

NIGERIA

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Introduction

This report presents an overview of ongoing and planned information and communications technology (ICT) initiatives in Nigeria. It has been compiled through online research, supplemented by interviews with role players involved in the three key regulatory bodies, the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC), the National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA), and the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC). Discussions were also held with two civil society ICT activists, and the government's national ICT policy development team. The author also attended the national consultative process supported by the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) which was held during the inauguration of the Telecentre Network of Nigeria, 25-27 January 2007.

Country situation

Nigeria has a population of 140 million people, 70% of whom live in underserved and remote areas of the country. It also has the fastest growing ICT market in Africa and its telecom penetration has improved from 400,000 lines in 1996 to 4.7 million in March 2004. Teledensity rose dramatically from 0.4% in 1996 to 3.92% in 2004, exceeding the International Telecommunication Union's (ITU's) minimum recommendation of 1%. Nigeria has the most lucrative telecoms market in Africa, growing at twice the African average (eShekels, 2006).

In spite of this obvious and significant progress, Nigeria's performance on a global scale is still far behind countries like Sweden, which has 100% access. On Africa's Digital Opportunity Index, Nigeria ranked 31st, with an index of 0.15, while South Africa ranked 7th, with an index of 0.38. In the global ICT diffusion ranking, Nigeria ranked 161st, staying in the same lower ranks as Ethiopia at 146th, Senegal at 149th and Mali at 157th (UNCTAD, 2005).

Nigeria's relative performance is also illustrated by comparing the number of community radios in different countries in West Africa. Mali tops the list with 120, while Nigeria has only one. On 8 February 2007, the regulatory body, the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) granted 28 new radio licences, six of which were for educational institutions (Auchi Polytechnic, Edo State; Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State; the National Teachers Institute, Kaduna; Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria; Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Osun State; and Madonna University, Okija). The remaining 22 were for commercial organisations. There was none for community radios (NBC, 2007).

Mobile telephony holds some promise for increasing access for marginalised sectors of the population. There has been exponential growth in mobile subscriptions (there were three million subscribers in 2004 alone) and all Nigerian states now have some form of mobile coverage.²

While rural access is often intermittent, the growth of mobile telephony can be illustrated by the financial performance of one of the major operators, MTN. In 2003 MTN generated USD 437 million in Nigeria, compared to USD 356 million in the rest of Africa combined.

Table 1: Community radios, West Africa

Country	Community radios
Mali	120
Senegal	44
Burkina Faso	27
Niger Republic	24
Republic of Benin	22
Ghana	8
Nigeria	1

Source: Ajjola (2006)

Its African subscribers outside Nigeria total 6.1 million. Nigeria alone accounts for 1.9 million subscribers (Ajjola, 2004).

ICT initiatives

The government's role in creating an enabling environment has faced considerable challenges, despite support by pan-African bodies like the UN Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), with its National Information and Communication Infrastructure (NICI) process,³ and the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), with its eSchools Initiative.

The National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA), which is charged with implementing ICT policy, began to work with UNECA on the country's NICI process in March 2000. While a draft ICT policy has been produced by NITDA, it has yet to be finalised.

A Presidential Task Force on ICT Harmonisation was inaugurated in August 2006. Its job is to examine the duplication of efforts and absence of cross-sectoral convergence in the government's ICT strategies. Various sub-committees have prepared reports, but it appears that their efforts have been overtaken by an unexpected announcement in December 2006 by the Federal Executive Council that several of the 27 government ministries have been merged, reducing the total number to 19.

The merger of the ministries has also impacted negatively on the work of a team of Nigerian experts that has been drafting a strategic plan for 2005 to 2008, with support from an UNECA consultant. It was hoped the plan would streamline the various ICT initiatives in the country.

Despite these challenges, several initiatives can be grouped together as efforts to facilitate affordable access for Nigerians:

Universal Service Provision Fund (USPF) The Nigerian Communications Act 2003 provided for the establishment of a USPF, which finally became operational with the inauguration of its Governing Council in September 2006 (NCC, 2003). All licensed

1 <www.fantsuam.org>.

2 See: <www.ncc.gov.ng>.

3 NICI is the mechanism that facilitates the implementation of African Information Society Initiative (AIS) e-strategies at the national level.

telecoms providers are required to contribute 2.5% of their annual financial turnover to the Fund, and calls for proposals have been issued by Nigeria's telecoms regulator, the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC). The Fund is expected to complement NCC projects such as Wire Nigeria (WiN), which aims to link up all the country's states with fibre optic cable, and the State Accelerated Broadband Initiative (SABI), which involves the provision of wireless broadband services in Nigerian cities.

Broadband infrastructure. One of the major constraints to the growth of rural telephony and internet connectivity has been the absence of broadband backbone infrastructure. This is one of the issues that is already being addressed through the setting up of Galaxy Backbone, a company owned by the Nigerian government. A deployment of 2,000 VSATs (satellite terminals) across Nigeria is planned. This will offer access to remote, underserved locations, and ensure that each of the 774 local governments will have connectivity. However, there are as yet no installations in place. Recently Nigerian Vice President Atiku Abubakar challenged the process by which the funds for Galaxy Backbone are disbursed, and it is now the subject of a senate investigation.

Fibre optic cables have been laid from Lagos to Kano, and Zaria to Jos, by Glo Telecoms, as part of its Nigeria to UK project. The National Space Research and Development Agency (NASRDA)⁴ also plans to launch a second satellite in May 2007. It is being built by Surrey Satellite Technology, and is expected to aid agricultural and economic planning as well as help in disaster management.

