

ADDRESS BY THE CHAIR OF THE MINISTERIAL OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE AND MINISTER OF COMMUNICATIONS, DR IVY MATSEPE-CASABURRI, AT THE AFRICAN TELECOM SUMMIT 2003, "READINESS FOR A NETWORKED AFRICA, VISION, STRATEGIES AND INSTITUTIONAL ARRANGEMENTS UNDER NEPAD"

Maputo, 12 - 14 March 2003

I am honoured to be speaking here on the first day of the African Telecom Summit. I believe that this important gathering of African leaders and African experts in the telecommunications sector will enable us to put our heads together, to share our experiences and to chart the way forward so that ICTs do indeed play a pivotal role in Africa's development.

The UN Human Development Report of 2002 recognised both the benefits and negatives of the new era of globalisation that has affected each and every one of us in the world. It says that:

"The new era of globalisation offers enormous benefits. But they will not be realised unless more of the world's people are included. This has importance for national and international policies in industrial as well as developing countries. Perhaps most important is the need to include more people in the decisions that shape their lives in the modern world - and to include more people in the economic and social gains. "Basically it is about "using technology to solve problems of the majority"

Thus, since 2000, talk of network readiness at regional and national levels gained prominence and began to be seen as public policy agenda. Heads of State and Government agreed to prioritise ICTs as tools for socio-economic development. International digital divide initiatives sprang up. The UN Task Force, the Dot force, the acceptance of the Okinawa Charter on Global Information Society, among others, were all taking us into a world reality where ICTs would play a major role in development.

Within the African context, in the new wave of democracy to sweep the African continent late in the latter part of the twentieth century, the conditions began to exist for Africa's rebirth, and a common quest emerged for an African Renaissance as we began to call it. It was premised on a common vision of African unity and solidarity, continental development and an end to the marginalisation of Africa in world affairs; coupled with recognition that unless we were to act and work together, we would be pushed deeper into poverty and economic backwardness.

Thus the social and economic development of our continent began to be treated with more urgency than before when we decided as Africans to embark upon a new initiative for social and economic recovery, that is the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). It started, as you are all aware, with a pledge by African leaders, based on a common vision, a principled stand, to eradicate poverty and to place African countries on the path of sustainable growth and development. Perhaps most importantly, we were quite clear that none but ourselves could rid this vast landmass of underdevelopment and the marginalisation in a globalising world.

Conscious that both the human and natural resources exist to bring about change, we declared that the challenge was to mobilise these resources through "bold and imaginative leadership" to accelerate Africa's overall recovery and to do so with the international community in the form of a new global partnership "based on shared responsibility and mutual interest."

The New Partnership was accepted as a project of the OAU in July 2001 and the report of the NEPAD Heads of State and Government Implementation Committee was accepted at the launch meeting of the African Union in Durban last year. There was agreement reached that, African countries would work together in policy and through action in pursuit of democracy and good political governance, economic and corporate governance, socio-economic development and an African peer review mechanism.

The emphasis was placed on establishing common codes of good practices in financial management among others. As regards, socio-economic development, the main focuses of attention would be (i) the attainment of democracy, good governance, peace and stability; (ii) the development of human and physical resources, (iii) gender equality; (iv) openness to international trade and investment; (iv) allocation of appropriate funds to the social sector and (iv) new partnerships involving all sectors of society. The question of market access, the importance of education, and the health problems facing Africa especially communicable diseases would gain priority among other infrastructure development projects.

Of course, crucial to our discussion today was the recognition of the importance of ICTs in enabling Africa's recovery and competitive entry into a globalising world. As part and parcel of the priority of bridging the infrastructure gap, emphasis was now placed on bridging the digital divide by investing in ICTs. Thus capacity-building in the ICT sector and improving our overall ability to deploy, harness and exploit ICTs to advance our own socio-economic development was regarded as a priority as a NEPAD initiative. The use of ICTs thus became important in the following ways:

- (i) bridging the divide between the rural and urban areas within a given country
- (ii) bridging the gap between countries of a given sub-region
- (iii) bridging the inter-regional gap and
- (iv) bridging the gap between Africa and the rest of the world

The projects identified in the short-term largely consisted of ICT infrastructure projects and plans, ICT infrastructure development and roll-out projects and ICT infrastructure exploitation projects that included the E-readiness Initiative, initiatives in tele-medicine and also in e-government and governance, in tele-education and in trade and content development promotion.

