

Africa: A “Have” or a “Have-not” in the Information Society?

Statement by the Forum for Another Mali on Africa and the Information Society

“To keep one’s silence, just as to protest, is a political act. Whoever is conscious of the disasters of globalisation is no longer innocent and forced to take action.”

Arundhati Roy

An Invitation to Cyberspace

The surge of the racist and xenophobic far right in Europe brings home to us—if indeed we needed any reminder—that as Malians or Africans from other parts of the dark continent, we are not always welcome in certain parts of the world. But the bitter fact is that life in our countries of origin is simply unliveable, with the dearth of jobs, income, food, schools, health care and prospects for the future. In this difficult situation full of torment and bitterness, the industrialised nations and our own politicians are now offering us a new destination to explore and populate: cyberspace. But just like the other roads on which we have embarked, the information highways are strewn with traps and pitfalls for our debt-ridden and dependant states, and only freely accessible to those with the right levels of education and income. Yet the financial resources which would open up the information highways to Africa have been confiscated. At the UN conference on Financing for Development, held in Monterrey, Mexico, in March 2002, the very same industrialised nations which are urging us to dive head first into the information society once again gave us to understand that access to the funding which our continent needs so desperately remains subject to the condition of our states subscribing 100% to the dogma of the market. The exorbitant social cost of this *diktat*, which discredits and destabilises the governments of the South, is glossed over with incantations on the fight against poverty. Africa is hungry, Africa is suffering, Africa is afraid of the future. Is the offer of information and communication technologies (ICTs) from African politicians and international institutions an adequate response to alleviate Africa’s adversity? In the context of the preparation of the World Summit on the Information Society in Africa, the Forum for Another Mali (FAM) which emerged from the African Social Forum and the World Social Forum, true to its mission statement of seeking to create transparency, questions the information society and the solutions it offers for Africa. The draft text which was given preference by the Bamako regional conference is a clear endorsement of a globalisation of trade rejected by the FAM. We shall not let ourselves be deceived by a false sense of scientific positivism whose proponents are allergic to any critical examination of the national and international implications of ICTs. We must be both meticulous and perspicacious in our approach, all the more since we have already been granted the right to health for all (in 2000), education for all, drinking water for all—all broken promises and therefore signs of a lack of solidarity, social justice and peace. So will cyberspace be able to fulfil so many unsatisfied human needs which are the source of so much

suffering? Was it necessary for Africa to prepare a world summit before the motor vehicle, radio, the telephone or television, now such familiar features of the African landscape, were let loose on the continent? What is the point of all the hype surrounding ICTs as they are being introduced in Africa in any case, albeit at our own pace and as a function of our own particular requirements?

In a nutshell, no one contests the need for or the performance of ICTs. No one doubts their omnipresent prowess, the wonders they hold. It is the promises they make which must be scrutinised with all due attention and clarity and with particular reference to the present state of our continent and relations with the North. Who are the real beneficiaries of the information society?

Information and Phagocytosis¹

The creation of a feeling of insufficiency, inferiority and insecurity to better justify the offer of the industrialised nations, combined with the economic, legal and institutional reforms which are deemed as indispensable to integrate Africa into the world market—this is the sad undertaking into which our states are dragging us. The gap which divides Africa from the rest of humanity is the sensitive chord struck by the heralds of ICTs; it is a subject which never ceases to be raised in discussion, evaluated and deplored. However the digital divide is only one manifestation of the neo-liberal impasse into which these very same market forces have led us by the substitution of national development plans by structural adjustment programmes.

The information society is a driving force in our forced march towards an ideal of a society designed and promised by the “haves.” This issue was in fact on the agenda of the ministerial conference of the G7 (United States, Japan, Germany, France, United Kingdom, Italy, Canada) in Brussels on 25–27 February 1995.

Asdrad TORRES, observing that the conference was opened by a round table session of 45 heads of enterprise, rightly points out that this was a decisive step towards the “transformation of political leaders into the water-bearers of the multinationals.” He adds that only a month previously three major industrial associations representing the electronics, computer and telecommunications sectors, had announced to the G7 states that “the IT industries unreservedly support all policies in the field of the global information infrastructure, provided that the following principles are complied with: business management is in the hands of the private sector and subject to the laws of competition; interoperability, confidentiality and security of data (exchanged via the networks); real international access, protection of intellectual property rights, international cooperation in R&D and new applications, the dismantling of barriers to trade and investment; project support in the developing countries.”