Computers for All Nigerians Initiative (CANI) The aim of this initiative is to improve Nigerians' access to computer hardware. It includes a funding mechanism whereby civil servants will be able to purchase computers and pay back the loan at a low rate of interest. Launched in July 2006, CANI is a typical example of a public-private partnership. It is being coordinated by NITDA and involves Microsoft, Zinox and Omatek. Related to the initiative is a Petroleum Technology Development Fund (PTDF) plan to build and equip computer centres in higher education institutions across Nigeria. However, this plan does not include internet access.

Universities Bandwidth Consortium This is a pilot programme in which six of the nation's universities are able to bulk purchase bandwidth for academic purposes. The scheme holds promise for the over 600 higher education facilities in Nigeria.

National Rural Telephony Project (NRTP) The NRTP was expected to provide 500,000 connected lines to 343 local governments in Nigeria within one year. In 2003, the federal government accessed credit from the World Bank's International Development Association (IDA), and a part of the funds obtained was to be set aside to improve national teledensity, as well as to step up telecommunication penetration in rural areas. The government also signed a memorandum of understanding with the Peoples Republic of China, supported by a concessionary loan of USD 200 million for the NRTP. The project was to be executed in two phases by Alcatel-Shanghai and ZTE. However, the project was only flagged off in August 2004. The supervising Ministry of Communications reports that implementation is currently

ongoing in 108 of 218 targeted local government headquarters in Nigeria. The project is expected to combine with the USPF to offer concessionary licensing for the providers.

Internet exchange points (IXPs). The establishment of internet exchange points will help keep local internet traffic within the country, which reduces the need to use international bandwidth and thus significantly lowers costs. An IXP allows different internet service providers (ISPs) to exchange internet traffic between their autonomous networks without cost. Although the Lagos IXP has been completed, it has not been commissioned. Seven more were expected to have gone live by now.

Telecentre Network of Nigeria (TNN) The inaugural meeting of the Network was held at the National Institute for Policy and Strategic Studies, Kuru, on 25-27 January 2007, with the support of the International Development Research Centre's (IDRC's) telecentre.org programme. It is hoped that the Network, by leveraging opportunities presented by the USPF, among other initiatives in Nigeria, will attain the goal of one telecentre in each of the country's 774 local government areas.

Participation

The near absence of the voice of Nigerian civil society in the nation's policy development processes has deprived the nation of much-needed robust consultation and discussions. However, recent events, such as the halt of an attempt to change the Nigerian Constitution and extend the term of office of the president and his governors, have demonstrated that mass mobilisation can have a significant impact. The role of civil society and media organisations across the country in stopping the challenge to the Constitution can be seen as a political watershed in Nigerians' slow and steady adoption of a democratic culture.

Civil society has also had an important impact in two other processes: the Freedom of Information (FOI) Bill and the drive to develop a community radio sector in the country.

The FOI Bill – a cornerstone of democratic government in any country – had been pending before the National Assembly since 1999. It was unanimously passed by the Nigerian Senate on 15 November 2006, largely because of the staying power of the advocacy efforts by a civil society coalition, led by the Media Rights Agenda (MRA).⁵

The MRA, among others, has also been active in the field of community radio. While the National Broadcasting Commission Act No. 38 of 1992⁶ did not make allowance for community radio, this was rectified in 2001 when the MRA presented a draft Media Bill to the National Assembly. Since then, civil society has led the advocacy push for community radio in Nigeria. Key advocacy activities include collaborations with the Association for Progressive Communications (APC)⁷ and the work of the Nigeria Community Radio Forum and the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC).⁸

These collaborations have had results. The government began to give consideration to the issue through the resolution of the National Council on Information in 2005. Working papers on community radio were developed by the NBC.

5 See: <www.mediarightsagenda.org>.

6 As amended by Act No. 55 of 1999. See: <www.nigeria-law.org/National%20Broadcasting%20Commission%20Decree%201992.htm>.

7 <africa.rights.apc.org/catia1c/nigeria>.

8 <www.amarc.org>.

A Community Radio Policy Drafting Committee, which was inaugurated by the government in August 2006, submitted its report to the federal government on 12 December 2006. The government's decision is pending, but indications are that the present administration would like to bequeath the first community radio policy to Nigeria before its exit in 2007.

Conclusions

When considered individually, the inherent ICT4D (ICT for development) credentials of the various initiatives discussed in this paper are clear. However, when viewed holistically, a lack of coherence and a lack of optimisation of resources become evident. For example, some higher education institutions have received up to three VSATs from different government programmes. This is due to the policy vacuum in which these otherwise laudable initiatives are being implemented.

While some of this duplication might be resolved through the recent merger of ministries, ICT policy issues are not likely to receive much attention in the short term, given that the current president is expected to vacate office by July 2007. The exception may be a few areas in which the president wants to leave a legacy, such as in the community radio sector. He would also, no doubt, like to leave his imprint on the development of a national backbone infrastructure.

However, numerous other policy interventions are needed. For example, telephony issues that still require regulatory attention and increased government intervention include tariffs, the local assembly of mobile handsets, maintenance and repair, and signal coverage to underserved communities.

Given Nigeria's recent military dictatorship, it may be understandable that acquiring a culture of consultation and inclusive democratic governance is slow. Civil society continues to be the most vocal advocate for sustainable ICT development and the most active facilitator of an enabling environment. Recent legislative approval of the FOI Bill may convince the next government of the advantages of an inclusive national ICT policy process.

The challenges for civil society in the coming months and years is to fill existing gaps such as the lack of a national focus with respect to the use of open standards, open access and open source software, either in education or public administration. SchoolNet Nigeria was once a champion of these innovations, but these efforts are now largely undertaken by the Nigerian Linux Users Group.

ICTs also need to be popularised and access to knowledge for development needs to be promoted, especially in underserved rural communities, and for young women and men. ■

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