The best ways to achieve this is seen as through P.P.P.s especially in power, telecoms and water and sanitation.

Already, the Ministerial Oversight Committee (MOC) established in Lusaka in 1998 at the Conference of Plenipotentiaries of PATU had worked on proposals and possible actions on the role and development of ICTs as a tool for Africa's socio-economic development and taken cognisance of both the Millennium Development goals and the Okinawa Charter. PATU was formed into ATU, a much better functioning institution.

The Ministers set up an African Connection Project and created the African Centre for Strategic Planning house in the DBSA in South Africa. In different regions, such as SADC, regional structures sprang up to leverage economies of scale but also harmonise regulations. SADC Regional Information Infrastructure Projects (SRIIPs) initiated by South Africa Telecoms association attempted to ensure digital connectivity between SADC countries. The SATRA (Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of Southern Africa) was set up to achieve common views and harmonisation of regulation and develop best practice. West Africa has started on its own similar association (WTRA). NEPAD's own institutional structures are being refined and would be known after the next AU meeting in June/July in Maputo, Mozambique.

However, NEPAD's E-Africa Commission has already been established and embarked on an e-readiness Study, which is a prerequisite for readiness for a network Africa, focusing amongst others, on issues of connectivity at regional and continental level, policy and regulatory issues at national regional and continental level in pursuit of our vision.

Reform of SATCC and ATU are under discussion in an attempt to align NEPAD institutions and the modus operandi.

The MOC established a Ministerial Task team to follow-up on international and continental initiatives on ICT, established a Ministerial Task Team and a Minister's Forum and special programmes for youth and students and to improve the lives of African women. The MOC would also play a role in advancing NEPAD through recommending the NEPAD ICT Task

Force and agreeing upon the reporting mechanisms of the Africa Commission within NEPAD.

Clearly this calls for a strategy of leveraging African resources, e.g. utilities rail roads and electricity grids for bandwidth rich infrastructure.

Concrete projects towards a networked Africa have been the SADC E-Readiness Study, the important work of the E-Africa Commission, the SAT3 / WASC / SAPE fibre optic cable linking the African continent and initiatives around E-schools and E-learning in general. Emphasis is being placed on the establishment of infrastructure. Even the SADC E-readiness study recognised the importance of basic telecommunications and electrification before anything else and importance of universal access and universal service to meet the needs of Africa's people.

Public-Private Partnership are gaining greater importance in ensuring investment for development of infrastructure, services, market and internet that is both PC and mobile based.

The NEPAD ICT programme itself is essentially cross-cutting and straddles a number of sectors in order to bring about development as a whole.

Institutional capacity building therefore looms as a major challenge, but so does human resource development. Mobilising existing African human resources in the Diaspora and reproducing human capital appropriate at R&D and other levels within regions needs more discussion.

We are still a long way from a truly networked Africa and from nearly as ready as we ought to be when we speak about Network Readiness. Yet in reaching our dream of this Africa that must be a vast network of hopes, conversations between countries, shared frustrations, efforts and successes, we must certainly pursue our focus on Africa's readiness.

My dream of a networked Africa is not only about Africa improving its competitiveness in the world, but begins as a small dream where every village has access to telephones, where every village has a public terminals where they can access government information and services, where young people come together to access distant learning and do their assignments on computers and connect up with others elsewhere through email and so learn about their full identity as Africans communicating with other fellow Africans, where community websites can flourish and record our rich traditions and unique histories in our own languages and where small and embryonic SMMEs emerge as people come to these sites to market their products. The benefits of tele-medicine and tele-learning will improve the quality of life of Africa's people. These are the areas where we can certainly make great progress and where ICT applications can help us to end underdevelopment and illiteracy and to foster community development and market access. This is how the African Century will live up to its name.