Commercial Interests or the Rights of Peoples

There is a striking resemblance between the “wish-list” of the G7 business community and the economic, legal and institutional reforms imposed on our states in the name of growth and the fight against poverty. These reforms include, among others:

- dismantling of nationalised enterprises in the telecoms sector (leaving a free rein for the multinationals),
- an increase of public funding for ICT equipment and ICT-related education and training (so that part of the capital raised with so much difficulty by our countries can be ploughed back to the business circles of the North and African sub-contractors),

Aminata D. Traoré

- involvement of the different sectors of the multinationals in these training programmes (so that the entire training process will be under the control of the multinationals),
- creation of a legal and fiscal environment conducive to private investment (to allow smooth and unhindered repatriation of profit),
- dismantling of customs barriers to the import of hard and software (to facilitate user access to ICTs and boost sales and improve suppliers' profit margins),
- restructuring of the ministries responsible for information, telecoms and ICTs (so that all the wheels of the system will move smoothly),
- promotion of e-commerce.

The term "information society" gives an apparently human face to this neo-liberal process planned and imposed by the G7. It has become general usage as opposed to the term "global information infrastructure" which stood at the centre of the campaign of the Clinton administration in favour of a New Economy in which information was to be the highest value-added commodity. The fact that the African Regional Conference attracted more representatives from the Euro-American and Asian business community than the African private sector or the social movement demonstrates what side of the fence the political class has positioned itself. Its allusions to foreign debt and the egoism of the partners of the North do nothing to change the heart of the problem. One cannot advocate opening the door as widely as possible to foreign investors and at the same time entreat a better fate for the workers, the people and the younger generation of Africa. The same ambiguities can be found within NEPAD, the New Partnership for Africa's Development, which follows the same exogenous logic but at the same time calls for endogeneity and popular participation.

The Dakar summit which brought together hundreds of international investors in the context of NEPAD from 15 to 17 April 2002, did not give African private enterprise its rightful place. A press report commented that "the NEPAD organising committee above all wished to hear North American and Asian investors with little or no presence on the continent." The same newspaper added that "at every possible opportunity, Asian corporate bosses compare the continent to the Titanic and refer to NEPAD as "Captain" Abdoulaye Wade's lifeboat"² Our leaders who think big and want immediate action are courting business men who are not only unscrupulous but also and often treat them with disdain.

Africa's politicians should learn to rely on their own strengths. The history of technologies goes hand in hand with the conquest and domination of the world by the West. The International Telecommunications Union (ITU), one of the main driving forces behind the World Summit on the Information Society, is one of the products of this history, which Armand Mattelart has outlined in broad detail. In the mid-19th century (1860), Great Britain raised communication to the rank of an agent of civilisation: the railways, the electric telegraph, submarine cable systems, the new inter-oceanic sea route through the Suez Canal and steam navigation were to make the world a "vast organism," all the parts of which were to show solidarity. "It was around these initial communication networks, the physical expression of this "organic solidarity"—a positivistic concept which differs from the traditional concept of solidarity as a moral obligation—that the first international organisation for the regulation of cross-border flows took shape." The International Telegraph Union, founded in 1865, i.e. 50 years before the League of Nations, by

20 (mostly European) states, was the forerunner to the ITU, established in Madrid in 1932. The Universal Postal Union (UPU) was set up in Bern in 1874. Postal and telegraphic services thus became an important bedrock of the utopian discourse on the “universalising and pacific” virtue of telecommunications technologies.

The rhetoric of African states and the institutions under their supervision on the ability of ICTs to eradicate poverty and to skip various steps of development is nothing new. What is more, this hot air has nothing to do with the real plight of real people in Africa. The globalisation of trade is quite simply the latest step of the internationalisation of information networks and flows, whereby the USA has assumed command in the conquest of the world with the technological weapon which it brandishes to extol the virtues of “humanist” and “pacifist” ideals.

Violence remains a constant feature of North / South relations. This violence manifests itself both symbolically (rape of the imagination), politically (interference in affairs of the state) and militarily (Afghanistan, Palestine and other axes of evil). Blissful optimism and a headlong rush into the information age are above all to the advantage of the powerful states of the North who did not want the New Economic Order or the New World Order in the field of information and communication technologies for which the nations of the southern hemisphere so dearly yearned. These new orders would have given a new face to our planet, heralding a world based on more healthy and equitable foundations and marked by a spirit of greater solidarity—if only the North had been willing and in a position to listen and pay heed at a time when sovereignty and negotiation were not yet devoid of meaning.

