NIGERIAN LIBRARY ASSOC[illegible]ON

44th Annual National Conference an[illegible]GM

(1)

Pgs. 69-76

THEME:

Libraries: Dynamic Engines for the Knowledge and Information Society

VENUE:

National Centre for Women Development
Opp. CBN, Central Business Area, Abuja.

DATE:

June 18-23, 2006

Abuja 2006

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Libraries: Dynamic Engines for the Knowledge and Information Society

Papers presented at the 44th Annual Conference and Annual General Meeting of the Nigerian Library Association, 2006

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Produced for

Nigerian Library Association

by

Heinemann Educational Books (Nigeria) Plc

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Head Office: 1 Ighodaro Road, Jericho, P.M.B. 5205, Ibadan
Phone: (02) 2412268, 2410943, 2411213; *Fax:* (02) 2411089, 2413237
E-mail: info@heinemannbooks.com
Website: http://www.heinemannbooks.com

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ISBN 978 129 688 7

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First published 2006

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6 Towards Implementing the WSIS Agenda in Nigeria

T.A Akinde

Abstract

This paper discusses the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). It made an overview of the first and the second phases of the WSIS and the documents generated from these meetings. The key issues around which the WSIS revolved were discussed and their implementations in and implications for Nigeria were elaborately highlighted.

Some recommendations on how Nigeria can derive meaningful gains from the WSIS Agenda were provided.

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Introduction

Recognizing the importance of the revolution in ICTs as a means of shaping the future of the world and in achieving the development goals outlined in the Millennium declaration, world leaders decided that a global vision and a global dialogue were needed to build the framework of an all – inclusive and equitable information society. The Information society is an evolving concept that has reached different level across the world, reflecting the different stages of development. Technological and other change is rapidly transforming the environment in which the information society is developed. The unique two-phase structure of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) provided an opportunity to take this evolution into account. (Childs, 2005)

The first United Nation resolution on World Summit on Information Society (WSIS) called for a partnership between governments, UN bodies, international/intergovernmental organizations, non-governmental organizations, civil society and the private sector to contribute to, and actively participate in, the intergovernmental preparatory process of the summit and the summit itself. (UN/ITU. 2005).

The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) is an initiative of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), a United Nations specialized agency. The summit was organized in two phases. The first phase took place in Geneva. It was hosted by the government of Switzerland from the 10th to 12th of December, 2003. The second phase was held in Tunis from the 16th to 18th of November, 2005 and hosted by the Tunisian government. (ITU, 2005). The

WSIS was organized on the premises of the desire and commitment to build a people-centred inclusive and development oriented information society, where everyone can create, access, utilize, and share information and knowledge, enabling individuals, communities and peoples to achieve their full potential in promoting their sustainable development and improving their quality of life (UN/ITU, 2005).

The Key Issues

A detailed examination and analysis of the documents generated around the WSIS will reveal the key principles as stated in Section B, paragraphs 19-64 of the "Declaration of Principles" which was later translated and enlarged as "action lines" in Section C, paragraphs 8-26 of the "Plan of Action", as the key issues around which the summit revolved.

The key issues are the following eleven (11) points raised in the WSIS agenda. These are:

1. **The role of governments** and all stakeholders (private/business sector, civil society, the U.N, other international/intergovernmental organizations and non-governmental organizations) in the promotion of ICTs for development which requires cooperation among these stakeholders.
2. **The provision of information and communication infrastructure and services** adapted to regional, national and local conditions and made possible by policies that create favourable climate for stability, predictability and fair competition at all levels. The challenge here is the provision of an equitable and affordable access to ICTs.
3. **Access to information and knowledge** – The ability for all to access, contribute and disseminate information, ideas and knowledge via easily accessible, enriched and protected information made available in the public domain and an increasing awareness of the possibilities offered by different software models and licences to encourage diversity of choice.
4. **Capacity building** – Each person (including people outside the formal educational structure) should have the opportunity to acquire, the necessary skill and knowledge in order to understand, participate actively in, and benefit fully from the information society and the knowledge economy. Attention should be paid to lifelong learning and improving professional skills. Given the wide range of ICT and the information specialist required at all levels, building institutional capacity deserve special attention. Also, national capability in ICT research and development should be enhanced. Furthermore, partnership, between developed sand developing countries in R and D, technology transfer, manufacturing and utilization of ICT products and services should be encouraged.
5. **Building confidence and security in the use of ICT** - strengthening the trust framework, including information security and network security, authentication, privacy and consumer protection while enhancing access

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and trade. Also, it is necessary to prevent the use information resources and technologies for criminal and terrorist purpose, while respecting human rights.

