Digital Solidarity, Key to Africa's Development — Interview with Mr Abdoulaye Wade, President of Senegal

His Excellency Mr Abdoulaye Wade, President of the Republic of Senegal. (IDRC Photo: Jérôme Gérard)

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Mame Less Camara

In Dakar, on December 2, 2003, His Excellency Mr Abdoulaye Wade, President of the Republic of Senegal, accorded Senegalese journalist Mame Less Camara an exclusive interview on behalf of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC). Mr Wade is coordinator of the information and communication technologies (ICTs) aspect of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). The interview took place on the eve of the United Nations World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), held December 9 to 12. President Wade considers the new technologies one of NEPAD's eight priority sectors. In fact, he says, the new technologies "have shown the way for giving concrete application to NEPAD in partnership with developed countries."

Mr President, as coordinator of the ICTs aspect of NEPAD, can you tell us what position Africa will take at WSIS?

I would simply point out that NEPAD, which is Africa's vision for its future, is also a long-term plan for Africa's development in partnership with developed countries. I mention this because the very essence of NEPAD lies in the new ICTs, with the advent of the information society. These new technologies are one of NEPAD's eight priority sectors, and they are therefore part of a whole, an integral element in an overall mechanism.

Therefore, when we speak of the digital divide, this is a gap that separates us from developed countries. I say that because we have to address this in all fields — infrastructure, health, energy, and so on — in order to be able to say that the proponents of the new technologies have shown the way for giving concrete application to NEPAD in partnership with developed countries.

So what is Africa's position? We want to see principles and mechanisms for closing the digital divide. It is not a question of doing this gradually or in dribs and drabs — we simply have to close that gap.

So how does Africa propose to overcome the digital divide?

In terms of principle, we have said that this issue needs to be seen in the context of digital solidarity. In terms of mechanisms, we are proposing a fund. Of course the fund is not the only mechanism, and there could be others. But we in Africa have chosen the digital solidarity fund.

At the outset, our ambition was to secure a moral commitment from the international community in the form of a charter, because the problem is so important. There would be nothing coercive about this charter. We were thinking of a declaration, in the form of a moral commitment in this particular field, reaffirming the unity of humanity, which is now in effect split by the digital divide.

I believe our partners have not understood us very clearly on this. In Geneva, I will have the opportunity to return to this question. That strikes me as essential. It's like a constitution, where you need a preamble to set out the philosophy that will inspire the citizens. This is also our approach in thinking about the charter. Digital solidarity as affirmation: people declaring their solidarity in the digital field in order to close the gap.

And how will these mechanisms work?

We have to translate this intention through the digital solidarity fund. That is the link. The digital solidarity fund has to be organized, it has to have a management, headquarters, and mechanisms.

To handle implementation, a world sponsorship committee is planned. In Geneva our work must not stop at a declaration. We need to put permanent structures in place. If the fund is created, it will have its headquarters in Geneva, in absolute transparency. This international committee is now being constituted. It will certainly include one country from Africa, one from Asia, one from Europe, the United States, and Brazil.

We also have to explain how it will be financed.

If we take the example of Canada, here is a country that is helping with its own means, with IDRC resources, to close the digital divide. Other countries are doing so at their own pace. How can we reconcile the digital solidarity that we are proposing with bilateral cooperation? As I see it, we must not confuse the two issues. Creating the digital solidarity fund does not affect bilateral cooperation at all. Digital solidarity is something new that will be added to existing cooperation mechanisms.

It is here that we disagree with Europe, which wants Africa to use existing cooperation mechanisms, improving them if necessary. But as I have said about NEPAD, we do not accept having bilateral cooperation funds recycled through NEPAD. NEPAD is something new, and so we are not asking them to recycle existing cooperation through the digital solidarity fund or in some other way. If that was the case, we would not go to Geneva.

The information society in Africa presupposes some conditions such as people's ownership of new technologies. This poses problems of sensitization and training. What importance do you assign to this aspect?

Thanks to international cooperation, computers are now becoming available in schools, for illiterate people, and the disabled and so on. This is to say that the problem is a lack of equipment. It is very reassuring for Africa, indeed, to realize that our backwardness is not one of mental astuteness or intellectual capacity. It is simply a question of means and techniques.

If Africa had to develop by following the path of Europe, the United States, or Canada, that would take at least a century and a half. But we are in a hurry, and we are going to copy Canada and the United States and move directly into the information society. Instead of going through the stages of agricultural development, processing, and the industrialization of the 19th century, we are jumping with both feet into the digital world. And then, through a process of feedback, we will work on the other issues.

