

15th July PARIS Intersessional WSIS Meeting
African Caucus Input

When we make statements such as 'we must strive towards global universal service in telephony and global universal access to the information super highway' we are referring particularly to the region of the world most disadvantaged by the current global scenario. We are referring to my continent - Africa.

The African civil society caucus wishes to assert that a prerequisite for the creation of an information society is the existence of an effective information infrastructure. The poor state of African information infrastructure is the main constraint to the ability of African people to develop their own communication solutions.

The lack of capital on our continent makes us dependent on external investors who more often than not have profit and not people centred partnerships for development as their primary objective. A result of this scenario is what we call reverse subsidies where the burden of paying for bandwidth is unfairly weighted onto countries in Africa. The simple fact that it costs 15 times more to make a phone call from Africa to within Africa than from outside Africa to Africa is a clear demonstration of how economic globalization is working against the development of African based service provision.

Many people in Africa have never made a phone call and don't have access to electricity. This will not be a limitation to a conceptual grasp of ICT's but the application of ICT's must be introduced in useful and relevant ways that will have a positive impact on peoples lives. The use of ICT's to

enhance democratic elections and improve health services are relevant examples.

In the short time available to me, I would like to raise some practical solutions to the issues we have in Africa.

New low cost VSAT based internet services could have a significant impact on improving access in Africa. Licencing and regulation that ensures African participation is an urgent priority for African states to address.

Africa needs a robust internet backbone with exchange points on the continent and strong ISP organizations.

Africa needs space on international ICT decision making forums. At the moment our perspective is not heard in such forums and this is felt in the lack of geo satellite positions and limited bandwidth.

Many African people are fluent in their own languages, but not the languages of the internet. The cycle of not having electricity, access to email and internet facilities and then not being able to understand the information on a computer when access is overcome permeates against African interest in the information society. The development of home language applications and touch screen solutions will assist to overcome some of the layers of the access problem.

The information society must be developed within a human rights framework. The right to communicate is a familiar one to African people and we assert that it is a fundamental human right that should be seen as the platform on which a global information society is built.

Many important declarations and charters have emerged from Africa to encourage and frame the development of informed societies that have the right to communicate. These are based on a human rights framework. Many of these are contravened on a daily basis in African countries where governments and the private sector exclusive of civil society, dominate the nature of development.

Some of the Charters and declarations that the African Caucus wishes to highlight as framework for the development of an African information society are:

- The African Charter on Broadcasting 2001
- Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression in Africa
- Internet Rights Charter
- Charter on African media and the Digital Divide
- E-Conference Statement
- The Peoples Communication Charter
- The African Charter on Human and People's Rights

And in true African tradition, I would like to end with a story about the struggle of one village, for information.

In Kanzinzila village in the Caprivi region of Namibia a 24 year old disabled man who has never attended school repairs the broken radios for his and several other villages. Self taught, a few years ago after hearing of the outside world from his schooling brothers, he convinced the village headman to gather enough money from villagers to buy a car battery, a television set and a solar panel. He then established a TV viewing set up for the village. As time has gone by the efficacy of

the battery and the panel have declined and it now takes two weeks to recharge the battery using the solar panel. This then works for three to four evenings.

The village was surprised to see recently that America was bombing the whole of Iraq because they were after one man. They were incredulous that so many people had to die because of one person. He also said that the TV is an important link between the younger generation who attend school and the older one that has not been educated at all. He has seen an advertisement for large screen televisions and is hoping the village will be able to raise enough capital to buy one some day.