ICT sector focuses on

growth, jobs and service delivery

At the Presidential Jobs Summit in 1998, the Nedlac constituencies (government, organised labour, organised business and community) agreed to hold sector summits. The Declaration adopted stated that: 'in some sectors or clusters of industry, particularly those with high potential to create or lose jobs, sector strategic processes should be encouraged. These should facilitate the development of industrial strategies for stakeholders, designed to expand output and create or save jobs.'

In 2001 government initiated a sector summit process for the information and communication technologies (ICT) sector. The Nedlac constituencies agreed to engage in such a process covering broadcasting, telecommunications, postal services and IT sub-sectors. The parties agreed to engage at the Nedlac level, and then to open the process to a wide range of stakeholders through a two-day public event. Following the public event, there would then be a post-summit process to implement whatever agreements had been reached.

Discussions at Nedlac began in November 2001. Once the terms of reference for the process had been established, each of the Nedlac constituencies met in their own caucuses in order to work out their positions. The parties then met around the table over four months of intensive discussions, in working groups, plenary, and with a steering committee overseeing the process. The parties managed to hammer out a Nedlac agreement, which was taken to the public event on 3 and 4 June 2002.

Aims of the Summit

The Summit aimed to define how the sector could be encouraged to grow in such a way that will maximise employment creation, investment and growth, and raise living standards on a broader scale.

Another aim of the Summit was to unite the Nedlac stakeholders of government, business, labour and community within the sector around common aims and strategies and to encourage the parties to share information and coordinate their various programmes and actions.

Challenges facing the sector

The parties identified that there were a number of challenges facing the sector. One of the biggest challenges is how to minimise job loss and underemployment and how to increase employment in the sector.

The parties recognised, however, that apart from job creation, there were other important challenges, including meeting RDP goals such as poverty alleviation, regional development and developing human resources. The sector also needs to be opened to sectors that have previously been excluded, namely women, the disabled and youth. Achieving universal service, particularly to under serviced areas, is another major challenge facing the sector.

The parties identified that it would be very important, in developing the sector, that the local industry is promoted, and not merely foreign imports. It would therefore be important to get support within the sector for the Proudly South African Campaign, which encourages the procurement of local goods and services in the interests of economic growth and job creation.

A further challenge was not only with regards to local technology, but also to promote the growth of local cultural industries including South African languages, local broadcasting programmes and local film, music and advertising.

Looking to the future, the parties realise that the sector needs to start with the youth, improving primary, secondary and tertiary education that promotes ICT usage; promoting mathematics and science, design and the skills needed for the development of associated sectors using ICT; promoting ICT infrastructure at schools and promoting specific education and training to assist people who want to enter the sector

Nedlac executive director Philip Dexter speaking to Department of Communication's DG Andile Ngcaba during the Summit.

Agreements reached

The Nedlac parties reached agreements on a number of specific aspects relating to the sector.

Universal service and universal access

The parties agreed that universal service and universal access must be achieved. This would include a telephone in every household/institution; every person/house/institution having a physical address and an address in any other form and every person having multimedia services including broadcasting. Affordability would obviously need to be taken into account.

Human resource development

The parties agreed to develop a Human Resource Development Strategy/Sector Skills Development Plan, in partnership with relevant SETAs.

The social plan

In cases where large job losses are unavoidable, the social plan approach, which was agreed at the 1998 Presidential Jobs Summit, seeks to actively manage retrenchments and lessen their effects on individuals and local economies.

For the ICT sector specifically, the parties agreed that enterprises in the sector should register vacancies and with their permission, former employees, with a central database, so that if they do need to hire staff, then they should hire from the database. If no people on the database meet their needs then they should proactively seek to employ people within the local community.

Procurement

Ensuring that government, parastatals and large private companies procure their ICT requirements locally is critical in terms of developing the sector. The parties agreed that procurement should be used to help achieve the aims of the sector summit process. The parties agreed to establish a database showing actual and projected procurement by parastatals, government and large private companies, where appropriate, indicating whether this was local or foreign. The database would also include a list of producers of ICT goods and services by type of product/service.

Research

Stakeholders agreed to submit a proposal on research and foresighting in the ICT sector to the Fund for Research into Industrial Development, Growth and Equity (FRIDGE) under the Trade and Industry Chamber of Nedlac.

Post Summit process

The Nedlac stakeholders committed themselves to detailed and ongoing engagement in the sector summit process after the Summit itself had taken place. LB