

"CLOSING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE ... CALL FOR AFFIRMATIVE ACTION" A PAPER DELIVERED BY ENGR. ERNEST C. A. NDUKWE, EXECUTIVE VICE-CHAIRMAN, NIGERIAN COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION AT THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON HUMAN CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT AND GLOBAL OPPORTUNITIES AT MARIT HOUSE, NEAR NUC, AGUIYI IRONSI STREET MAITAMA ABUJA, MAY 15, 2001

Your Excellency
Mr. President,
Secretary to the Government,
Honourable Ministers,
Distinguished Senators,
Honourable Members of the House of Representatives,
Captains of Industry,
The Academia,
My colleagues in the ICT Industry,
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen.

Good morning Mr. President, Honourable Ministers, Distinguished Guests Ladies and Gentlemen. It is a great pleasure and honour to address this august gathering and to participate in this international conference on human capital development for the Communications Industry. May I on behalf of the Nigerian Communications Commission who are co-sponsors of this event welcome you all once again to this event.

I am particularly pleased to be part of this event because of the special interest I have in promoting human capital development and my strong belief in the fact that skilled human resources are a critical factor in ICT development policies for Nigeria and indeed Africa.

That telecommunications is an important facilitator of economic growth and improved living standards is now a widely accepted fact. The development of a modern nation to its full potential today can never be attained without adequate telecommunications infrastructure. In today's world, modern digital telecommunications networks are as necessary to economic growth – and to attracting foreign investment as are programs dedicated to promoting healthcare, electricity, transportation and agriculture. It is also

true that reliable telecommunications networks can improve the productivity and efficiency of other sectors of the economy and enhance the quality of life generally.

The telecommunications sector is at the heart of a much larger industry – that of information and communications or info-communications. This combined industry was worth \$1.4 trillion dollars in 1995 and the convergence of the telecommunications sector with the computer and broadcasting worlds is creating new synergies and opportunities.

Regrettably however, most of the values derivable from info-communications development have been concentrated in the developed countries of the world where 15% of the world's population have 70% of the world's telephone lines. In contrast, about 60% of the world's population have access to less than 6% of the network.

Africa has less than 2% of the world's main lines although it accounts for more than 12% of the world's population.

In Nigeria the telephone density is estimated at around 5 telephones to about 1000 people or 0.5%. As telephones tend to be concentrated in the cities, access in rural areas is even much more limited and non-existent in many parts of the country.

Studies by the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) and the world Bank show that there is a direct correlation between telephone penetration and economic growth, so telecommunications is a vital component in the development process of any modern nation state.

Information tools such as telephones, personal computers, and the Internet are increasingly critical to economic success and personal advancement. There is therefore a big divide separating the world's information "haves" and "have nots" which is what is now commonly referred to as the digital divide – the divide between those with access to new info-communications technologies and those without.

The advent of Internet for example has been variously described as being as important for society as the development of the personal computer, the telephone or even the printing press. Yet it is difficult to explain to those

who have never used the Internet how it has the power to change lives, to create new businesses or facilitate the delivery of basic services such as health, education.

As leaders who have experienced the benefits of education and exposed to the central role info-communications plays in the overall economic development of other nations of the world, we have a duty to ensure that our nation is not left behind in the emerging digital economy.

It is instructive to note that the importance of telecommunications infrastructure has always been acknowledged in the past but never followed up with any serious and consistent implementation initiative. For example the "Lagos Plan of Action" which was approved by Heads of States of the OAU recognised as far back as 1980 and resolved that the overall development of the telecommunications sector should be given the necessary backing it deserves in the overall development of the African continent.

Also in 1990 the African Telecommunications Development Conference (ATDC) in Harare, Zimbabwe created within the ITU/BDT, a standing African Information and Telecommunications Study Group (AITPSG) entrusting to it as a matter of the utmost urgency the task of elaborating a first draft of the regional telecommunications policy document to be known as the African Green Paper.

The study group, working in close collaboration with the African administrations produced the document - the African Green paper, which was approved by the African Regional Telecommunication Development Conference (AF-RTDC) held in Abidjan, Ivory Coast in 1996.

Despite these initiatives in Africa and for Africa, it is regrettable that most African states including Nigeria are not experiencing the growth of ICT anywhere near to the extent that is evident in Asia and Latin America.

I believe that Nigeria can reverse this trend and take the necessary steps to join the ranks of the information society by taking specific steps to manage effectively, the critical success factors.

We have already taken the first steps with the liberalisation of the telecom sector, licencing of GSM operators and the planed privatisation of NITEL.

The next most important is what we have assembled here to discuss which is the development of the human capital required for the digital economy. As enunciated in recommendation No. 9 in the summary of recommendations in the African Green Paper, "Human resources are the principal resource necessary to development and national operation of telecommunications networks, particularly in an environment such as Africa where the latest technology has to be used in particularly difficult conditions."

Human resources are a critical factor in info-communications development policies of all the resources required to develop and operate networks, lack of highly qualified staff can constitute a great setback to telecommunications development and quality of service.

As we liberalise our telecommunications market and introduce competition a number of international companies will be installing sophisticated equipment, all which are imported. These companies will be looking to employing local manpower to install, operate and maintain these systems.

As we try to preach the benefits of information revolution to Nigerians we need trained manpower to design and implement networks that are robust and cost effective. Networks that are designed, taking Africa's specific needs and environmental conditions into consideration. While more and more Americans are embracing computers and Internet daily, majority of the African population do not even realise that this technology is relevant to their lives. There is an urgent need to reach out to these communities and educate them on how the new technologies can open new opportunities for them and their children, and why they should care. Even this very important task requires skilled and well-trained human resources.

Perhaps of major significance is the fact that at present, only a very small number of the larger or more advanced developing countries have a research and development (R&D) capabilities of their own. The majority of developing countries, including Nigeria, are dependent on R&D undertaken in industrialised countries. In several aspects of info-communications technology, satisfactory solutions to problems particular to developing

countries have not yet been found. We need to develop local capacities to be able to handle this since R&D by major manufacturers in industrialised countries are geared to conditions and requirements of those countries.

This is where the intervention of Nigeria as a nation is imperative with the population and the economic potential of the nation, Nigeria should be the hub for the development of human capital for the African continent. A hub for manufacturing industries that will tailor equipment and design of networks to the needs of African countries.

Nigeria must therefore ensure a well-organised human resources development approach in this vital sector such that professional education and training must be well adapted to a well articulated set of objectives for the nation.

As recommended in the Green Paper, Nigeria must invest in the development of human resources management and ensure that procedures and regulation concerning human capital management are compatible with the commercial orientation of the digital economy where being connected today increasingly means to have access to telephones, computers and the Internet. While it is possible to survive without having such an access, but in the emerging digital economy of today, having the access is definitely essential for success.

Also jobs in the new economy require technical skills and familiarity with new technologies. As Nigeria directs efforts towards the closing of the yawning digital divide, a vital foundation to build on will be a affirmative action towards making the right training facilities widely available throughout the country for the acquisition of skills in this modern technology area.

Thank you.

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