

## I make phone calls, therefore I am

At the onset of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, our world is globalized and yet fragmented. The new information and communication technologies (NICTs) which largely contributed to the shrinking of distances and the elimination of geographical borders, supposedly draw cultures and people closer together, and promote a new world, one that would be better and more open because it would be more just and more tolerant. Such is the view of the American Vice-President Al Gore, for whom the information highways will incur savings on health care and education costs and will guarantee improved workplace productivity.

For several proponents of the NICTs, Africa has everything to gain from this new chapter in the scientific and technological adventure. But in fact the discourse on the NICTs reinforces the existing dominant economic system and amplifies the cultural alienation of Africans. For example, has the advent of the cellular phone truly contributed to the creation and distribution of wealth, not to mention increased social and economic justice, or freedom in Mali? "The African cellular phone market that has shown the most rapid increase in the last five years when compared with other regions of the world," remarks José Do-Nascimento,<sup>1</sup> citing the ITU (*Indicateurs des Télécommunications Africaines. Editions 2004 / African Telecommunications Indicators. 2004 Edition*). The number of cellular subscribers has shown an increase of more than 1000 per cent between 1998 and 2003.

Promoters have adapted their product to the needs and the means of populations that let themselves be tempted while they otherwise cannot afford to educate their children, or even feed themselves on a daily basis. All too often, African countries were forced to open the telecommunications market to the competition and to occasionally sell the businesses at cut-rate under pressure from the World Bank, IMF, WTO, and the ITU.

The African cellular telecommunications sector reached, in 2002, more than "ten billion US Dollars."<sup>2</sup> This windfall benefited those States "who received more than four billion USD in the form of dues and licensing fees [...] and components manufacturers that earned more than five billion USD thanks to the contracts drafted in Africa since 2000."<sup>3</sup>

No one denies the usefulness of NICTs, particularly of mobile telephony, in an African environment characterized by considerable communication difficulties and which is generally under-equipped. It is clearly easier and less expensive to place a phone call than to make a visit thereby increasing urban traffic and stress.

"But numerous are those destitute users who are already demystifying it. 'Lend me your phone so that I can send my sms' is a request heard more and more often from telephone owners in educated circles who cannot purchase their recharging cards regularly. For the illiterates, for whom there can be no sms, the request is 'Lend me a unit!'"<sup>4</sup>

Undoubtedly, Africa must signal and assert its presence in the world by appropriating NICTs. But let us attempt to dissociate the commercial and financial interests of multinationals from the economic, social, and political rights of Africans. We ought to rethink the function of the NICTs in light of our own challenges.

True citizen participation in this venture demands a different configuration of the civil and the social, of public power and the private sector, incurring the following challenges:

- Free access to information for Africans, on the true state of their continent and the stakes of economic openness;
- The construction of an informed public opinion along with independent thinking that allows us to provide the content of the NICTs and
- Effective citizen participation through their NICTs in the analysis of their situation, in the decision making process relative to the NICTs.

“Our credo should be: live with dignity while knowing how to communicate with each other, as we mobilize the energies and the talents that deserve as much recognition as the NICTs ... Viewed from this perspective, the relationship between NICTs and culture does not limit itself to the borrowing and the transfer of technologies, or to the visibility that they can guarantee their talented creators, even if these stakes are substantial. Our self confidence and our trust in our resources must inform the nature of our investments, the way in which we provide incentives and give priority to African economic creators and operators alike, and the way in which we promote their accomplishments and products, which we ought to be the first to consume.”<sup>5</sup>

1 José Do-Nascimento, *Société numérique et développement en Afrique. Usages et politiques publiques / Numerical Society and Development in Africa. Uses and Public Policy*, in collaboration with members of the CSDPTT. <http://www.csdptt.org/article349.html>

2 Ibid

3 Ibid

4 Aminata Traoré, *Accès, être et paraître. La connectivité : Vrais et faux défis en Afrique* (forthcoming)

5 Ibid