



The African telecommunications union: A Pan-African approach to telecommunications reform

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Abstract

This article examines the organisational structure and strategic plans of the African Telecommunications Union (ATU). Although the ATU has been restructured to include private telecommunications entities as associate members, it remains essentially an inter-governmental agency. The article assesses the benefits of a regional approach to telecommunications reform and proposes that regional economic organisations replace the nation states as members of the ATU. Although the goals of the ATU, as articulated in its strategic plans are laudable, clearly defined benchmarks and specific strategies to achieve them are needed to make the organisation more effective.

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1. Introduction

If the wealth and socio-economic health of a region is defined by its ability to participate in the networked economy, Africa is indeed impoverished. In an era of accelerated technological change, Africa's technological dependency and underdevelopment utterly impairs its ability to compete in the global economy. This is evidenced by it comprising less than one percent of global trade (Oshikoya & Hussain, 1999). The African continent grows increasingly marginalized as technological advancements in other areas of the world are accompanied by new patterns of

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dependency in Africa. This situation is further aggravated by the policies of the predatory, neo-colonial state (Castells, 2000). The capital-intensive nature of the sector, coupled with Africa's rent position in terms of technology and its consequent inability to control costs, also places unattainable demands on the continent. Africa is the most indebted region in the world in per capita terms with nearly half of its population subsisting on less than one US dollar per day (African Telecommunications Union (ATU), 2001a). As the only region of the world where poverty levels are projected to increase, Africa can ill-afford to invest in the expansion of telecommunication services. Although the number of telephone lines has increased in absolute terms on the continent, the growth rate needs to be much greater to have a positive impact and outpace population growth, which at around three percent is the highest in the world (Oshikoya & Hussain, 1999).

To remedy this situation, the African Telecommunications Union (ATU) has articulated its mission to effectively promote the rapid development of information communications technologies in Africa in order to achieve universal access and full inter-country connectivity (African Telecommunications Union (ATU), 1999). The ATU is not only cognizant of the vital role the telecommunications sector plays in promoting socio-economic development, but it also recognizes the need to develop telecommunications networks and services in a concerted, planned and integrated manner (African Telecommunications Union (ATU), 1999). The potential for cooperation between states is arguably highest when the issue at stake reinforces an interdependent relationship among the states involved, so collaboration on an issue-specific area, such as telecommunications, may offer better potential for success than macro-level schemes (Akinyemi, 2001). This article thus examines the organisational structure and strategic plans of the ATU, as well as the challenges it faces in achieving its goals and objectives to facilitate telecommunications policy reform and related infrastructure and service developments in its member states. This article assesses the efforts of the ATU for it is important that this continental organisation, in its various endeavours, actually achieves tangible results and is not merely a Pan-African paper tiger.

2. Methodology

Since the research is interdisciplinary in nature with several contemporary, interrelated issues being examined, this work employs the case study, which draws upon multiple data sources to develop converging lines of inquiry or triangulation to investigate a specific phenomenon. A major strength of case study data collection is its use of several different sources of evidence. This study, based on field work conducted in Kenya in the summer of 2002, draws on three primary sources of evidence: documentation, archival records, and elite interviews. Documentation sources include, among other references, policy and legal documents from the ATU. In the process of gathering data, interviews were conducted with officials of the ATU, including the secretary general, as well as others intimately involved in the telecommunications sector. These interviews, while open-ended in nature, followed a specific set of questions concerning telecommunications policy and infrastructure developments in Africa.

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