Speaking Notes
for
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"Adapting public management to a knowledge-based economy:
the case for ICTs in Africa."

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Introduction

Good morning.

It's a great pleasure for me to be here for the final day of La Conférence de Montréal and the Africa Direct program. As you know, the theme of this morning's session is "adapting public management to a knowledge-based economy." This is a very big subject so I'd like to focus on IDRC's support for information and communication technologies, both in terms of policy and applications in the field.

First, though, let me give you some background about the International Development Research Centre. For the past 30 years, IDRC has worked to connect people, institutions and ideas. Ultimately, we want to ensure that the results of the research we support and the knowledge that the research generates are shared equally among all our partners, North and South.

In all of our work, we strive to make research relevant to both policy makers and the people who will ultimately benefit from the real-life applications. That means making the connections between our experience in the field and the policy framework that supports this work. We've found that we have to pay attention to both sides of the spectrum at the same time, ensuring continuous feedback between policy and applications, and vice versa.

IDRC has invested significantly in research, capacity building, and information and communication throughout the developing world. In fact, the Centre was among the pioneers in the adaptation and use of information communication technologies in Africa. Currently, we have three programs that focus specifically on ICTs and development: PAN, Bellanet and Acacia.

PAN, Bellanet and Acacia

Let me say a few words about PAN and Bellanet before moving on to Acacia, which is our program in sub-Saharan Africa.

The PAN initiative gives researchers more efficient access to the vast amounts of information on the Internet. It promotes collaborative research and strengthens the capacity of organizations in the South to make better use of ICTs. Originally, PAN was focused in Asia, but it has now expanded to Latin America and the Caribbean.

Bellanet also uses ICTS to increase collaboration, but it focuses on strengthening relationships between donors and partners in the South. Through use of Web sites, databases and e-mail discussion lists, Bellanet provides advice and direct assistance on more effective use of ICTs. In southern Africa, for example, Bellanet is helping the humanitarian mine action community use ICTs to share information and coordinate their activities.

For the rest of my time, I'd like to focus on Acacia, as well as on some of the related policy and applications issues around ICTs in Africa.

The Acacia Initiative enables sub-Saharan African communities to apply ICTs to their own social and economic development. It's an integrated program of research, development and demonstration projects. It addresses issues of applications, technology and infrastructure, as well as policy and governance.

Acacia, which was launched in 1997, is Canada's major contribution to the goals of the African Information Society Initiative. As most of you will know, AISI is a framework to build Africa's information and communication infrastructures. Over the past three years, Acacia has focused on four countries: Mozambique, South Africa, Senegal and Uganda. It has also helped set up pilot telecentres in Mali, Benin and Tanzania.

ICTs in Africa

Now let me state the obvious. As we've been hearing from the Africa Direct participants, it's clear now that ICTs are a powerful tool for development in Africa. There's also no question that it's crucial to provide access to the majority of Africans who live in rural areas. We also know the model for serving rural Africans will be a community access point.

The question is: How do we do it?

The answer is: We don't know—yet.

That being said, IDRC made several decisions early in the development of Acacia that has put us on the right track.

First, instead of jumping in feet-first, we decided to use our expertise in research to lay the groundwork. We spent the first year, for example, simply consulting with the four countries ... defining the way forward .... putting in steering committees ... getting buy-ins from the government and communities ... and building best practices.

Second, we felt it was important for an African to manage Acacia from Africa. After a lengthy executive search, we were fortunate enough to hire Gaston Zongo who runs Acacia from Dakar. Mr. Zongo has been instrumental in raising the profile of Acacia throughout the countries in which we work.

Finally, we were not transfixed by the technology. We weren't about to drop computers into isolated villages without any kind of plan for sustainability. We knew we needed a comprehensive approach that worked both on policy issues and applications at the same time.

Senegal

I want to look now at this ever-changing dynamic between policy and applications.

