Global agenda and ICT4D in Africa: Constraints of localizing 'universal norm'

Tokunbo Ojo

Department of Communication Studies, York University, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

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ABSTRACT

In 1996, as part of the global ICT for development phenomenon, the Africa Information Society Initiative (AISI) was launched as the action framework for the building of ICT infrastructure in Africa. Its goals included the digital connection of every African village to the global information network by the year 2010, and the leapfrogging of Africa's development through ICTs. Over a decade after the enactment of the AISI, many villages are still without electricity, and lack access to Internet services and other core ICTs. Based on the data gathered from qualitative semi-structured interviews and secondary sources, this paper analyzes the challenges and obstacles that have confronted the AISI implementation and ICT4D agenda in Africa. It examines the implication of these challenges and potential ways of addressing them.

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1. Introduction

More than ever, the multilateral trade agreements and consensus reached at the meetings of international organizations such as World Trade Organization (WTO) and International Telecommunication Union (ITU) are shaping nation-states' communication policy agendas and development priorities. Examples of these influential international agreements include the 1997 WTO Basic Telecommunications Agreement, and General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS). At the regional level, this emerging order became more apparent in the African context with the 1996 United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) sponsored "Africa Information Society Initiative (AISI): An action framework to build information and communication technologies (ICTs) infrastructure in Africa." The AISI, which African ministers of economic planning and social development endorsed at the UNECA's Conference for African Ministers in Addis Ababa in May 1996, is the primary framework upon which the current ICT activities and policies in Africa are based on.

As the African regional framework for the ICT for development (ICT4D) agenda, the AISI's primary objectives were to foster digital connectivity and to create "a sustainable information society" by the year 2010 (UNECA, 1996/2003). That is, a sustainable information society in Africa where:

Every man and woman, school child, village, government office and business can access information and knowledge resources through computers and telecommunications;

Access is available to international, regional and national "information highways," providing "off-ramps" in the villages and in the information area catering specifically to grass-roots society;

A vibrant business sector that exhibits strong leadership capable of forging the build-up of the information society;

African information resources reflect the needs of government, business, culture, education, tourism, energy, health, transport and natural resource management;

Table 1
ICT Penetration rates per 100 inhabitants in Africa and other regions in 2014.

Regions	Fixed telephone	Mobile phone	Internet usage	Mobile broadband	Wired/Fixed broadband
Africa	1.3	69.3	19.0	19.0	0.4
Arab States	8.7	109.9	40.6	24.6	3.1
Asia & Pacific	12.7	89.2	32.4	22.8	7.7
Europe	39.2	124.7	74.9	63.8	27.7
Americas	26.3	108.5	65.5	59.1	16.7

Source: ITU World Telecommunication/ICT Indicators Database (2014).

Information and knowledge are disseminated and used by business, the public at large and disenfranchised groups, such as women and the poor, enabling them to make rational choices in matters related to the economy (free markets) (UNECA's AISI document, par.18. Emphasis added).

However, while there is a marginal improvement in the diffusion and usage of ICTs between 1996 and 2014, "Africa [still] remains the deepest part of the global digital divide" (Hafkin, 2001, p. 326) as it was in 1990s when the AISI was initiated. Many villages across the continent are still without electricity, telephone and Internet services, in spite of the AISI's strategic goals to get every African village connected by 2010 (Foster & Briceño-Garmendia, 2010). Only about 10 percent of the rural areas in the sub-Saharan African region have electricity and less than 7 percent of them have mobile service coverage (ITU, 2008). Over 80 percent of the African population is not wired to the Internet (African Development Bank, 2013). Overall, the continent lags behind the rest of the world in ICT penetration rates. Table 1 shows the statistical comparison of ICT penetration rates between Africa and other regions of the world.

Why is there a huge gap between the AISI vision and the "reality" on the ground? Within the conceptual framework of Amartya Sen's capability approach, this paper assesses the challenges and obstacles that confronted the socio-political buy-in of the AISI and ICT4D agenda in Africa.

2. Contextual background: ICT4D agenda, policy transfer and AISI

Policy transfer refers to the diffusion of administrative arrangement, policy programs and ideas from one geo-political setting to another geo-political setting for appropriation or adoption (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000; Stone, 2012). It is a process that typically unfolds within the context of international laws or international development aid such as "the communication for development programs of the United Nations and its specialized agencies" (Eko, 2012, p.42). The underlying principle is that it would "jump-start the wider process of social change and leapfrog over long-standing social and cultural obstacles" (Nelken, 2003, p. 455). This was the case with the AISI, which was formulated by a team of international experts and international donor organizations under the auspice of the UNECA, as part of the international agenda to build the Global Information Infrastructure (GII). The GII, which then US Vice-President, Albert Gore, proposed at the first ITU's World Telecommunication Development Conference (WTDC) in 1994, was touted as a transnational communication system that would revolutionize human relations and global economies (Chakravartty & Sarikakis, 2006; Raboy, 1999).

Initiated within the broader framework of the global ICT4D agenda to address Africa's comparative disadvantages in the global economy, the AISI enunciated a techno-deterministic promise of social, economic and political benefits for Africa if it was integrated into the global digital information economy. As expressed in the AISI plan document, "the global movement to an information age and the world-wide technological innovations … present a clear window" for Africa to adopt appropriate "leapfrog strategies" to accelerate its development goals. These development goals are: "improvement of the quality of life for every African; economic integration of the region; and, improved trade and other linkages with the global community" (UNECA, 1996, 2003, article 6). In other words, it spawned a belief in a new global "digital Jerusalem" (Sardar, 1999), and privileged appropriation of ICTs as the solution to the continent's woes of development and underdevelopment. This is a re-articulation of the modernization paradigm of mass media for development of 1960s and 1970s in the ICT4D policy discourse (Ojo, 2004; Schech, 2002; Shade, 2003).

However, unlike the proponents of the modernization paradigm and mass media for development, the AISI's initiators-cum-authors (UNECA and its team of international experts and donors) did not view African traditional belief systems and cultural norms as barriers to modernity, social-economic development and innovative growth (Kraidy & Murphy, 2008; Ojo, 2004). In other words, the conceptualization of ICT4D has been limited to a socio-economic dimension and did not include "psychological reconditioning of people's daily lives," as conceptualized by modernization theorists (Lerner, 1958; Schramm, 1964) and endorsed by several international development agencies in the 1960s (Singh, 2003, p. 190). Rather, the contemporary ICT4D discourse constructed Africa's social space as a subset of the new global information economy. By this construct, the continent's progress and engagement in international trade transactions and geopolitical relations are dependent on the development of a communication network infrastructure for the new global information economy.

This 'new' construct of the African local space fits well with the descriptions and perspectives of the neo-modernization school of thought, which is also known as neoliberalism. It is a school of thought that became popular in the 1980s, following the massive criticisms of the modernization paradigm in the scholarly literature on international development