

Flow of ideas: a cornerstone of democracy

(By Sophia Bekele)

Congratulation to the InterAfrica Group on a successful symposium discussing the issues at hand: poverty, agriculture, social and service sectors, industry and trade, banking and insurance, and the opportunists and challenges facing the private sector. This issues were presented categorically on the forum on macro-economic performance of the economy as a whole, on the main economic sectors including agriculture, industry and service, and the social situations as it relates to the quality of the life with introspect into health, education, employment and housing.

I am writing this article not to be critical of why the agenda for the economic forum did not include information and communications technology (ICT), but to use this opportunity to underscore the importance of importance of ICT in building our economy model in the next millenium.

It was made obvious by the discussions, papers and statistics gathered at the end of the four-day symposium that economic progress was achieved in the last nine years in light of the market oriented liberalization reforms and directives issued by the government. It was not however, clear what the long term impact and direction will be, given that we have started the millenium (if accepted this global calendar as a standard) with an unresolved Ethiopia-Eritrea conflict and recurrent drought which has forced our country to address different agendas-a decade after a transition period of asserting market economy, democracy and development.

Having said that, I can not help but point out that while the tools of the trade during the 20th century were such things as new mass-production technologies, the proliferation of the automobile and growing network of highways, and the application new scientific methods of management, today it is the Internet revolution. The computer has come a long way from the perceived PC to the concept being coined as ICT to create an understanding in people that it encompasses a wide range of communication tools, PC, modem, satellite dishes, television, radio, vedio, Internet and the various software that allow us to develop the necessary content to reach the people we are targeting. Rural radio provides a forum for rural people; participatory radio could be utilized as a tool for rural and agricultural development. The Internet has become a vast and growing global network that people use to converse, debate, meet, teach, learn, buy and sell, and share virtually every type of information imaginable.

One way of providing access to modern ICT is via telecenters. Kudos to Ethiopia Science and Technology Commission, we have Ethiopia's first teleceter in Wolliso, which I had the opportunity to witness, while over 300 more are planned. With basic telephone, fax, e-mail, Internet electronic networks, database and libraries, telecenters can link the Internet to local media such as radio and television and thus make information accessible to wider audiences.

Communication media and techniques can help overcome barriers of literacy, language, cultural differences and physical isolation. They are powerful tools to inform and educate people about new agricultural ideas and technical innovations for improved food production.

For example, ICT is a key component in food security in Ethiopia, which was a main issue at the forum. Effectively using communication to improve food security in Ethiopia first requires an understanding of the knowledge and information needs of the farmer and rural people. It also demands the application of appropriate communications as part of the rural development policy and help in establishing national communications systems, which can support food production initiatives. Extension agents and other development workers need training in communications skills, methodologies and media usage. Field-based research is essential for identifying innovative, successful and cost-effective communications approaches for specific audiences, tasks and messages.

As such, I am obliged to ask: are we considering e-commerce for external trade, technology-induced industrial development strategy, or distant learning via satellite? What about early warning systems for poverty and conflict management? What about for tourism; are we reaching out and telling our stories via a global medium? Should we not be deploying technologies in our banking and financial institutes for efficiency, control and accurate reporting? Does our upcoming stock market have a technology strategy? Is ICT an important factor in the internalization of trade and development of world economic market? What about the globalization of news and personal communication? What about having a truly global forum for reflection and debate of these issues and to catalyze the search for coordinated approaches and solutions? If all or half of the above are true, are we not taking technology for granted and not giving it credit in our economic agendas?

Having said these, what are the policies of our government regarding access to information technology, including Internet access, content development and e-commerce? Joseph Stiglitz, the ex-chief economist for the World Bank, had touched upon his point in his presentation at the forum. The faster actions are taken by our policymakers in the liberalization of our telecommunications sector, the sooner will be the creation of the necessary market forces that will provide competitive communication service to empower our societies, and to remove that barriers to information and knowledge sharing. Such actions would also harness the potential of all available tools and technologies to transform ourselves into knowledge societies for our own growth.

We should look at model economies such as those of Malaysia and South Africa. Both countries have used ICT to jump-start their economy and integrate it with their daily lives for sustainability. The governments of both countries have demonstrated their community to the use of ICT for development and have successfully partnered with private sector actors to realize their vision of sustainable development.

As successful as the conference was in the free flow of ideas, a framework should be developed to layout a plan of action for policymakers and practitioners to follow-up on issues discussed and propose the possible solutions. In doing so, I reiterate - in line with the establishment of appropriate economic policies - the need to put a technology strategy in place as well as the designing and implementation of ICT projects for improving all development sectors of importance.

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