

# ITU, Africa's Youth and the Information Society<sup>1</sup>

by 'Gbenga Sesan', Youth Forum Alumni of ITU TELECOM Africa 2001

In 2001, the International Telecommunications Union ("ITU") began implementing its idea of a parallel "Youth Forum" for the highly successful regional telecommunications event. Beginning with Africa 2001 (and later hosting for other regions and a joint World 2003), the ITU Youth Forum brings together two young people (a young woman and man) from each country to learn about the role of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in national and regional development, and discuss their own possible contributions within this development opportunity.

96 young Africans (49 ladies and 47 gentlemen) from 47 countries were selected to represent their countries as Youth Fellows for the ITU Africa 2001 event, having submitted winning entries for the essay competition conducted across the continent<sup>2</sup>. The title was "Information and Communication Technologies: Development Opportunities and the role of Youth"; the year was 2001 and the destination, Johannesburg. During the meeting, we were introduced to the institutional, financial and technical dimensions of Africa's engagement of ICT opportunities. After series of workshops and consultations, the young faces of Africa jointly presented the "ITU Africa 2001 Youth Forum Declaration"<sup>3</sup>

Leaving Johannesburg, we all returned to our countries with the passion to contribute to Africa's inclusion – and active participation – in the Information Society. One of our promises in the declaration was to establish the African Youth Initiative (AYI) as a platform of expression for young Africans to contribute to Africa's Information Society dream. The AYI started with dynamic activities (in Nigeria and Ghana) but it was not long that we realized that the Digital Divide was real – most Youth Fellows could not remain connected to the dream due to various reasons including lack of access to the ICTs we sought to promote. It was not long after this that the World Summit on the Information Society began, and Africa was to hold the first (regional) meeting.

Africa held the first Regional Meeting Preparatory to the World Summit on the Information Society ("WSIS") at the *Palais des Congrès* in Bamako, Republic of Mali from 28 to 30 May 2002 and the conference had representatives from 51 African countries, delegates from many other countries and representatives of African and global entities, the private sector and civil society.

The meeting had five young people (among others) sponsored by the Telecommunications Development Bureau (TDB) of the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) for the purpose of driving youth input into the process. These young people lobbied and recorded major success as the roundtable discussion threw a lot of support behind the clamour for youth empowerment and

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<sup>1</sup> Developed from the article titled, "From Bamako to Accra: Drumming Support for Africa's Youth" ('Gbenga Sesan, December 23, 2004)

<sup>2</sup> A total of 186 essays were received, with 45 countries sending 4 essays each, one country submitted 3 essays, two countries submitted 2 essays each and 2 submitted 1 essay each

<sup>3</sup> [www.itu.int/AFRICA2001/forum/youth/declaration.html](http://www.itu.int/AFRICA2001/forum/youth/declaration.html)

inclusion. Eventually, one of the major outcomes of the conference, the **Bamako 2002 Declaration**, requested, “that African States should actively involve the youth in national and regional ICT activities”<sup>4</sup>.

Building on this momentum and other fortunate networks, Africa was duly represented when eight (8) young people from 5 continents met in Geneva in July 2002 to kickstart the process of global youth involvement in the WSIS. They started the **Youth Caucus** and made clear its objectives even at the first preparatory committee meeting of the WSIS. The WSIS Youth Caucus, then led by Nick Moraitis of TakingITGlobal, is now anchored by a team of three young people – with Titilayo Akinsanmi (Nigerian – and obviously African – working in Johannesburg) as the Global Facilitator.

From the Bamako meeting, through the preparatory committee meetings, December 2003 summit, side events, and to local, national, regional and international WSIS-related meetings (including the recently concluded United Nations ICT Task Force meeting in Berlin), young Africans have remained active in the process. At the times when visa and funding problems would not allow us attend the meetings physically, we took to the World Wide Web for help. The African Youth eConference on the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) held online at [www.yahoogroups.com/group/wsisyouthafrica](http://www.yahoogroups.com/group/wsisyouthafrica) between the 20th and 30th of November 2002. It was coordinated by Paradigm Initiative Nigeria (an initiative led by an Africa 2001 Youth Fellow whose participation in the ITU Africa 2001 was his entry into regional and international processes) and ninety-six (96) young Africans from over 13 countries (from Western, Eastern, Central, Northern and Southern Africa) participated in the eConference which sought to strengthen the role of African Youths in the WSIS processes, and the eventual action plans that will be drawn<sup>5</sup>.