In all four countries—Mozambique, Senegal, South Africa and Uganda—Acacia has helped governments think out telecommunications policy frameworks and regulations. Let me focus on Acacia's work in Senegal and South Africa, and look first at the policy side.

In Senegal, IDRC provided institutional support to the new Telecommunications Regulations Agency. This support enabled the Agency to develop the human and technical capacity to both develop and implement ICT policies. However, through this process, it became clear that ICT policies inevitably spill over into other sectors—everything from education and government service policy to health and agriculture.

Here are two examples:

The Tambacounda region of Senegal is rich with pastoral, aquacultural, forestry and mining potential, but the region is very isolated from markets. Acacia is working with several partners to see how ICTs can improve the management of soils, as well as to support economic, social and education activities. Through a participatory research process, the findings can be instantly validated and fine tuned. Ultimately, the research will generate training programs and tools for use in other parts of the country.

IDRC also has an ICT project in Senegal to support decentralization. It's called SAFEFOD, which stands for Société Africaine, d'Éducation et de Formation pour le Développement. Under the framework of Acacia, SAFEFOD has trained civil servants and elected officials in ICTs to help them handle their new responsibilities more efficiently. In fact, ICTs are at the very core of the decentralization policy that involves a partnership between State, local communities and civil society.

South Africa

Let me turn now to South Africa, where IDRC worked with the post-apartheid government on policy reform, institutional restructuring and capacity building. We funded and managed five processes to review policies in the areas of telecommunications, environment, small enterprise, agriculture, and science and technology. Each process involved multi-stakeholders and led to Green and White papers, and ultimately, to new legislation.

Drawing on our experience with Schoolnet Canada, Acacia has helped develop Schoolnet South Africa. This is a nation-wide program to develop the needed infrastructure, human resources and curriculum to introduce ICTs into South African schools.

So far SchoolNet activities have included training for teachers and students, and opportunities to interact and collaborate with students in other schools, and even in other countries. Some 42 percent of our budget for supporting ICTs in Africa's education systems is spent on school networking.

Of course, it's difficult to build capacity in schools without solid baseline data on information technology and its use. For that reason, we're supporting a comprehensive audit of ICTs, resources, capacities and approaches in all South African schools. The audit will be undertaken by the Education Policy Unit of the University of the Western Cape.

In addition to its support for policy, IDRC is helping to establish telecentres in remote areas that can provide telephone and Internet access to poor communities. This is seen as one of the most practical ways to use ICTs. However, it raises all kinds of questions about the relationship between policy and applications.

On one level, ICTs have very clear benefits for rural Africans who want to sell their goods in the city. One story we've heard through our program involves village women in Uganda. In the past, these women could spend four hours on a crowded bus with their bag of goods and a baby on their back. They were never sure if they would find an international conference where they could sell their wares to foreigners. Now, through ICTs, they know exactly when to make the journey to Kampala.

However, for more complex applications such as paramedical support and telemedicine, providing the equipment is only half the battle. How do you train people to trust the computer to give you a diagnosis? How do you train doctors in teaching hospitals to ask the right questions when they're looking at someone on a scratchy TV monitor 200 miles up-country? Acacia is trying to find answers by drawing on the experience of the province of Newfoundland, which has many isolated communities.

And then there's e-commerce, which is being heralded as the savior for so many small communities, in Canada as well as elsewhere. It sounds easy enough: African women can sell their beadwork and handicrafts on the Web. But no one's got a bank account. No one has a credit card. How are they going to collect a payment? And how are they going to buy something they desperately need?

These questions about applications lead us back, inevitably, to policy.

Before we sell the idea of e-commerce, we need to integrate ICT policy into the financial and banking systems.

And before we do anything, we need to look at how our decisions will affect both men and

women.

IDRC recently published a book called "Gender and the Information Revolution in Africa." From our research, it's clear that men's and women's attitudes, needs and perspectives on ICTs differ greatly. Any policy framework must take these differences into account.