We are going to use ICTs to combat poverty. An example of the importance of information technologies is that, today, you can provide information from the Web to women, who then see how others do things — process vegetables, care for children, combat diseases, etc. Canadian cooperation is setting an example — it is increasing the capacity of small farmers and rural women to understand their situation better by making comparisons. So ICTs have a role in overcoming poverty.

There is also a challenge when it comes to content, such as preserving local know-how and communicating knowledge.

We are in a hurry, and so we have to do both. We must import and at the same time we must create the conditions for import substitution. We can do that, but it needs two things: on one hand, intelligence, I mean the ability to use this information; and on the other hand, the means and equipment.

We have the human resources: what we don't have is the equipment. That poses a complex and difficult problem, but it is also a very exciting problem because the leading edge of scientific research is certainly ICTs. Of all the sciences, the most complicated one, and we might say the one that drives the world, is ICTs. If we succeed in closing the digital divide, we can do the same in all other sectors.

Access to information technologies is still very uneven for people in Africa. What do you intend to do to reduce disparities within African societies?

I made the point some years ago when we were talking about these things for the first time, that the digital divide is not between certain Senegalese and the developed countries, but that it exists globally between us (Africa) and developed countries and also within our own countries between Dakar, for example, and Darou Mousty and Matam.[1]

Looking at the percentage of the population that has access to or can use the new ICTs, all you need is a graph, shading in the countries that have so many telephones per person, so many Web sites and such, to see that we are at the bottom of the scale. Meanwhile very few countries are at the top, and the potential for equipment and communication is concentrated there. We have said, since we were delegated to defend Africa's interest, that we can identify an upper margin and a lower margin that is reasonably accessible, and these margins will delineate the information society.

We have defined a situation using quantitative criteria, and now we — those of us at the lower end of the scale — know what to do to join the information society. That brings us back to computer equipment, of course, but also to training so that people can use these tools to enter the information society.

Africa already has severe disparities between men and women. How can the digital divide be prevented from perpetuating and worsening this gender gap?

You are already familiar with the campaign I am waging for the advancement of women and for equality of opportunity, to bolster women who have lagged behind men because of colonial policies. Access to ICTs merely mirrors the gap between women and men. The gender problem exists here like everywhere else. My philosophy is to try to help women reach the top as quickly as possible, and that depends on us alone.

Women can contribute more to decision-making if they are at the top, where they can influence the progress of other women and of society. The fate of women must not be left up to men — that would be a tremendous mistake. That would be unilateral, and I can tell you that things will go much better if we leave it to women to close the gap between men and themselves.

Africans often cast their relationship to technology in terms of having it take root and being open to it. How can they appropriate the new information technologies while maintaining their identity as Africans?

Cultural identity doesn't mean that "I'm not going to take an airplane because my ancestors didn't invent it." It is clear that when people use these technologies, they express themselves and they are creative in accordance with their own culture. Teach children to draw using a computer. The child from Senegal will not draw the same way as one from Norway. It's a means of cultural expression that is available to everyone. Moreover, thanks to these new technologies, our culture is better known around the world.

Canada has already taken some initiatives to use the new technologies for sustainable development, for improving connectivity and so on. How can these Canadian initiatives help to meet the NEPAD objectives in the field of new information technologies? Are they moving towards the notion of digital solidarity?

On the principle itself, I must say that Canada's policy in Senegal and some other African countries is an application of digital solidarity. It is through solidarity between the Canadian people and the Senegalese people, between the Canadian government and the Senegalese government, that Canada is helping us to benefit from digital possibilities and potential in nearly all fields of economic and social life.

You may ask me why am I so intent on promoting digital solidarity. It's because Canada is the only country that is doing that here in Senegal, in terms of cooperation that is as broad and as deep and that embraces all fields. I'm not saying that others don't do the same thing. Whether it's the World Bank, France, or other countries, others are doing so in a certain number of sectors. But to my knowledge, Canada is the country that is doing it most widely and in most depth. And that's what solidarity is all about.

Why do you think Canada would be providing this cooperation if it were not based on the principle of solidarity? It would be good to generalize this approach. But as soon as you generalize something, you have to organize it. To be most effective, it has to be done by affirming this

solidarity so that all developed countries that have capacities in the ICT field enable us to justly benefit from them, help us put this potential to work for our development.

With Canadian cooperation, we are in the process of closing the digital divide. When you connect Senegalese school children to young Canadians, you are taking that step — you are closing that gap.

In effect, we have had digital solidarity with Canada, but the expression did not exist. It's like Molière's Mr Jourdain, who was speaking prose without knowing it.

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(1) Darou Mousty and Matam are two areas of Senegal that are among the most remote from the capital city of Dakar.