6. **An enabling environment** – At national and international levels. At national level, it can be achieved through government intervention in correcting market failures, maintains fair competition, attracting investments, creating a secure, safe and healthy working environments, appropriate for the utilization of ICTs; and to serve national priorities. Also, at international level, a dynamic and enabling international environment can be created supportive of foreign direct investment and international cooperation in the areas of finance, debt and trade, and a full and effective participation of developing countries in global decision making. Furthermore, the development, adoption and respecting of international standards and norms that take into account the needs of users and a worldwide consumer access to service regardless of underlying technology, are of paramount importance.
7. **ICT applications benefits in all aspects of life** - ICT applications are potentially important in all area of life, hence, applications should be user – friendly, accessible to all, affordable, adapted to local needs in languages and culture and supportive of sustainable development.
8. **Cultural diversity and identity, linguistic diversity and local content** – cultural diversity are the common heritage of humankind. The information society should be founded on and stimulate respect for cultural identity, cultural and linguistic diversity, traditions and religions and foster dialogue among cultures and civilization. Also, the creation, dissemination and preservation of content in diverse languages and formats must be accorded high priority in building an inclusive information society, paying particular attention to the diversity of supply of creative work and due recognition of the rights of authors and artists. The development of local content suited to domestic or regional needs will encourage social and economic development and will stimulate participation of all stake holders, including people living in rural, remote and marginal areas.
9. **Media** – There should be freedom to seek, receive, impart and use information for the creation, accumulation and dissemination of knowledge and the responsible use and treatment of information by the media in accordance with the highest ethical and professional standards. Also, traditional media in all their forms have an important role in the information society and ICTs should play a supportive role in this regard. Diversity of media ownership should be encouraged, in conformity with national law and taking into account relevant international conventions. In addition, international imbalances affecting the media, particularly as regards infrastructure, technical resources and the development of human skills should be reduced.
9. **Ethical dimensions of the information society**- The information society should respect peace and uphold the fundamental values of freedom,

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equality, solidarity, tolerance, shared responsibility and respect for nature. Justice, the dignity and worth of human person should be fostered.

Also, the widest possible protection should be accorded to the family, to enable it pay its crucial role in society. Furthermore, there should be respect for the fundamental freedoms of others.

11. International and regional cooperation- The information society is intrinsically global in nature and national efforts need to be supported by an effective international and regional cooperation among government, the private sector, civil society, and other stakeholders, including the international financial institutions in areas such as finance and technical assistance (UN / ITU, 2005).

Having seen the key issues in the WSIS Agenda, how then do we appropriate and implement these action lines in our country; Nigeria?

The Way Forward for Nigeria

The implementation of the ideals of WSIS in Nigeria should be a collective responsibility of the following:

A. THE FEDERAL/STATE/LOCAL GOVERMENTS

1. They need to initiate a structured dialogue with all relevant stakeholders via at least one functioning Public / Private Partnership (PPP) or Multi – Sector Partnership (MSP) to promote technologies and R & D programmes in areas such as translations, iconographies, voice assisted services and the development of necessary hardware and a variety of software models including proprietary, open source software, and free software, such as standard character sets, language codes, electronic dictionaries, terminology and thesauri, multilingual search engines, machine translation tools, Internationalized domain names, content referencing as well as general and application software and in making available adequate and affordable ICT equipments for end users.
2. Encourage research on the information society including on innovative forms of networking, adaptation of ICT infrastructure, tools and application that facilitate accessibility of ICTs for all, and disadvantaged groups in particular.
3. Encourage initiatives to facilitate access, including free and affordable access to open access journals and books, and open archives for scientific information.
4. Support the creation and development of a digital public library and archives services, adapted to the information societies, including reviewing national library strategies and legislation, developing a global understanding of the need for "hybrid libraries" and fostering national cooperation between libraries.

