



Information and Communications Technologies in the Service of Development

The New Partnership for Africa's Development
(NEPAD)

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—PRESIDENT ABDOULAYE WADE

Let me first express, once again, my heartfelt gratitude for the great honour bestowed on Senegal by the President of the General Assembly's kind decision to invite me as the keynote speaker of the General Assembly Meeting on Information and Communications Technologies for Development.

I feel all the more flattered because this invitation comes from a man of vision and commitment whose outstanding qualities as a seasoned

statesman, dedicated parliamentarian and bright academic, have greatly benefited the work of the General Assembly during this session.

Indeed, your achievements, Sir, are no surprise to me. As an eminent citizen of the Republic of Korea, you belong to a proud nation of true achievers who have been able, within a generation, to leapfrog decades of underdevelopment to become one of the top economies in the world. I should like to thank you most warmly, Mr. President, for your commendable initiative.

I should like also to pay a sincere tribute to your, and our, Secretary-General, Mr. Kofi Annan, as well as to President José María Figueres, former Head of State of Costa Rica and an outstanding figure in the development of digital technology in his country, for the decisive role they have played in the establishment and development of the study group on information and communications technologies.

The initiative of holding this meeting came from the South, which is suffering from the effects of the “digital divide”. As the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD) coordinator for this extremely significant aspect of our development strategy, I am fully aware of the timeliness and the relevance of our Meeting. That is why I am particularly honoured by this invitation to address the community of nations as the keynote speaker on this subject.

The tremendous stakes involved in new information and communications technologies, which today are decisive for the progress of nations, are the reason why the New Partnership for the Development of Africa—which was adopted last July at Lusaka, at the thirty-sixth summit of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), and entitled “The New African Initiative”—has made this sector one of its principal priorities.

I should like to recall that NEPAD is based on several fundamental pillars; namely, good governance; the region as a basis for development, rather than the State; and finally, heavy reliance on the private sector.

NEPAD has chosen eight priority sectors: infrastructure, education, health care, agriculture, new information and communications technologies, energy, the environment, and market access, with the diversification of agricultural products.

Backing our appeal, Cisco, Hewlett-Packard, Microsoft, Tiscali and other titans in the new technologies sector all were heavily represented last April in Dakar at the Conference on Partnership with the Private Sector for Africa's Development, and they made clear their desire to assist Africa in its fascinating new technological adventure.

I should, therefore, like to recall here a few practical measures for which Africa, in the conclusions and resolutions of Dakar, requests the support of the international community. These include the establishment of Internet networks, thereby making possible the transmission of audio and visual information among the Governments of the region, or indeed, those of the entire continent. And why not hold digital African conferences?

Other measures include harmonising the regulatory framework for the telecommunications sector, at least in each of the regions, to facilitate foreign investment and the digitalisation of Africa's cultural heritage, in particular through the production of CD-ROMs on the history of Africa. This project, which is particularly important to me, is now being implemented in Senegal.

Another measure is the establishment of a pan-African "e-store" for trade and exchange in African products—crafts in particular—and to make e-trade the driving force for economic growth; the creation of industrial units for the production of information and telecommunications equipment; and finally, the establishment of a global fund for information and communications technologies to assist Africa in overcoming the digital divide that separates it from the developed world.

Moreover, Africa's backwardness in this area, far from being inevitable, is now being dealt with and is on the way to being eliminated, for the struggle is well under way, as I am gratified to note. Efforts to this end are now being made to bring about this new planetary citizenship—the digital revolution.

Indeed, the entirely new system of underwater fibre-optic communication, which I launched in Senegal this past May 28, which links Europe, Africa and Asia over 28,000 kilometres, shows that our continent is indeed well on its way towards digital emancipation, since this system

allows Africa to be connected, with full autonomy and at a lesser cost, to the global network.

The use of underwater digital cable *de facto* eliminates expensive travel through major urban centres outside the continent. It ensures autonomy, reduced costs and the linkage of users to the rest of the world. As you are aware, many African countries depend on certain European capitals to communicate even among themselves.

This technological marvel—which we inaugurated recently, and which was implemented in a relatively short time, several months, thanks to the involvement of companies from the South and the North—represents a specific example of new technology projects, which NEPAD is striving to promote through private partnerships.

