

# BACK

*to*

# AFRICA

*Issues in Transforming the Digital Divide into Digital Opportunities*



**Round Table on Bridging the Digital Divide at the  
African Regional Preparatory Conference for the WSIS (Bamako, 28-30 May 2002)**

*an input from*

## 'Gbenga Sesan

*Nigeria's Information Technology Youth Ambassador*

*me@gbengasesan.com*

*www.gbengasesan.com*

# introduction

*"Africa must get onboard... Right now! ... Africa will be either on to the Information Age or off to the dark Agricultural Age ... Africa is suffering from knowledge apartheid that forces its children to eat the crumbs from the dinner table of the information-affluent nations."*

**Philip Emeagwali**

*"The General Assembly, recognizing the urgent need to harness the potential of knowledge and technology... and to find effective and innovative ways to put this potential at the service of development for all... welcomes the resolution to hold the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) at the highest possible level..."*

**UN Resolution on WSIS**

We are here today because there is an urgent need. The walls that divide nations are fast fading off as the global information society keeps exceeding predictions. As described in the World Summit on the Information Society website, "The accelerating convergence between telecommunications, broadcasting multimedia and information and communication technologies (ICTs) is driving new products and services ... This dynamic process promises a fundamental change in all aspects of our lives, including knowledge dissemination, social interaction, economic and business practices, political engagement, media, education, health, leisure and entertainment. We are indeed in the midst of a revolution, perhaps the greatest that humanity has ever experienced".

But in the midst of the *boom*, there is an emerging trend that may be a threat to a certain sector of the whole lot. The gap between the **haves** and the **have-nots** is getting wider, and Africa happens to fall into the category of the **have-nots**.

It is thus an object of major concern to look at how Africa, and Africans, can *catch up* because the widening Digital Divide will have undesired effects on both sides of the divide, if not well handled. **Africa**, and her allies, must then find a way to **transform the digital divide into digital opportunities**.

# the african youth's dream

The need for an assured tomorrow is a major issue with everyone, particularly young people. And for the young people of Africa (who have seen the way things have been), there is a passionate desire for a New Africa, one that we can be proud of – and that offers us the opportunity for personal development, nation building, regional cooperation and global participation.

**The African youth has a dream!** His dream may not be to own the best and fastest of things, but he wants to be comfortable. Access to qualitative education, effective communication, a fair environment and enabling opportunities will be topmost in his list of desires. He has seen dreams aborted, may have heard of unfulfilled promises and has been around long enough to think that he is better off on another soil.

While the global information society is experiencing a revolution, some African experiences reveal that there is a lot of work that needs to be done. I will not spend time listing the obvious, but permit me to say that as *unpleasant* as it may be, some graduates of our Universities in Africa never touch computers until they are fortunate enough to get access to one in their places of work.

But all hope is not lost. In the past few years, we have seen remarkable growth in the African telecom sector, and it appears that all sectors of the society are responding to the demands of the global information society. For example, the Recommendation Implementation Analysis of the Telecom Development Symposium reveals that Africa's response to the surveys sent to countries rose from 45% in 1999 to over 60% in 2001.

## **back to africa**

At the ITU TELECOM Interactive 97 and ITU TELECOM 99 events, three recommendations were adopted in relation to developing countries and the Information Society. In 2001, recommendations followed the ITU AFRICA 2001 event, and there was even a Youth Declaration presented by 104 young people from 49 countries. The Istanbul declaration came ...

All these declarations have come, and I think it will not be unexpected to ask about what individual countries have done with the declarations. Are the young people being equipped? Are youth-led initiatives being encouraged? And what about the availability of infrastructure?

Really, I believe that the ball is now in Africa's court. So much has been said that can help set things right but Africa must rise to solve her own challenges, with the cooperation of the entire global information society. Africa, Africans and the governments of the countries in Africa must take advantage of the adopted recommendations and expressed support toward the construction of a wired Africa in order to transform the digital divide into a unique opportunity.

The following recommendations are possible action-paths that I believe Africa can follow in our collective duty of transforming the divide into an opportunity:

The Academia and the Industry should work together on Research partnerships that will promote *local innovation* that can address local needs

- Information and Communications Technology should be integrated into the existent school curricula at all levels of education
- Awareness on the need for the learning and use of Information and Communications Technology should be intensified, employing the use of local languages alongside the usual delivery languages
- School teachers, lecturers and educationists should be re-trained with appropriate Information and Communications Technology skills so that they can deliver such in their *constituencies*
- Individual initiatives must be encouraged to promote the emergence of more of such initiatives
- Individual nation's corporations, with emphasis on those in the Information and Communications Technology sector, must be introduced to Corporate Social Responsibility through the funding of Information and Communications Technology education
- A National Policy on Information and Communication Technology must be drafted in countries where none exists, and in countries that already have such, it must be **implemented**
- Public libraries, that have turned into *Sleeping Cafes*, should be re-equipped and re-staffed for Information and Communications Technology literacy purposes

## **a challenge to the african youth**

While looking forward to the implementation of recommendations by appropriate authorities, I believe the young people of Africa must rise to the challenge of weaving the New Africa, the Africa of our collective dreams: The Africa that is not only an active player in the global information society, but will also be innovative and remind everyone that the Pyramids of Egypt and other African wonders were not accidents – they were the products of deliberate efforts, and the proof of the strength in the African blood!

Permit me to wrap this up with my final challenge to the African youth:

*“I have read, listened and seen the different attempts at bringing Africa to a place of Global relevance. It appears to me that the Intra-Digital Divide is getting even stronger than the Inter-Digital Divide. Or how do we explain the fact that we always see the same names on the Web, in Conference brochures, in news articles ... and in chat rooms! It appears that some of the Youth of Africa that should be tomorrow's leaders do not even know what to do! Some young Africans have never touched a computer! I think that my days, weeks and months of thinking have produced something; an idea I'm willing to share.*

*The few of us who have (one way or the other) been favoured to have access and knowledge should take it upon ourselves to climb the ladder whose rungs are Personal Development, Nation Building, Regional Cooperation and Global Participation. We should work hard at what we know best. Remember what Thomas Jefferson said, "I find that the harder I work, the more luck I seem to have". Maybe while working hard, you may have more luck...*

*We should take it upon ourselves to work towards becoming ROLE MODELS to our colleagues and the younger ones. This way, every young African will be challenged to work harder than us, and that will promote a natural cycle of successful and socially responsible young people.*

*For example, I humbly spend almost all my weekends speaking to young people (some of them older than me) in various Universities in Nigeria, and the truth is that I've seen changes. I'm beginning to see more Nation Building conscious Nigerians, who care less about ME, but are more concerned about US.*

*I've said much...but people, we cannot keep talking and discussing and presenting papers, we need to get to work! Preach the gospel of ICT to that guy beside you, talk about Nation Building to those ladies in your class, Open your mouth and challenge every young person around you to build a life worthy of emulation. In doing so, we will discover that we've built a solid nation, and continent.*

*Build yourself, build those around you... and soon, you will discover that we have a strong network of knowledge-driven people. Make a decision to help someone understand ICTs better today ... Viva Africa!"*

Thank you for listening to my thoughts, and you for considering the need to have Africa look inwards and discover that the baton of action is **Back to Africa.**