



## Restoring Africa's National Space<sup>1</sup>

First of all, I would like to thank the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Mr. Kofi Annan, and Ambassador Wibisono for inviting me to this important session of ECOSOC. Regarding the question of the New Information and Communications Technologies, you could have found—I am sure—another speaker, somebody more representative of the extraordinary impact of this revolution in human progress. After all, the connection of the African continent to the worldwide network does not represent more than 2% of the total!

Also, I wish to pay homage to the United Nations for its delicacy and perspicacity for having brought our continent, today, to a debate where—as it could be possible to think—we do not have a say in the matter. But this thinking would be contrary to a vision of the future, since it is certain that Africa, tomorrow, will be able to overcome its handicaps as well as other nations did in history, fighting against all pessimism existing in this domain. Furthermore, the weak presence of

Africa on the world scene does not mean that it is not aware of what is at stake.

### An Old Problem in New Terms

I would like to recall that it is not the first time that the African community has had to face up to problems affecting such a delicate area as Information and Communications. For more than 30 years, we have measured the real significance of these topics compared to the other fields of human activity. In particular, we know that the control of these parameters is the prerequisite for modernity, progress and freedom. This is why, in the same tribune of today, we have spoken several times throughout the 1970s, to advocate a new world order in information. It was already a time of unilateral occupation of the world, when the space of the Southern countries was occupied by the satellites of the North, without any possibility of debate, without any possible compensation.

During these years, Africans have understood that national space at the end of the 20th century could become foreign to its indigenous people, alienated and dominated even on their own land. Today, everybody knows that the least movement in the most remote African village can be thoroughly dissected by the always-increasing sophisticated instruments. We have been suffering this merciless domination for thirty years, to a point where everybody by now considers this alienation as a natural event. Everybody knows the dramatic consequences of this. On the world scene, Africa is unfortunately only present because of its ethnic conflicts, famine, and disease. Africa appears as an old sick person, pale and atonic, suffering continuous agony, and constantly kept alive by international aid.

This is the only image of Africa that exists for Northern countries, simply because only they can hold images. For those rare people whose interests and affairs are on the continent, this represents a great injustice. They discover populations in good health, industrious, trusting in the future. They discover democratic societies, where the modernity of

institutions has nothing less in comparison with others. They discover—above all—the young people of today, the managers of tomorrow; young people free of complexes, because they do not know anything about colonisation; young people by now aware of the tiniest pulses of the world, because they navigate the Internet.

## Early Initiatives

Furthermore, I would like you to know that if, once again, Africa is the poor relative of the world in terms of connectivity, it is due to the fact that the costs for new technologies and media are still out of our reach. Actually, in Africa, the debate on these technologies started several years ago, almost at the same time as in the Western countries. In 1976, two hundred personalities, including politicians and businessmen, university professors and common people—two hundred personalities from the North and from the South—convened in Geneva, invited by President Guy Olivier Segond, President of the State Council and of the Canton of Geneva and by myself, to think together in global terms about Africa and the challenges of new communications technologies.

The right measure of the world significance of the Internet has been expressed through the decision to build a virtual world between Geneva and Bamako, my country's capital city, chosen as a representation of West African countries in this initiative. This is how the Anais Network was born, a consultation network on ICT in Africa. This creation meant for us basically two things: a new form of cooperation between the North and the South, and the commencement, through the Internet, of a revitalised integration among African countries.

## The Legacy of Slavery, Colonialism and Racism

We finally understood that one of the major handicaps of the international cooperation lies in the lack of communication and of reliable information regarding our societies, our cultures, the structure of our economies, and our reciprocal political objectives. The slave trade,

colonisation, racism and all forms of domination and exploitation in history, based on the superiority complex of one race, come from an ignorance typical of the human dimension of the *other*, simply because this *other*, despised and discriminated against, could never really express itself.

## The Internet Revolution

The Internet, in this regard, realised an unprecedented revolution, allowing Africa to be in the world without any detour or intermediary. There is no doubt that Africa is better known in the last five years than in the last five hundred years. And it is also thanks to the hundreds of African websites that the character and the potential qualities of the continent are now being more appreciated than in the past.

The second value of the Anais Network for African countries themselves is as an instrument that could allow them to better grasp their common problems in order to evolve common solutions.

Starting from Geneva, we chose four major areas where development seems to be the foundation of progress and all possible well-being: education, health, democracy and environment. The rebirth of Africa, which has been so widely discussed in the last few years (and that does not seem to me to be an illusion), can be reached through the development and constant renewal of human resources, and through the construction of a truly democratic society, which would be able to free all initiatives and to protect our environment, the very condition for our existence.

When we invited the governments of six countries from the South and one from the North, and the citizens to discuss these main questions, obstacles and barriers collapsed; this was surely due to the vitality and fluidity of information, and to the possibility for African countries to together identify a problem and a barrier.

## The Global Dialogue

If, in recent years, we have participated in almost all world meetings on the ICT, it is because of the creed of Geneva, where all participants

agreed that Africa had a great opportunity of finally having its voice heard on all major issues.

The Global Knowledge Conference held in Toronto in 1997, with its focus on the question of knowledge and ICT, gave us the opportunity of expressing our views on this issue. Knowledge, for us, is the essence of everything that is to be known, including rational knowledge, as codified by Western culture and, unfortunately, presented ever since to the rest of the world as the only valuable knowledge.