Indeed, if Africans had the same favourable conditions as other peoples, there is no question that they have all of the necessary intellectual resources to meet the challenge of an information and communications society. It is on the basis of this belief that I have decided to embark firmly on a bold policy of development of new information and communications technology in Senegal.

I recently launched a large-scale project—Cyberville—a technological park on the outskirts of Dakar with a highly competitive telecommunications infrastructure. It is designed to host major companies working in the area of new technologies and the future start-ups of outstanding young Africans who wish to be active participants in the new economy. Here again, this is a project that was launched by the public authorities but that has become a private one, involving the private sector in Senegal and the American private sector.

The time has come for Africa to make full use of its human resources by taking advantage of the enormous potential of e-business, the spread of digital technology and the development of information technology solutions. Asian countries have succeeded in this, and they too started from circumstances similar to ours. I am, therefore, convinced that this can be achieved very quickly.

For its part, Senegal has had a successful initial experiment with distance medicine, which was repeated last week. Doctors in Dakar assessed

via satellite the pregnancies of 60 women living in the most remote and cut-off areas of the country. Again, that took place just 72 hours ago. For these people, seeing a baby sucking its thumb in its mother's womb and understanding that abusing the mother means brutalising the child, represents a genuine social and cultural revolution. Indeed, we saw people holding their heads in their hands in astonishment.

We have had similar success in the education sector, where Microsoft has provided public schools with a free introductory programme in computing. The day care centres established under the La Case des Tout-Petits programme—my pet project—train children between the ages of 2 and 6 using modern educational games—which remain a privilege of children in developed countries. These centres use computer games to make inroads into the world of computing. This project has been adopted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) as a Universal Project.

Our planned University of the African Future—a university without borders to which one does not have to travel—will provide complete, real-time and carefully chosen Western university programmes via satellite. Through this programme, students will no longer have to go abroad, as their degrees will be absolutely identical—not just “equivalent”—to those issued by universities affiliated with the programme. Technological Senegal therefore wishes to gain access to the information highway instead of remaining on the periphery of the achievements of the new Millennium.

There is no doubt that the new technologies suggest a higher form of democracy in which everyone moves forward at the same speed: the speed of the electron or, if you will, of the speed of light. But such democracy, accessible to all with the intelligence that is the gift of nature, can only become a reality if everyone has an opportunity to be a player in the interaction of its forces.

Our desire is shared in Africa today through the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) and the projects we shall be submitting to the Group of Eight² as part of our partnership with the Western world which, I would like to recall, is both a public and private partnership.

Among other things, Africa is indeed giving pride of place to new information and communications technologies. We have in store numerous projects that must be supported by the public sector, but which must also be a matter for the private sector. Our partnership must therefore have the goal of providing opportunities to every country and to every man and woman. To that end, our eyes should be on the enormous international differences in computer ownership. We must strive with resolve to achieve widespread access to information and communication networks.

In conclusion, I would like to make a solemn appeal to all partners: Governments, the private sector, non-governmental organisations, international institutions, scientific circles and all active participants in this fascinating adventure. I urge them to join their efforts with ours and with those of the international community and of the Secretary-General, who has been able to endow our institutions with a soul. Nations have become scientific laboratories backed by political decisions. That is the reason why we are gradually seeing a very deep-rooted change in how these institutions are viewed throughout the world, including in Africa.

Now, we are addressing the colossal challenges posed by the digital revolution that Africa aspires to join—a continent that is standing proud because it is able to continue to assume with dignity its role in the community of nations.

Bearing that in mind, I would like to join the Assembly in a toast to an enhanced partnership between the United Nations and Africa towards the full realisation of the NEPAD programme, and to a fruitful meeting of the Assembly on Information and Communication Technologies for Development.

NOTES

1. President Abdoulaye Wade, in his capacity as the Coordinator for infrastructure for the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), gave the keynote address to the 101st Plenary of the 56th Session of the United Nations General Assembly at a Special Meeting on Information and Communications Technologies for Development, on June 17, 2002. This is the text of his address.
2. The Heads of State of the Group of Eight industrial nations (otherwise referred to as the "the G8") consisting of Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia and the United States.