



INTERNATIONAL TELECOMMUNICATION UNION
Telecommunication Development Bureau
Telecommunication Statistics and Data Unit

20 December 2002
Original: French

3rd World Telecommunication/ICT Indicators Meeting
Geneva, 15 - 17 January 2003

Document: WICT-18E

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Forum sur la dette extérieure et le développement du Congo (FODEX)

Title: Digital divide and global information society

DIGITAL DIVIDE AND GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY

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November 2002

The Digital Divide

In Kinshasa, the capital city of the Democratic Republic of the Congo in Sub-Saharan Africa, fewer than 10 per cent of the population of approximately 8 million owns a telephone, and fewer than 5 per cent is connected to the Internet. Moreover, fewer than 50 per cent of the population owns a television set. The situation in the provinces outside the capital is even worse.

Such a disproportionate situation, commonly referred to as the digital divide, is a real paradox in the light of the telecommunication demands of twenty-first century society.

Causes

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the main cause of the digital divide is the crisis affecting both the level of income and the purchasing power of the country's population. This crisis has had a damaging impact on the general state of basic infrastructure, which explains the failure to introduce modern information and communication technologies (ICTs).

Secondly, the information and communication sector is hampered by inadequate and unfavourable fiscal and regulatory provisions. This situation reflects the lack of determination by the State to participate actively in the restoration, modernization and construction of communication infrastructure or the promotion of ICTs.

However, since the arrival of a number of mobile telephony operators and some Internet providers in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the large towns have begun to develop communication systems and to open up a gateway to modernity through the Internet. Thus, in Kinshasa in particular, Internet cafes have spread rapidly.

Towards a global information society

Given the vital importance of information to the survival of the human race, in order to exploit the full potential of the information society, that society should be made up of the most essential ingredients to human activity and the world in which we live, *inter alia*:

- accessibility to databases and information and communication tools;
- the development and transfer of ICTs;
- an administrative system that, on the basis of international agreements and with a firm commitment to sustainable development, encourages the vitality of the sector.

Advantages of the global information society

Given Africa's numerous problems, particularly in the fields of education and health, the continent could clearly benefit from the enormous advantages of the global information society.

In response to the persistent, devastating impact of malaria and tuberculosis, as well as to the AIDS pandemic, the global information society will make an enormous contribution to enhancing the effectiveness of policies designed to combat these diseases.

Furthermore, it will help to improve the organization of educational systems, particularly by ensuring that knowledge is up-to-date and that international cooperation takes place with regard to education.

Recommendations

To the representatives of States and international organizations, as well as to the other participants at the World Summit on the Information Society, I should like to make the following recommendations:

- 1) ensure that a comprehensive electricity supply exists in developing countries, with a view to increasing the use of information and communication tools;
- 2) restore and organize into networks as many information databases as possible;
- 3) review policies and enhance management systems in the information and communication sector with the emphasis on sustainable development;
- 4) reduce fiscal and other pressures which jeopardize the importation of information technology and telecommunication equipment;
- 5) promote the development and transfer of ICTs at the international level;
- 6) ensure that all States are fully connected to the information highway;
- 7) restore and extend basic communication infrastructure;
- 8) encourage States which impose restrictions on the acquisition and dissemination of information to pursue greater openness in that regard;
- 9) develop an effective management structure for the information sector in countries susceptible to armed conflict, with a view to curbing press excesses that potentially undermine the political stability, that is so essential to the development of poor States.