The debate in Toronto did also raise the question of content that should be developed by Africa on the Internet and the electronic media. We said that development was a question of culture, and that countries in the South were confined to an inactive scheme with the connivance of the North, for as long as this hypothesis was not recognised by everybody.

The question of world knowledge brings along that of the exhumation, thanks to the ICT, of the historical legacy of Africa. It poses the problem of the confinement of the means to a particular civilisation, in which there is the escape, the salvation of the *difference*, in a world globalised to death, so to speak.

But it is up to African university students, to business agents, to judges, to all citizens—it is their task to reveal their knowledge, their know-how-to-do and know-how-to-be Africans who, throughout the centuries, have kept the continent alive in spite of all the aggressions that we all know.

It is through our involvement in this debate on the world scene that will make it possible to develop our prolific differences and to refuse the assimilation of our values by a media-driven world eruption of sound and image.

This is the same position that we had the honour of supporting in our closing speech at the ECA (Economic Commission for Africa) Forum on Information Technologies, held in Addis Ababa.

### **“Bamako 2000”**

As for the “Bamako 2000”, organised in my country last February, which counted on the participation of four continents out of five, 736

representatives from 48 countries, it was the greatest gathering in Africa on the topic of ICT. Regarding the subject of “Internet as the footbridge of development”, the panelists presented the most recent applications of the Internet in the following domains: education, health, administration of decentralised communities, media, electronic commerce, sustainable development, women in information society, the rights of citizens and peoples, the collective access and the appropriations of the ICT, and the ethical and legal challenges of the Internet.

### A Collective Approach to Access

Nobody has any doubt today about the revolutionary character of the Internet in the development process. But one of the questions just mentioned represents today a real problem and has been discussed in Toronto, Addis Ababa, Bamako and, lately, in New York at the Experts’ Meeting preparing this General Assembly of ECOSOC. I am referring to the collective access and the appropriations of ICT.

### The Threat of a New Digital Conquest of Africa

We are aware of the interest that 400 million African consumers represent for multinational companies, and reforms advocating privatisation have been initiated everywhere in this important field. There is such a movement in this direction that a great world competition is taking place. But among all possible analyses, we can recognise, in the prompt increasing interest of northern countries in the connection of Africa, a kind of re-conquest of the African continent. The doctrine of a “new society of the planetary information” is just an idea serving a fooling market. It is, in a word, the eternal debate on the objectives aimed at all innovative technologies.

You all understand that our commitment to Information and Communications Technology is mainly based upon the vigilance and maturity of Africans in this respect. Also, the only valid question for us

is that of the exploitation of our populations with respect to opportunities related to ICT. We know that the United Nations, until today, devoted almost eighteen million dollars to strengthen connectivity in Africa, in addition to the fifteen million dollars of the Leland Initiative for which we are sincerely thankful to the United States. We also have to say that there is more pressure for installing cellular telephone networks than local infrastructures, since these need a major connection effort.

## A United Nations Response

This is why I strongly commend the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations for having convened this important meeting. A glaring inequality among the different regions in the world came out from the experts' report. But it also arose that there are countries which, only ten years ago, had an economical structure similar to that of African countries today, and they succeeded in a spectacular takeoff with a resolute policy with respect to connectivity.

## Mali's Initiatives

It is for this reason that today, at the "Bamako 2000", we announced the intention of the Government of Mali to link the 701 municipalities coming out from a long program of decentralisation of the country and to provide each of Mali's municipalities an Internet access point in order to give to the State reliable demographic statistics and electoral lists for transparent elections. We will also install one Internet access point for the country's natural resources map, and for the school, the health system, and the ecological and cultural chart. There will also be one Internet access point in each municipality for communication and better acquaintance amongst citizens, and for more efficiently positioning and increasing the value of their production.

Is the planned link of 701 municipalities of Mali to the Internet today, a utopia? Is it something impossible?

## “Debt for Connectivity”

I do not see another way of giving Africans a chance to enter the global information society than invoking international cooperation, which, as it seems to me, is—in the whole world—the only possible universe for solidarity and parity: the United Nations have always been the defender of the poorest.

Everybody knows here that Africa does not need to beg on the world scene. It is one of the continents with the greatest natural resources in the world. And as for human resources, more than the fifty percent of the population of Africa is under 25 years old. The burden that Africa drags upon its feet and that prevents it from taking off is debt, always debt.

And if the dream of the Government of Mali is still just a dream, it is only due to the burden of debt. At “Bamako 2000”, I revealed to the participants that the Internet link of 701 municipalities would have cost a maximum of 8 billion French Francs, or less than 7 million US dollars, which is impossible to find today, since Mali pays almost 60 billion French Francs, or approximately 10 million US dollars, annually for its debt.

The linking up of Africa to the world is not a luxury. It is not simply in the interest for Africa; it is in the interest for the entire world. This is why I take advantage of being in front of such an important tribune to propose to the international community the formula of “debt for connectivity”. I am sure that, if every year just one percent of the total amount of debt of each African country is devolved for the creation or the amelioration of the telecommunication infrastructures (telephone, instant messages, electricity, Internet), the Northern as well as the Southern countries will find it to their mutual benefit.

## NOTES

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1. On July 5, 2000, H. E. Alpha Oumar Konaré, as the then President of the Republic of Mali, addressed the High-Level Segment of the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), as a special guest. That speech is presented here.