER) at the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) will definitely benefit as a result.