Sincerely, **Youth** is not a thematic issue within the WSIS process, and the need to involve and empower Africa’s youth is not just another conference statement bullet point. It is imperative that young Africans participate in the process, and are empowered to translate words and thoughts into action. We are the proof of sustainability, and the bridge between today and tomorrow. With this fact accepted, Africa’s development process utilizing Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) can be accelerated. You just need to see the passion in the blood of the empowered African youth within the WSIS process and the action they have been able to place on the discussion table to appreciate the song this piece seeks to sing!

One very obvious outcome of African youth involvement in the WSIS process is the National Information Society Youth Campaign. The official website of the WSIS Youth Caucus<sup>6</sup> reports that, “During the second half of 2003, young people in 21 countries worldwide mobilized around Information Society issues through "National Information Society Youth Campaigns"... young people implemented a vibrant series

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<sup>4</sup> Bamako 2002 Declaration. African Regional Meeting Preparatory to the World Summit on the Information Society.

<sup>5</sup> Final eConference Statement from the African Youth eConference on the World Summit on the Information Society. 20 – 30 November 2002.

<sup>6</sup> [www.wsisyouth.org](http://www.wsisyouth.org)

of workshops, prime-time radio programs, media outreach, video conferences, websites and more. They held meetings in community halls, visited schools, published newsletters, trained other youth in technology skills at internet cafes, talked with decision-makers, and implemented concrete local projects”<sup>7</sup> Nigeria, Ghana, Egypt and Sierra Leone were the 4 African countries that led National Information Society Youth Campaigns (NISYC).

Nigeria’s NISYC, tagged “Policy Train” stopped in three representative cities in the northern, eastern and western regions of the country. On the 11th of October 2003, young Nigerians met in Port Harcourt to discuss youth involvement in the WSIS process, and the role of youth in acting out the outcome of the summit. The train proceeded to Kano on the 18th of October and the final phase of the consultation held in Lagos on the 22nd of the same month<sup>8</sup>. With the commencement of the second phase of the WSIS, Policy Train II has taken off with a decentralized system coordinated by Paradigm Initiative Nigeria and seeking more active participation from Nigeria’s youth.

On January 8, the Lagos consultation held. The Abuja version of the Policy Train held on the 12<sup>th</sup> of January and more states have hosted consultations, courtesy of Policy Train Coordinators – youth volunteers who believe that *action speaks louder than words*. A January 17 Nigerian WSIS pre-event was hosted by the Policy and Development Centre and it witnessed the initial showcasing of the multimedia presentation of Policy Train II, which will be one of Nigeria’s youth’s contribution to the WSIS process as proof of action within the WSIS process. In January 2005, Ghana’s NISYC was launched and it came at a very important time – when Ghana was hosting Africa for the Second Regional Meeting Preparatory to the WSIS (Accra 2005).

Fortunately, Accra 2005 was an opportunity for Africa to evaluate how we have been able to build enduring processes within the framework of the WSIS. The conference’s official website stated that “the African Regional Preparatory Conference for the WSIS, in Accra, with the theme “Access – Africa’s key to an inclusive Information Society” will prepare Africa for an effective participation in the second phase of the WSIS to ensure a strategic and interdependent digital partnership that will promote economic growth and human development of the continent. The conference will bring together all stakeholders, ranging from Government to civil society, the private sector and academia, parliamentarians, local authorities, African regional institutions, development partners and international organizations.”<sup>9</sup>

The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, along with her partners in progress hosted pre-conference workshops, which included a strong focus on Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships (MSPs). During the MSP breakout sessions, young Africans addressed the all-important theme, “Empowering Youth in the Information Society”<sup>10</sup>. This builds on the brilliant participation that Africa’s youth recorded in a virtual community set up earlier by the ECA. The online group, “African Youth in the Information Society”<sup>11</sup>, discussed relevant Information Society issues to date and has

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<sup>7</sup> <http://wsisyouth.takingitglobal.org/phase1-natcampaigns.php>

<sup>8</sup> [www.ydco.net/policy/wsis-nigeria](http://www.ydco.net/policy/wsis-nigeria)

<sup>9</sup> [www.wsisaccra2005.gov.gh](http://www.wsisaccra2005.gov.gh)

<sup>10</sup> [www.wsisaccra2005.gov.gh/preconf.htm](http://www.wsisaccra2005.gov.gh/preconf.htm)

<sup>11</sup> [www.dgroups.org/group/aisi-youth-l](http://www.dgroups.org/group/aisi-youth-l)

even gone ahead to propose concrete action towards Africa's accelerated development. Accra 2005 was an opportunity for the group to consolidate and give Africa a New Year gift – the African Youth ICT4D Network, which also builds on the earlier work of the African Youth Initiative.