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5. Develop national policies and laws to ensure that libraries, archives, museums and other cultural institutions can play their full role of content – including traditional knowledge – providers, in the information society, more particularly by providing continued access to record information.
6. Support efforts to develop and use ICTs for the presentation of natural and, cultural heritage, keeping it accessible as a living part of today's culture. This includes developing systems for ensuring continued access to archived digital information and multimedia content in digital repositories, and support archives, culture collections and libraries as the memory of humankind.
7. Develop of framework for the security of the e – archives and other electronic records of information.
8. Design specific training programme in the use of ICTs in order to meet the educational needs of information professionals such as archivists, librarians, museum professional, scientists, teachers, journalists, postal workers and other relevant professional groups. Training of information professional should not focus only on new methods and techniques for the development and provision of information and communication services, but also on relevant management skills to ensure the best use of technologies while the training of teachers should focus on the technical aspects of ICTs, on development of content, and on the potential possibilities and challenges of ICTs.
9. Provide affordable or free of charge access for citizens to the various communication resources, notably the Internet, by establishing sustainable multi – purpose community public access points. These access points, should to the extent possible, have sufficient capacity to provide assistance to users, in libraries, educational institutions, public administrations, post offices and local ICT training centers, with special emphasis on rural and underserved areas, empowering local communities in ICT use and promote the production of useful and socially meaningful content (traditional knowledge) and nurturing local capacity for the creation and distribution of software in local language.
10. Promote affordable and reliable high speed internet connection for all universities and research institutions to support their critical role in information and knowledge production, education and training, and to support the establishment of partnerships, cooperation and networking between these institutions.
11. Promote electronic publishing, differential pricing and open access initiatives to make scientific information affordable and accessible in all countries on an equitable basis.
12. Promote the use of peer – to – peer technology to share scientific knowledge and pre – prints and reprints written by scientific authors who have waived their right to payment.
13. Promote the long – term systematic and efficient collection, dissemination and preservation of essential scientific digital data, for example, population and meteorological data.

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14. Give support to media based in local communities and support projects combining the use of traditional media and new technologies for their role in facilitating the use of local languages, for documenting and preserving local heritage, including landscape and biological diversity and as a means to reach rural and isolated and nomadic communities.

B. The Nigerian Private Sector

The sector should aim at developing and diffusing information, for infrastructure, content and applications. The private sector is not only a market player but also plays a role in a wider sustainable development context when encouraged by series of related programmes, including, among other things: incubator schemes, venture capital investments (national and international opportunities) government investment funds (including micro finance for Small, Medium-sized and Micro Enterprises

(SMMEs), investment promotion strategies, software export / import support activities (trade counseling), support of Research and Development Networks and Software Parks.

C. The Nigerian Civil Society

Civil society organizations are where people come together and work collectively to further their common interests. Civil society occupies the "social space" between the state and the individual. The civil society is made up of the media, non – governmental organizations, youth groups, gender groups, volunteers, cities and local authorities, trade unions, indigenous people, education academia and research, science and technology community, creators and promoters of cultures, networks and coalitions, multi-stakeholders, partnerships, philanthropic institutions, think tanks, and people with disabilities. The mobilization, involvement and the commitment of this group is equally important in creating an equitable information society, and in implementing ICT related initiatives for development.

D. International and Regional Institution including International Finance Institutions

These institutions have a key role in integrating the use if ICTs in the development process and making available necessary researches for building the information society and for the evaluation of the progress made.

Nigerian government should raise the relative priority of ICT projects in the various request made for international cooperation and assistance on infrastructure development projects from developed countries and international finance organizations.

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Finally, international and regional organizations should develop and launch a website on best practices and success stories, based on a compilation of contributions from all stakeholders, in a concise, accessible and compelling format, following the internationally recognized web accessibility standards. The website could be periodically updated and turned into a permanent experience sharing exercise.

Concluding Remarks

Since ICTs are merely a tool for development, social and economic development is not possible without meaningful and sustained involvement of the people who are most affected by developmental changes. Hence, the challenge is to engage the people as central players in issues concerning their own development.

A Working Group on ICT or ICT Task Force should be established to supervise, advice, monitor and reports developments and issues pertaining to ICT to relevant authorities for necessary actions. Such group may be made up of members of Nigeria Society of Engineers, Nigerian Computer Society, Nigerian Institute for Development Policy and Management; Museums, Libraries and Archives Councils and members of the Nigerian Civil Society. The body should be charged with the responsibility of analyzing policies, developing capacity, promoting research, innovation and change, and providing strategic leadership on ICT issues.

A Nigerian version of the Voluntary Digital Solidarity Fund should be established as this will serve as a depository for subventions (from the federal or state governments), donations (from international, regional and intergovernmental organizations), from Official Development Assistance (ODA) accruing from developed countries, and from other form of assistance (coming both from internal and international financial, and other organizations), meant for financing ICT for development.

Finally, there should be a Nigerian Internet Institute aimed at becoming a multi-disciplinary academic centre with a focus on furthering institutional, scientific, legal and other social factors shaping the Internet and its implications for the society.

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