

Africa prepares for WTDC-02

Yaoundé meeting calls for a greater ITU role in the region's telecommunications development

Africa's relative share of the world's fixed telephone and mobile networks has grown, although it is still low in relation to the size of the continent's population of more than 784 million. And while its share of worldwide Internet access points and users has fallen, its overall share of the PC market has increased markedly. To participants in the recent Africa Regional Preparatory Meeting (Yaoundé, 29–31 May 2001) for the World Telecommunication Development Conference scheduled to take place in Istanbul in March 2002, these trends are encouraging signs that Africa can bridge the digital divide quickly if it overcomes certain obstacles.

Issues raised during the discussions focused on finance and investment, policy and regulation, human resources management, universal access and least developed countries (LDC). A resounding call ran through all the debates: the ITU role in Africa's telecommunications development should be stepped up.

At a ministerial roundtable leading up to the Yaoundé Declaration (see box on pages 28–29), there was strong support for an enabling infrastructure without which extending access to the four corners of the continent would remain a distant dream. One priority that clearly emerged from the debates was the need to cut the cost of telecommunication services to bring it within the reach of all citizens and to formulate strategies that make it possible to

achieve this goal. A fund to improve universal access was cited as one possible path in that direction.

Several countries pointed out the yawning gap between urban and rural areas in terms of access to Internet and telephony. Among the problems which top the list of pressing issues for most participants is how to privatize telecommunications while ensuring quality of service and efficiency in international communications and, at the same time, finance public service.

Participants were clear that the purpose of regulation should be the promotion of abiding values such as universal service, development



of infrastructure, reduction of tariffs and proper monitoring of post-privatization effects. Many went on to emphasize the need to not only establish strong and efficient regulators, but also to find ways of improving regulatory independence from policy-makers and operators. In this regard, some stated that the operating costs for regulators should not be

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funded from government budgets in order to ensure the autonomy of these regulators.

Initiatives, such as the African Centres of Excellence (CoE), where policy-makers and regulators are trained in the development of national sector priorities and regulations conducive to private sector investment, were recognized as



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important steps in strengthening the efficiency of regulators in Africa. Wide support was expressed for the current African CoE to also become nodes of excellence for on-line learning. Other welcome initiatives included the Development Symposium for Regulators, which provides a forum for the exchange of regulatory experiences among regulators.

G-REX, a brand new ITU service for regulators (see article on page 37),

received strong support not only because it provides an on-going forum where policy-makers, regulators and operators can exchange views on issues of mutual interest and have immediate access to a wide range of regulatory expertise, but also because it makes it possible for the African voice to be heard internationally. In addition, the meeting felt that interaction and swapping of regulatory staff should be encouraged to further strengthen their skills in matters of interconnection, tariffs, monitoring of market changes and principles of competition and legislation for which a dire need exists.

YAOUNDE DECLARATION

We, African ministers responsible for telecommunications and information technologies, meeting in Yaoundé on 28 May 2001 within the framework of the Africa Regional Preparatory Meeting for the 2002 World Telecommunication Development Conference (WTDC-02), organized to identify and analyse obstacles to the development of telecommunications and information technologies in Africa and to identify strategies, priorities and other appropriate means of overcoming those obstacles,

Considering

— that digital technology and the development of high-capacity telecommunication media such as optical fibre and satellite systems have led to the advent of the global information infrastructure and to convergence between telecommunications, information technology and broadcasting;

— the relatively low level of development of the basic telecommunication infrastructure, telephone penetration and the use of new services derived from information technologies;

— that the digital divide is now widening the gap that already exists between developed and developing countries in terms of access to, and the use of, telecommunication services and services derived from information technologies;

— the role played by ITU in the development and harmonious use of telecommunication services and information technologies,

Reaffirming

the particular importance and central role of telecommunications and information technologies in political, economic, social and cultural development in the age of globalization and the information society,

Noting

the efforts deployed by African countries, despite a particularly difficult economic context, to stimulate the development of the telecommunication sector,

Further noting

— with satisfaction, ITU's initiatives and other initiatives, including the African Information Society Initiative (AISI) and African Connectivity;

— ITU's participation in, and contribution to, the meetings of "Dot Force" — a working group set up by the G8 Summit in Okinawa,

Declare

— that we welcome the actions undertaken on behalf of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) by South Africa, Algeria and Nigeria, particularly their fruitful participation in the Okinawa G8 Summit, and invite them to continue with such actions;