Many of these differences are deeply-rooted. The IDRC book on gender and ICTs noted that, traditionally, men have greater access to technology; they are more likely to have income to buy telephones or telephone services; and they are more likely to have slightly higher levels of education, which predisposes them to want to experiment with new technologies.

However, it's not sufficient to provide women with computers and Internet connections. Our research suggests that, even when provided with the opportunity, women may show less interest in ICTs. It's not because women are afraid of technology. Rather, it's because they don't have the time or energy to experiment with the Internet.

There is also evidence that many women are alienated by computer culture, which encourages a top-down, linear way of thinking. Providing information about issues such as production, processing, marketing, decision-making, and so on, is not enough. Women need the tools and the space to adapt material for their own needs.

We've learned this through experience. IDRC has a project in Nairobi with the International Center for Agroforestry Research. The idea is to send information on soil conservation and good farming practices by e-mail to a community centre in Kabale, Uganda. When the project is fully functional, they will download the information and share it with women's groups. But first they will have to adapt the technical and scientific information. In fact, local women's groups have already to started to humanize the information by creating stories and performing dramas to convey the knowledge.

The lesson for us is that it's not enough to introduce technology into a community. It's not enough to set up an infrastructure to provide information. We have to look at how the technology and the information it conveys will be used, by both men and women. And we have to channel all of these lessons learned and best practices in the field back into policy so we don't reinvent the wheel.

In its own small way, the Acacia Initiative is trying to make the link between applications and policy. For the past few years, Acacia has been working with AGRA, Nortel Networks and the International Telecommunications Union to develop two Centres of Excellence. One Centre is located in Dakar, the other in Nairobi.

Through these Centres, we can integrate best practices into the curriculum and case studies. This

will enrich the training of policy makers and corporate managers, allowing them to appreciate what's really happening in the field. In this way, our research gets reinforced and turned into policy, and then back into repeatable practice.

Before closing, I would like to outline what I think are some of the major challenges facing the expansion of information and communications technologies in Africa. They touch on four policy areas.

First, telecommunications policy itself. The evidence shows that a competitive telecommunications policy provides more accessible and more affordable service. There are several aspects to the process which each require legislation within a clear policy framework. These areas include the separation of telecommunications from postal services; privatization of telecommunications, which will bring in capital and expertise to support modernization; competition through the licensing of additional operators; and an independent regulatory agency that can ensure universal access.

The second challenge relates to government services policy. Within a policy of universal access, governments must ensure their departments and agencies are committed to providing rural and marginalized communities with access to information and services. This kind of commitment will help enhance the sustainability of investments in rural areas.

Third, education policy. To put it simply, Ministries of education must ensure that students are learning about ICTs alongside their ABCs. Otherwise, Africa stands to get left behind.

And lastly, entrepreneurship policy. Our research shows that today's technology can unleash an incredible amount of resourcefulness in rural and marginalized communities. We've seen it with the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh, and we are now seeing it in Africa. New jobs, new services—new opportunities—are springing up within our telecentre communities. Everything from delivering messages to re-selling phone cards to Web site design.

Government must support the emergence of new small and medium sized enterprises. It must simplify registration and reporting processes. It must assess taxes and levies in proportion to the size of the business. And it must encourage, or even mandate, financial institutions to provide access to micro capital for these new entrepreneurs.

I think it's clear to all of us that we are quickly understanding best practice. It is up to governments now to integrate these practices into their policy frameworks. Only in this way can Africa join the knowledge economy.

Ladies and gentlemen, in my presentation this morning I've given you a brief description of IDRC's work through the Acacia Initiative. Like everyone else, we are still feeling our way along

the Information Highway. But from our experience, one thing is certain: we must look at ICTs from the perspective of both policy and applications. I believe it's only by working from both sides of the spectrum at once that we can make ICTs a truly useful tool for sustainable development in Africa.

Thank you. I wish you all the best for your last day of the conference.