The African Youth Information and Communication Technologies for Development (ICT4D) Network – AYIN – is a pan-African and all-inclusive platform for African Youth input into the African Information Society agenda. With a vision of, “a networked generation of young Africans empowering themselves and contributing to the continent's active participation in the Information Society”, the network is set to move youth inclusion to the next level, as far as the Information Society is concerned.

AYIN was launched on the 4th of February 2005 at the second African Regional meeting for the World Summit on the Information Society (Accra 2005), but the network is a product of time and efforts. Beginning with a fortunate crystallization of youth advocacy efforts which were later supported by the Economic Commission for Africa (through a mailing list), young Africans discussed their role and expectations around the Information Society.

These discussions led to the emergence of concrete proposals on the path to follow in order to move in the direction of progress. With the support of numerous organizations, youth gathered at Accra 2005 and came up with action-laden recommendations – including the setting up of the African Youth ICT4D Network through which they promised to lead action within the Information Society.

AYIN does not seek to replace, or compete with existing networks. Rather, our aim is to identify, complement and support such networks as possible avenues through which Africa's dream can be realized. In the course of delivering our Plan of Action, the network will liaise with individuals, organizations, institutions, people groups and other networks in engaging sustainable and efficient mechanisms that can accelerate Africa's wholesome development through the instrumentality of Information and Communication Technologies – Africa's password to leadership in the New Economy.

The African Youth ICT4D Network involves organizations that are led by youth, or work around youth issues. All young Africans –regardless of location, sex, language or creed – own this network. Experts, newbies and enthusiasts will join hands to build the Africa of our dreams, especially as it relates to the role that ICTs can play in such processes.

The network set up a coordinating team, the AYIN Bureau, to lead organizational strategies. The bureau acts in line with the constitution, and helps lead the implementation of the Plan of Action. The network has also nominated an 11-man bureau, representing all the five regions of the continent and the Diaspora.

Upon leaving Accra, the network registered two domain names – [www.ayinetwork.org](http://www.ayinetwork.org) and its French equivalent, [www.reseauaji.org](http://www.reseauaji.org). This online platform will help provide a one-stop centre for information on the network, its people, activities, opportunities and successes! While the online home of the network is being set up, you may get more information by sending an email to [info@ayinetwork.org](mailto:info@ayinetwork.org).

For this all-important network, the onus lies on the entire African community – and her friends – to support the value- and demand-driven initiative. We accept that as told in the story of the proverbial bird in the hand of a young child, whether the “bird” lives or dies, we decide. But just as another African proverb says, “a child who lifts his hands will get the support of his mother”. We lift our hands and ask for support. Support – not for individuals or selfish interests, but for the future of our continent. We have moved around in circles long enough, its time to join forces and weave a new continent we can be proud to call home. No longer shall we just tend the gardens of others, our own flowers will blossom. It is Africa’s time to reveal to the world that the pyramids of Egypt and mineral resources of Nigeria are not accidents but gifts planted ahead of a day of celebration – today!

It is time for action, and support. Relay the message of the network to other young people, publish the emerging items in your local media outlets, advise the network’s youth, make resources available for the ambitious but necessary work, and hold us accountable for our promises. We believe in positive peer pressure and will enjoy a healthy competition on the track of development. Fortunately, the fifth African Development Forum has its theme as “Youth and Leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” and we believe that it comes at a great time for us in order to weave these efforts into one fine matrix.

From Bamako to Accra, Africa’s youth have toiled. In the words of David Diop, “the blood of your sweat / the sweat of your work / ... / That is your Africa / springing up anew / springing up patiently obstinately / Whose fruit bit by bit acquire / The bitter taste of liberty”<sup>12</sup>. Here comes liberty, and it is time to support these efforts and network with other stakeholders to announce the birth of a New Africa, one riding on the wings of Information and Communication Technologies for accelerated development.

Combining the powers of hindsight and foresight, I believe that the ITU’s 2001 seed – which is presently being followed up – will contribute immensely to the weaving of the Africa of our dreams through young women and men who are empowered to learn more about ICT policy processes, are equipped with appropriate skills and are rightly positioned for influence.

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<sup>12</sup> AFRICA. David Diop - [www.bowwave.org/AfricanWriters/David%20Diop.htm](http://www.bowwave.org/AfricanWriters/David%20Diop.htm)