ICT Policy Development Process in Africa

Hopestone Kayiska Chavula, United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), Ethiopia

Abebe Chekol, United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), Ethiopia

ABSTRACT

This chapter reviews the information and communication technology (ICT) policy development process in Africa and assesses to what extent African countries have taken on board ICT issues in their overall national development policies and plans. It is argued that African countries lag behind in technological issues hence negatively affecting the overall development of the continent due to their inability to recognize the critical role played by ICTs in overall national development issues. The chapter emphasizes the significance of mainstreaming ICT policies and strategies in the overall development process, so that African countries remain competitive on the global market. This is done by taking into consideration the development and implementation of the National Information and Communication Infrastructure (NICI) policy and plans in different African countries initiated by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) after recognizing the little emphasis placed on the significance of ICTs in national development policies by African countries. The chapter assesses also to what extent these NICI policies and plans have impacted on ICT and economic development, and tries to propose the way forward for the continent.

INTRODUCTION

Full and effective participation of a country in the emerging global knowledge economy through information network, is of fundamental significance if that country wants to avoid marginalization from the global information society and if it wants to enhance, essentially, the full participation of its citizens in all spheres of life and be able to address the current development challenges. ICTs can contribute to the integration of developing countries in the world's digital economy, and they can create a conducive environment for the flow of information and knowledge as well as exchange and utilization of goods and services. This makes ICTs become an effective tool for development and poverty reduction, which could only be achieved if they become an integral part of a broader and more comprehensive national development strategy.

ICTs offer tremendous potential to raise standards of living and widen opportunities for individuals, communities, countries and regions. While many in Africa still remain directly untouched by the information revolution, one cannot deny the transformative effect traversing over the continent over the past few years, especially after the liberalization of the ICT sector in many African countries which led to the proliferation of investments in mobile technology. ICTs contribute significantly

towards the delivery of health, education and agricultural services which are of paramount significance to the lives of the rural poor in Africa. Apart from these they also play a pivotal role in the provision of banking services and trade facilitation within and between countries.

The main objective of this chapter is to review ICT policy developments in Africa and to assess to what extent African countries have taken on board technological issues in their overall national development agendas and also to assess their impact on ICT development within the countries' national development programmes[2]. It stresses on the significance of having ICT policies and strategies in the overall development processes in Africa. This is done by taking into consideration the development and implementation of the NICI policy and plans in different African countries initiated by the UNECA as it recognized that there has been little emphasis placed on the significance of ICTs in national development policies of African countries[3]. NICI formulation process provides the framework within which ICTs are mainstreamed into the national planning process in order to facilitate the achievement of national and sectoral development priorities and objectives. It is an ongoing process through the planning, implementation and regular evaluation of programmes and projects developed according to the needs and priorities of each country.

Policies and plans under the NICI framework could be defined as an integrated set of decisions, guidelines, laws, regulations and other mechanisms geared towards directing and shaping the production, acquisition and use of ICTs. The process is based on national development needs and priorities as determined by all the relevant stakeholders. It should be noted that very few studies have touched on ICT policy development issues in developing countries, hence having very scanty literature on the issue.

The chapter is divided into 7 sections. Section 2 gives an overview of the evolution of the economic development policy issues in developing countries, stressing on how the role of ICTs has not been showcased in most of the countries' national development policy plans in Africa and their effects on ICT development, emphasizing the significance of ICT policy to development among African countries. Section 3 gives an overview of the ICT development initiatives in Africa including the NICI Process and Plan and what led to its development and how it relates to the overall national development policy formulation process in the different African countries, as well as its significance, goals and objectives. Section 4 outlines the NICI policy development process framework and Section 5 gives the policy implementation process in selected countries supported by the best practices from the selected African countries. Section 6 presents the different challenges faced and lessons learnt as well as future trends. Finally, Section 7 makes some conclusions and offers some policy recommendations.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND ICT POLICY IN AFRICA

The economic development policy regimes in developing countries, especially in Africa, can broadly be categorized as having gone through three distinct phases of development agendas. First was the import substitution industrialization period which was before the 1980s and after independence of most African countries. During this period most African countries made import substitution strategies the framework for their approaches to industrial development. Their implementation was accompanied by highly restrictive trade policies and a lack of external openness. Complex systems of tariff and non-tariff protection, government state-owned monopolies, exchange control and import licensing were set up in most developing countries to defend local production. During this phase economic growth among African countries was relatively stable as compared to years that followed this phase. However, as was the case with most developing countries in the world, this success due to the implementation of import substitution industrialization strategies was interrupted by the economic crisis in the

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