

Not only a vision - a common vision

by Sophia Bekele

Vision can be thought of as a foresight, thus a conceptual framework whereby one articulates her/his thoughts to arrive at an end result as envisaged. A common vision is then a unified view of this framework and complementary ideas that reinforces the vision.

Not quite over three weeks ago, an Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) conference was organized in Addis Ababa at the UNECA conference facilities by the British Council. I think it was well-organized. Forums such as this are important to building consensus of community understanding of issues and to create a shared framework. The uniqueness of this conference was that it called for an ICT vision in Ethiopia. To successfully implement it, it further called for a National ICT Task force led by the Prime Minister himself. An ambitious vision, yet a practical one.

It is a known fact that Ethiopia needs a vision in ICT, perhaps even the deployment of ICT could be an impetus for the economic development of the country. None other than the government could also bring about this change that will embrace this vision.

Why the government? Well, considering that most of the country's key institutions and resources are still under government management and driven by the government agenda, the success of our development is still dependent on these policies. To this end, the private sector involvement in ICT in Ethiopia is quite limited. Thus, its vision is near-sighted or hampered by the bureaucracy that is associated with the implementation of the public sector policies.

Now, it is also evident that the technology sector in Ethiopia is characterized by computer products and services companies. The most popular services provided by computer services businesses have been limited to sales of hardware/software and maintenance, training, software development and consultancy and network implementation. While there are over 30-50 companies that are engaged in this business, few do it well, and even fewer earn a profit out of it, particularly sustainable profit.

The reason behind not attaining sustainable income is associated with the high cost of imports including computing goods and accessories and telecommunication costs. Whereas the limitation and lack of differentiation in the product and services could be directly tied with the telecom policy, a government-owned body has a monopoly of the services that could be used to deploy ICTs.

Policy changes that foster enabling environment such as low taxation on Information Technology (IT) products and liberalizing the telecommunication sector will allow for competition. This

competitive environment results in economies of scale such as fair prices, specialization, innovation, and new products and services.

Additionally, to have an equitable distribution of services and resolve some of the key issues mentioned, the government institutions need to be sensitized about private sector business and its development and contribution to the economy. Many capacity building seminars by the donor communities to the government institutions should also discuss the value and participation of the private sector for a sustained development of the economy.

Many IT and communications companies globally have been successful as a result of liberal economic policies that

include the empowerment of the private sector. However, deploying ICT on itself might widen or narrow the digital divides. Therefore, the public policy environment is important in securing positive outcomes. The right public policy environment would allow suitable initiatives by the public and private sectors and by civil society organizations, individually or in partnership, to contribute to relevant development and set the context in which enterprise and other initiatives would be channeled in the right direction.

We have to look at examples even close to home.

For example Nigeria has over 4-5 mobile operators which initially started as a joint venture with the government. Several Internet Service Providers (ISPs) exist, and communication and broadcasting is deregulated via the franchise model. Senegal has over 8 ISPs. Kenya possesses a similar environment. Ethiopia, in this regard, has a single ISP only, providing insufficient internet access and hosting service to an overcrowded market. The Ethiopian Telecommunication Corporation (ETC) can forge partnership initially with the private sector to improve its service delivery capacity, and also to encourage private sector penetration where the service will be efficient and profitable. The benefit to government will be through receiving royalties and fees.

It is worth noting at this point as we also talk about vision for an information society at a country level, the UNECA, as one of the pioneer organi-

zation in ICT advocacy in African, has put a lot of effort not only in advising its member states, but itself investing and advocating the use of ICT for the speedy entry to the information age. In order to speed the continent's digital inclusion, the UNECA has initiated the African Information Society Initiative (AISI), a guiding framework on which to base information and communication activities in Africa. This initiative was adopted by OAU Council of Ministers meeting in its Sixty Fourth Ordinary Session held in Yaounde, Cameroon in July 1996.

The AISI action framework calls for the elaboration and implementation of national information and communication infrastructure (NICI) plans and

The common vision for ICT is yet to be reinforced by the birth of African Union (AU). Jump-started with a new and ambitious Interim Secretary General, Amara Essy, and modeled on the European Union, the AU envisions common institutions such as a parliament, a court of justice and a central bank.

strategies involving development of institutional frameworks; human, information and technological resources in all African countries, and the pursuit of priority strategies, programs and projects which can assist in the sustainable build-up of an information society in African countries. It has been recognized

by our leaders now that building an information society will help our continent to accelerate its development plans, stimulate growth and provide new opportunities in education, trade, healthcare, job creation and food security, helping African countries to leapfrog stages of development and raise their standards of living.

The ECA has also conducted the first edition of the African Development Forum (ADF 99) under the theme "The Challenge to Africa of Globalization and the Information Age" held in Addis, Ethiopia in October 1999 in order to evaluate the progress made in the implementation of the AISI initiatives.

The implementation of AISI is well underway in Africa.

Some of its achievements are seen in the area of policy awareness, democratization of access, connectivity, and project initiatives such as the UNECA's Technology Center for Africa that have been successfully launched. Additionally, with a view to monitoring the progress and results of AISI, the UNECA has appointed an African Technical Advisory Committee. In their role as the African vision guiding the AISI,

Sophia Bekele is the President/CEO of CBS International, a California-based IT company represented by SbCommunications Network plc, in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. She is also one of the ten elected members of the African Technical Advisory Committee advising the UNECA in the implementation of the African Information Society Initiative.

the 10 members of the committee provide technical guidance and advise the ECA Secretariat on issues related to the implementation modalities of AISI.

The recent meeting of the advisory committee resulted in a successful completion of identifying the key issues of ICT in Africa and finally concluding with a Common Position on Africa's digital inclusion to the G8's Digital Opportunities Task Force (Dot Force) created by the G8 Heads of Government. The discussions focused on the need to have an African voice and that a common vision already exists through the AISI framework and the political endorsement and commitment, and the need to form synergies among similar initiatives.

With the AISI framework, as a continent could say that an African position is now in place and Africa has its own agenda. The emergence of global initiatives aiming at reducing the digital divide between Africa and the developed countries such as the United Nations' ICT Task Force and G8's Dot Force, and other similar initiatives of development agencies and multilateral organizations also reinforces the AISI framework. The implication of these initiatives for Africa is that it needs to redefine its position in light of the AISI framework to put ICTs to the service of development and enhance the inclusion of Africa into the global digital world. Towards this end, Africa will be able to prepare an African Position to the Dot Force, UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) United Nations Task Force, World Economic Forum, and other International forums on the digital divide.

Another development initiative that Africa is yet committed to is the Millennium Partnership for "African Recovery" Program (MAP), which describes the "determination of Africans to extricate themselves and the continent from the malaise of underdevelopment and exclusion in a global zing world" and where the key-areas among which the investment and use of information technology and communications is covered. The emphasis is on that "Africa is marginalized in the world economy, it is hyper-marginalized in the information economy."

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