

THE 21st century has been characterised as a knowledge-based society. This century has ushered in the information communication technologies revolution (ICT) which are the primary engine for socio-economic development and promises to enhance the living standards of the people of the world. It is a confirmed that current transformation taking place in the world economy is driven by ICT.

The rapid deployment of ICT will facilitate access to opportunities and information. Through ICT the country's youth will have a plethora of new opportunities to use their talent and their efforts to address fundamental challenges of daily living.

ICT is the industry of the youth and today for any society, its' important to provide sufficient wealth creation opportunities' to its' young people, if the future of the society has to be protected. Africa has a large young population and unless it is employed productively it would create unrest and destabilise the society. Hence, creative and a b s o r b i n g opportunities' for young people is the need of the society and what better business than ICT.

Over the past couple of years, Africa has seen a rapid transformation

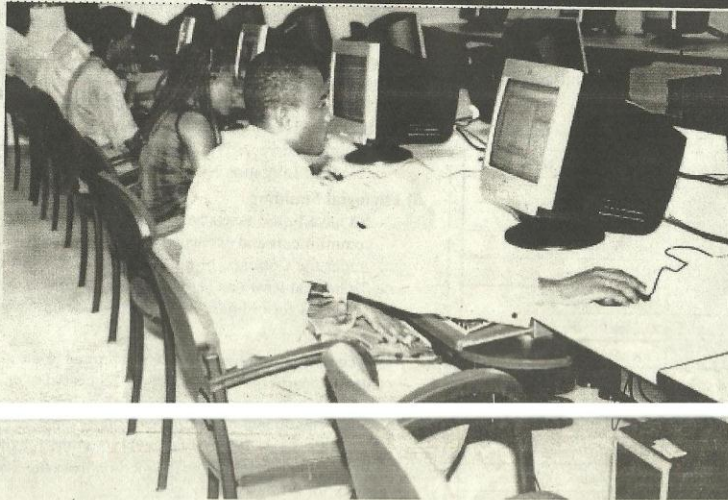
of its telecommunications and technological landscape. The improvement in telecommunications networks, the increasing use of mobile technologies, the availability of used computers, and the deployment of new technologies has made it possible for a cross section of the population to have access to basic telephony and Internet services.

In spite of the gains made, several challenges exist, especially for those living in rural Africa. While it is true that the introduction of telecommunication in remote areas has facilitated access to opportunities and information for such people, there is still a big gap between urban and rural Africa regarding access to ICT and telecommunications services.

South Africa has the largest telephone network (accounting for 72 per cent of 5.3M lines in the region) and certainly the best teledensity (ratio of telephones per 100 people) for countries with large populations in 1995. The island nations of Mauritius and Seychelles have a far higher teledensity, followed by Namibia, Botswana and Swaziland. In all the other countries, teledensity is below two. The fact that close to 80 per cent of the population live in the rural areas where only 20 per cent of the phones are installed illustrates just how seriously the telecommunication services are lacking for the rural majority of people in the region.

As we know, rural telephony and broadband penetration is vital to generating rural growth and employment. The New Partnership for

Trends in rural telecommunications and ICT in Africa



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Africa's Development (NEPAD) and the World Summit for Information Society (WSIS) point to the need to address the communication needs of people living in rural Africa.

Four primary reform strategies such as liberalisation of telecom services, total or partial privatization of the incumbent fixed line operator, licensing of new mobile operators, and the establishment of an independent regulator to implement policy and to mediate when there is conflict among the telecom providers, have often been employed. While the outcome of these measures have been mixed, most African countries which have implemented telecom reforms have witnessed price reduction in telecom service charges, seen improvements in service quality, seen an acceleration in infrastructure roll-out, and the introduction of value added services.

There is the need to fully bridge the "Rural - Urban divide" through the provisioning of Information & Communication channels in rural areas. One option to promote rural connectivity is for the creation of opportunities for people living in rural areas to set up "Private Telecom Networks", so as to promote entrepreneurship that will result in employment generation and creation of opportunities for setting up business. This would further facilitate absorption of technology in areas of ICT including private GSM networks.

People like S. Mahapatra of Coral Telecom (India) argue and advocate for the promotion

of self-sustaining micro communication networks" in a cluster of villages where ownership resides with the village self-help groups or the local entrepreneurs. These networks in the villages could be partly funded under the government schemes with the clear objective of promotion of employment, entrepreneurship & Technology absorption, remarks Mahapatra..

Also, there is the need to explore the creation of a rural telecommunications unit within incumbent telecommunication companies to facilitate the expansion of telecommunication services to rural and underserved areas. For example, in the United States, high penetration of telecommunications services in the rural areas was achieved by

independent local telecom companies (cooperatives) through a combination of subsidized loans, provided under the Rural Electrification Program and fair revenue-sharing agreements. Ghana may need to provide a small GSM spectrum for grooming local telecom companies in the rural terrain, owned and managed by local youth on similar lines.

The implementation of Extended Local Calling (ELC) policies which allow households to pay a flat rate for placing calls within a geographic region will dramatically increase revenues and raise consumer satisfaction.

It is possible to achieve the goal of universal access, that is, community access to basic telecommunications at reasonable distance if reform is monitored effectively.

Other writers have alluded to the role of rural PC kiosks as one manifestation of various attempts to apply information and communication technology for socio-economic development (ICT4D). Kiosks (sometimes referred to as telecenters) serve as Internet cafes for rural villages, where rural people visit to have access to the Internet. They offer a broad range of services and applications specialized for rural areas

Early evidence indicates that rural kiosks can help villagers improve their economic standard of living by expanding livelihood options and empowering them with information, tools, goods, and services (such as education and healthcare).

Self-Sustaining Micro Communication GSM Network should be viewed as an extension or progressive step over Kiosks project.

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