SUPPORTING E-STRATEGIES FOR AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT

United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UN-ECA)

Introduction

In the global networked economy, information and knowledge have become strategic resources on which governments, corporations and the public at large make their decisions. The countries which have created an enabling environment are experiencing revolutionary effects especially in the governance, education, health and business sectors. Yet, there are countries in Africa where people are not able to make informed decisions on their daily lives because of lack of access to ICTs, information and knowledge.

Towards e-strategy development in Africa: NICI and SCAN-ICT programmes

As a response to the above realities, the Conference of African Ministers of Economic Development and Planning adopted in May 1996 the African Information Society Initiative (AISI)[1] which was adopted the same year in Yaounde (Cameroon) by the Head of States of the Organization of African Unity (OAU). Driven by critical development imperatives, AISI focuses on priority strategies, programmes and projects, which can assist in building African information societies. A key component of the AISI is the development of national e-strategies, or the [famous] National Information and Communication Infrastructure (NICI) plans as well as the development of procedures for the measurement of the impact of the information society known as the SCAN-ICT programme.

ECA's work on e-strategies is geared towards addressing the Millenium Development Goals (MDGs) so that ICTs can assist in the reduction of poverty, improve healthcare delivery, provide education opportunities for all, particularly the girl-child, create employment opportunities as well as food security.

Other activities are carried out in the framework of the AISI, including support to civil society organizations to spearhead information society development issues in member States. ECA supports also regional activities such as the NEPAD ICT component, e-PolNet, Connectivity Africa and activities of the regional economic communities.

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[1] http://www.uneca.org/aisi/

National e-strategies
Concerning national e-strategies, the introduction of policies and strategies is to principally assist countries deploy, harness and exploit ICTs to advance their socio-economic development at the local, national and sub-regional levels, enabling citizens' access to affordable telephones, broadcasting, computers and Internet services. Some of the concrete measures include the need to develop sound regulatory frameworks as well as human resource capacity.

Although in recent years a number of countries have made efforts in ICT infrastructure development, the continent still lags behind other regions of the world, considering the actual needs.

ECA has been assisting member states in their endeavors to initiate, formulate and implement national e-strategies with a view to achieving their development goals. The success is evident in the fact that the number of countries with e-strategies increased from 13 in 2000 to 16 in 2002, while countries in the process of developing a policy jumped from 10 in 2000 to 21 in 2002. Thus, the number of countries without a plan in Africa was reduced from 30 to 16.   Four new requests have been received from countries which need assistance in developing their e-strategies.

This progress has been a result of increased awareness on the importance of ICT policies and plans among decision and policy makers and key stakeholders.

SCAN-ICT
Concerning SCAN-ICT, the project was developed and launched to build support for African capability to collect and manage key information needed to support the growing investment in ICTs.

The rationale for Scan-ICT is based on five inter-related phenomena and/or events, which are explained as follows:

➢ First ICTs have taken on a preponderant role in the globalized economy and that Africa must be able to integrate into the "New Economy" or risk being further marginalized;

➢ Second, there is growing evidence that ICTs can play an effective role in ensuring Africa's sustainable development;

➢ Third, if African decision makers are to undertake effective ICT policies, in order to harness ICTs as effective development tools, there is a need for relevant data and information to support the formulation of these policies;

➢ Fourth, there is a proliferation of ICT activity and investments in Africa, but there is need for effective co-ordination to ensure impact and reduce duplication.

There are four major components to Scan-ICT activities:

➢ **Indicators and Benchmarks:** to track movement towards an information society, it is necessary to establish indicators, set benchmarks, and measure progress in meeting targets.

➢ **Policy Issues:** achieving maximum benefit from ICTs requires policies to facilitate access and effective utilisation. Scan-ICT will help African nations to develop, implement and monitor policies that will facilitate access and utilization.

➢ **Human Resources:** monitoring the growing demands for ICT skills in Africa.

➢ **Applications:** disseminating information on effective applications of ICTs in business, community development, and social services including education and health care, etc.

The project launched pilot initiatives based on the following activities: 1) a defined methodology; 2) collection of baseline data and benchmarking; 3) creation of a mechanism for regional analysis through development of databases and websites; 4) recommendations for the sustainability as well as roll out to other countries.

The methodology was developed to contribute to the continuation and expansion of the collection and analysis of data with a view to monitoring the progress in the ICT sector in the pilot countries. Together with continuous improvements on the indicators and benchmarks, it is expected that the system can provide accurate and up to date data and information to decision makers whilst progress is monitored over time. The common denomination of data and development of databases will also allow the analysis, monitoring and sharing of best practices and lessons learned at the regional level.

The above activities are implemented through AISI for African countries. Apart from the UN Secretariat, support for the activities comes from a variety of key partners including mainly, the EU, IDRC of Canada, USAID, and some countries of the North and Asia.

Lessons Learned

Based on the available data on the e-strategies completed by ECA in member States, sample analysis was made. The following are some of the results and observations extracted from the analysis:

a) Visions and objectives: most of the countries articulated their visions and objectives in the NICI plan for overcoming geographical features, promoting good governance, improving public administrations, developing human resources, generating employment opportunities, advancing economic development, and sustaining democratization process.

b) Half of the NICI countries target at 4-5 focus sectors, while the other half expanded to 8-9 sectors.

c) All countries have identified business and private sector development and education as priority in their action plans.

d) Several countries benefited from the personal involvement of top-level decision makers, such as presidents and prime ministers.

e) As to the impacts the plans have had, it was noted in some countries that the e-strategy formulation process resulted in major telecommunications policy changes and facilitated liberalization of the telecommunication sector.

f) Even though governments need to take the lead in the development of national strategies, other key stakeholders should be encouraged to play their part in both the formulation and implementation process, hence needs for clear and intensive national consultations involving all stakeholders.

g) Given the number of countries involved in the NICI process it is clear that Africa is gradually beginning to optimize the full benefits of ICTs. (However, a great deal still needs to be done with respect to the development of effective implementation plans once national strategies have been formulated, based on the availability of adequate infrastructure).

The Way Forward

After the successful formulation of NICI plans, the countries have been requesting further assistance from ECA in sector-specific areas. Services required range from development of an implementation strategy to examination of the work programmes, to resource mobilization, development of sectoral strategies and monitoring of the implementation plan. This underlines the importance of ECA's role in providing assistance for the formulation and piloting of sectoral policies and strategies. Special attention is being paid to e-governance, democratizing access, private sector development and content development to meet AISI and MDG objectives. In addition, ECA is proposing a new dimension of village information and communications infrastructure (VICI) plans to the existing process to extend policy-making and implementation.

ECA will also place more emphasis on the expedited participation of the countries currently without a national ICT policy in the global knowledge society.