



Organization of African Unity

**African Telecom 98 Forum**

**The African Renaissance: Agenda for Action  
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In 1963, when African Leaders adopted the Charter establishing the Organization of African Unity (OAU) they agreed, among others, to cooperate in the field of transport and communications. In doing so, the founding fathers recognized the critical role of communications in Africa's development process. They considered this particular sector to be central in promoting Pan Africanism and in building African Unity. They also expected the sector to contribute not only to the economic cooperation and development but also in promoting peace, security stability and understanding in the continent. In other words, the sector was considered critical in addressing the multiple challenges that were confronting the post-independent Africa.

Thirty-five years after the establishment of the OAU, the vision of the founding fathers on the central role of communications has proved to be of great relevance. Indeed, history has taught us that behind all successful economic development, there was always a significant role of the information and communication sectors. The information and telecommunication sectors have provided the infrastructure and facilities for the production, storage, retrieval and rapid flow of information necessary for planning and for socio-economic development. Today, the emergence of new information and telecommunication technologies has defied distance and space and has made the concept of the world as a global village a reality.

From this perspective and in addressing the challenges that confront the African continent, African leaders, meeting under the auspices of the OAU, have adopted programmes, Declarations and Treaties mapping out collective strategies and action for socio-economic development of the continent. These include: the Lagos Plan of Action and its Final Act of Lagos, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, the Declaration on the Political and Socio-Economic Situation in Africa and the Fundamental Changes Taking Place in the World, the Treaty Establishing the African Economic Community, Relaunching Africa's Economic and Social Development: The Cairo Agenda. All these strategies and plans have set the tone for the re-ordering of Africa's priorities and paved the way to renaissance in Africa, together with an agenda for action. Indeed, the African agenda for action was meant to address the various challenges confronting the African Continent, particularly in the areas of economic cooperation and integration; prevention, management and resolution of conflicts; good governance, democratization and the respect for human rights.

In the implementation of this agenda, the OAU has considered that the building of peace, security and stability on the continent, the intensification of the democratization process that has been initiated in most African countries together with the on-going efforts for the growth of and the protection of human rights and the environment of good governance

depend upon an advanced and strengthened role of the information and telecommunication sector. The strengthening of the information and telecommunications sector has a significant contribution to make to the efforts being deployed on the continent to increase the efficiency of the African economies through the adoption of appropriate policy measures and the creation of conducive environment so as to deepen and widen the economic integration process initiated by the adoption of the Treaty establishing the African economic Community.

Consequently, the role of telecommunications in the implementation of the African agenda for action is at the core of Africa's renaissance. It is now generally accepted that telecommunications lies at the heart of progress whether in the socio-economic or in the political fields. It provides the necessary support for economic development just as it also provides the required infrastructure for conflict prevention, management and resolution. For instance, empirical studies have clearly established the relationship between GDP and telephone density. This goes to prove that efficient and easily accessible telecommunications play a catalytic role in socio-economic development of the African continent and constitute a major factor in Africa's endeavors aimed at achieving peace and development on the continent.



Telecommunications is an important factor in rural development. Increased access to telecommunications services provides the link between the rural and the urban populations. It makes a substantial contribution and brings the people together not only within the national boundaries but with the rest of the world. Telecommunications therefore, become increasingly a medium for sharing common interests of the people as it enables them to exchange information about their different developmental activities. It enables rural farmers to get in touch with the suppliers of agricultural inputs for timely supply as well as obtain the necessary information on market demands. It facilitates timely availability of agricultural inputs and improved access to markets for goods and services which can in turn stimulate economic growth in the rural areas. Furthermore, increased rural access to telecommunications enables the farmers to develop Emergency and Disaster Prevention capacities.