But unfortunately it was not to be ... Admittedly, internet cafés can be found here and there in African towns, giving thousands of Africans an opportunity to surf the net and others a chance to survive unemployment. But this is no reason for undue optimism, especially when one considers the difficulties encountered by the cyber-café in their day to day operations. Moreover, they are not in a position to raise awareness among Africans of the real challenges facing us in terms of freedom of thought, production and the distribution of wealth.

ICTs for Political Ethics

Although issues such as raw materials prices, the mechanisms and modalities of the financing for development and the integration of Africa into the world economy at its own pace and as a function of its own interests, questions which were on the agenda in the 1970s and 1980s, are still relevant today, they are constantly side-stepped and avoided. As a consequence the resulting inequalities are becoming more and more blatant.

The UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) 1999 Human Development Report observes that the world has become more prosperous, with per capita income having more than tripled and global GDP posting a tenfold increase from USD 3,000 to USD 30,000 billion over the last 50 years. However it also points to the omnipresence of poverty: according to the Human Poverty Indicator (HPI1), more than one quarter of the 4.5 billion people living in the developing countries are still deprived of essential basics, e.g. a life expectancy of over 40 years, access to knowledge and a minimum provision of private and public services.

There can be no doubt that Africa must demonstrate its presence in the world and make its voice heard by appropriating ICTs. But we must be mindful not to confuse speed with hastiness. We must separate the commercial and financial interests of the



G8 and the multinationals from the economic, social and political rights of Africans. The fact that the first regional conference in preparation of the World Summit on the Information Society took place in Africa is of no significance, other than the fact that the return on investment offered in Africa is more attractive than elsewhere in the world and that our leaders are so desperate for foreign investment that they tend not to attach too many strings. A genuine participation of the citizen in this undertaking would call for a different configuration of the relationship between civil society, state authorities and the private sector. The players and organisations claiming to represent civil society must adopt a more rigorous and perspicacious stance. They must not stand surety for the flooding of the poor quarters and villages of Africa with gadgets when the population is in need of food, schools, health care, water and work.

Are we prepared to fully play the role which suits us best—that of a counterbalance, exercising our right to examine and control the choices, decisions and practices of our politicians, without being led up the garden path or instrumentalised by their development “partners”?

Is it necessary to recall that the rising force of global civil society which reached its climax at Port Alegre I and II was largely thanks to the judicious use of ICTs by global citizens? Using the weapon of the dominant group to drive the opponent into a corner, to stand up to the challenge and to win the battle of dignity and social justice—this is the subversive use we must make of ICTs.

Conclusion: We are of this World

We should never forget that we are of this world and that there are in fact many ways out of this impasse. Our liberation must start in our minds and then spill over into our choices and our practices. To be or not to be a stakeholder in the process of capitalist globalisation—a dilemma weighing heavily on the minds of our politicians—therefore becomes a meaningless debate and a rearguard action. Our credo must be to live in dignity by being able to communicate among ourselves and with others and by mobilising energies and talents which are just as worthy of recognition as ICTs. Technical co-operation should be based on mutual recognition and respect and above all co-responsibility.

The power and the potential to steer the reshaping of the continent in the right direction lies in the seeds of culture. The relationship between ICTs and culture is therefore not merely limited to the adoption and transfer of technologies nor the visibility which they can guarantee to creative talent—despite the importance of these dimensions. Confidence in ourselves and in our resources must find its expression and become visible in our type of investment, our way of encouraging and supporting African inventors and economic players and our way of promoting their works and their products which we have first of all to start consuming ourselves. As soon as we begin to adopt this mind-set, cultivating in ourselves the feeling that we have nothing to catch up with and that we should be ourselves, we will cease to be regarded by others as a burden and will find solutions to our own plight. It is from this perspective that the Forum for Another Mali believes that another world is possible, with another Africa and another Mali.

Translated from the French by Stephen Conn

- 1 Phagocytosis is the process by which foreign particles invading the body are engulfed and broken down by animal cells (phagocytes).
- 2 Abdoulaye Wade: Senegalese President since 2000