— that we undertake to devote more actions to the timely addressing of issues relating to telecommunications and to information and communication technologies, these being issues which we consider to be of prime concern;

— that bridging the digital divide must of necessity entail development of the telecommunication and sound and television broadcasting infrastructure, and that development partners must consider this parameter, in particular with respect to rural areas;

— that it is essential that African countries, given the importance of telecommu-

nications and information technologies in political, economic, social and cultural development, adopt innovative strategies and policies designed to stimulate development, particularly through reform of the telecommunication and information technology sector;

— that each African country should henceforth define a common, or at least coordinated, national policy and strategy for the development of telecommunications and information technologies that takes account of multimedia convergence (telecommunications, information technology and broadcasting),

Recommend

that African administrations take the necessary measures to stimulate the development of the private sector as well as measures to encourage private investment,

Appeal

— to ITU to pay particular attention to the urgent development needs of African countries and to continue to implement activities and programmes that will make a concrete and tangible contribution to reducing the digital divide in Africa;

— to ITU to assist African countries in developing their human resources and strengthening their capacities in the area of information technologies;

— to subregional economic integration institutions to work towards the harmonization of policies and regulations in the field of telecommunications and information technologies;

— to development partners, African regional institutions and international institutions to strengthen cooperation and coordination between all projects and initiatives with a view to ensuring the harmonious use of resources. ■

The Telecommunications Regulators Association of Southern Africa (TRASA) was cited as a model to be emulated in other regions of the continent. ITU was asked to step up its assistance by developing guidelines for use by regulators, providing experts, conducting country case studies, diffusing best practices and enhancing the current ITU regulatory database to allow the benchmarking of national experiences.

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The discussion on infrastructure development highlighted the need for guidance to the countries in the region to adjust to changes resulting from emerging technologies, particularly for Internet protocol (IP) telephony and third generation (3G) mobile communications. They suggested a number of ways of doing this: appropriate training programmes based on

surveyed needs; supporting industrialization on the continent; and continuing to focus on the social benefits of telecommunications, for example, telemedicine. Besides fostering regional technical cooperation, there was a suggestion to promote national expertise more vigorously.

Finance and investment remain an overriding concern in the region, according to the participants. Indeed, several African countries called for direct assistance in setting costs, prices and interconnection charges, as well as in creating a fiscal environment that provides incentives rather than one that penalizes the telecommunication sector. Assistance is also needed in setting targets for the sector, in terms of a percentage of their GNP, and in preparing programmes to demonstrate to investors the long-term prospects of profitability. Countries called for guidelines and handbooks on cost structure and analysis and on tariffs to assist them in their negotiations with local and international operators, regulators and other decision-makers.

A number of participants felt that measures should be taken not only to facilitate partnerships with other countries of the region, but also to encourage local entrepreneurs so as to promote investment in the telecommunications sector. Cooperatives were seen as providing the key to development and local jobs in rural areas and in the poor neighbourhoods of large towns.

While the session on universal access and the development of information and communication technologies (ICT) noted that the disparities between developed and developing countries and between urban and rural areas within developing countries was still wide, it also acknowledged the progress made in the quest for universal access, defined as the provision of reliable and good-quality telecommunication media at an affordable cost for the user. To give a strong boost to universal service, participants asked that ITU provide quantifiable, measurable and time-bound objectives in order to achieve a defined rate of penetration of services within a given time-frame. ITU was further called upon to help African countries formulate convergent policies and strategies and create an environment conducive to meetings and forums to facilitate access to all possible sources of financing for universal access.

Africa's LDCs (34 of the 49 in the world today) were the subject of special attention in a working session that emerged with a draft recommendation suggesting measures to help them bridge the digital divide. There was wide support to promote the Internet Training Centre Initiative in LDCs.

"The World Telecommunications Development Conference is the last opportunity to make a realistic and concrete difference in Africa," said William Tallah, Chairman of the meeting, in his closing remarks. He emphasized the need for the Yaoundé meeting to urge the G8 countries at their Summit in Italy (Genoa, 20–22 July 2001) to take to heart the needs of the developing countries, particularly in Africa. "The Genoa Action Plan should be carried out by developing countries in the interest of developing countries, and ITU should play the leading role in implementing action plans in cooperation with international organizations," Mr Tallah also remarked. ■