Modern telecommunications technology also offers immense potential for extending health and education facilities to remote and isolated areas. In the field of health, tele-medicine facilities have become increasingly essential tool in the delivery of health care. In the field of education, most literacy campaigns on the continent were successful largely because of telecommunications. Likewise, the use of facilities such as television and inter-net to deliver education to students in areas where the required specialists are not available has alleviated the problem of shortage

of teachers. Distant education, using modern communications facilities can be utilized by African countries to quickly extend education to areas which in the past could never have access to education.

In Africa's quest to intensify the democratization process and to encourage the protection of human and peoples rights, easy access to efficient telecommunications services will enable the population to be better informed as well as monitor situations of human rights in the continent. Violations of human and peoples rights in supposedly remote and isolated areas may become instant international news with the provision of such modern telecommunication facilities as E-Mail, world wide web and global mobile personal communications by satellite. The wide spread diffusion of such violations can bring pressure to bear on concerned authorities by human rights movements from within and outside the continent.

This technology can also propel Africa into the information age. The digitisation of switching and transmission facilities as well as the development of wide band transmission facilities such as satellite and optical submarine and terrestrial cable systems should enable African countries to leap frog from analogue into digital world. Such facilities combined with the appropriate local net work should enable countries to offer modern and new-fangled services. Most importantly, the development of mobile satellite and global mobile personal communications by satellite systems as well as

wireless local loop systems should go a long way in resolving, the difficult problems of providing services to remote and isolated areas. Satellite communications also provide the technology for total coverage of African countries in terms of both population and area as regards transmission of television and radio programmes.

Owing to the high cost of telecommunications terminal equipment in comparison to the average income of the African population, policies and measures that encourage community usage of telephones and television sets and computers should be put in place. Furthermore, the extension of telecommunications infrastructure facilities to the rural and isolated areas will require huge investment which the cash-strapped economies of African countries cannot raise. Consequently, policies and measures such as the separation of the policy making regulation and operation functions of sub-sector and a good investment environment that will attract private sector participation in the provision of telecommunications services should be adopted.

It is important to mention here that in recognition of the role that satellite communications can play in expanding communications within and among African countries, especially to the rural and isolated areas, African countries established the Regional African Satellite Communications Organization. The objective of the Organization is, among others, to



provide the space segment for the routing of domestic and intra African traffic. In fulfilling its mandate, RASCOM is in a position to foster cooperation among African countries and contribute to the overall socio-economic recovery.

Increased efficiency in the performance of the sector should be encouraged through sector restructuring. This is essential in order to reduce the high tariffs charged for telecommunications services in Africa. Another factor that has contributed to the high tariffs in Africa is the small size of the individual telecommunications markets in Africa. African countries are therefore unable to take advantage of the economies of scale that comes with bulk purchasing of equipment. It is therefore, essential that African countries coordinate their purchases of equipment through a cooperation mechanism. It is in recognition of this problem that the OAU/AEC is collaborating with the West African Economic and Monetary Union (UEMOA) in the preparation of proposal on a pilot project for the joint purchase of equipment. It is also in recognition of the cardinal and catalytical role of information and communications sector in enhancing the efficiency of the economy as well as in promoting the physical and economic integration of the continent that the OAU/AEC Secretariat is organizing an Exhibition on Information and Communications technologies alongside the 34th Assembly of Heads of State and Government in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso from 6 - 12 June, 1998. The purpose of the Exhibition is to sensitize



African leaders, at the highest level, to the potential of these technologies in promoting national cohesion and economic development as well as regional cooperation and integration.

In conclusion, there is need to recognize the fact that Africa's renaissance should be supported by sustained development in the telecommunications sector. The sector however, cannot play the role expected of it unless radical measures are taken to restructure the sector with a view to improving its efficiency and quality of service, expanding the network and its services to the rural areas and centres of production, increasing investment in the sector, introducing modern technology and its attendant services and integrating the national networks into a high inter-operable continental one. These are essential prerequisites to be fulfilled in order for the telecommunications sector to contribute to the implementation of the agenda for action for Africa's renaissance and to enable the African continent to play its role and take its rightful place within the comity of nations as we usher into the next millennium