

Africa after the Africa Commission: What Priorities for the German G8?



Working Group Report

e-Africa and m-Africa: How can ICTs deliver?

Richard Heeks

Richard started by outlining a history of the use of information and communications technologies (ICTs) for development in Africa:

- 1960s-1990s, where activity was concentrated on the use of IT for data processing in the public sector;
- Late 1990s-Early 2000s: A period of great hype around the possibilities for the internet to deliver development;
- Early-Mid 2000s: Accompanying the internet dot.com crash, there was widespread disappointment and withdrawal from e-agendas for development.

He characterised the current phase as one of hopeful realism and new priorities. There is an understanding that ICTs are not going to save the world but a belief that they will be a fundamental force for change in private public and civil spheres of African development. He went on to outline some of these priorities.

First, he noted the importance of getting ICTs back on the donor agenda, especially as leaders in Africa are increasingly interested in ICTs and there was increasing usage of the internet in Africa (he outlined various statistics on this point).

Next, Richard argued for a change in donor approaches to ICT. He said that there was a need to move beyond a focus on delivering rural telecentres, which have not been particularly successful. A new priority should be to link ICTs to urbanisation in Africa, through what he termed an "African Digital Cities Initiative".

Richard suggested some further links that could be made between ICTs and development by donors, including:

- Anti-corruption activities, with e-procurement systems, greater information from government to citizens, and more transparency;
- Growth and exports through e-commerce. He pointed out that a recent World Bank report has found that higher levels of internet access are linked to increasing levels of exports in a country and also noted a concern that non-intervention on e-commerce in Africa might allow Northern firms to increase penetration and market share in Africa.

Richard went on to outline his recommendation for an "African Digital Enterprise Initiative." He sees this Initiative as less about consumption of ICTs, which has been central to most initiatives in the area so far but has had limited developmental impact. Instead, he saw the Initiative as focusing on ICT production, by supporting the large number of ICT enterprises being created in Africa that are not getting much support from traditional investment sources. This could be through:

- Outsourcing IT goods and services, both in a traditional sense and through a “social outsourcing” model, where IT services are outsourced to social enterprises, empowering people and improving livelihoods; and/or
- An IT Fair Trade system.

Richard summed up his priorities for the G8 in two areas, the support of entrepreneur-led (more than scientist-led) innovation mechanisms and developing an enterprise focus for Africa’s ICT agenda.

Abi Jagun

Abi started by outlining the major growth in the use of mobile phones in Africa, a continent where more people have access to mobile than wired telephony. She said that this growth, the highest in the world, does not appear to have had major developmental impacts and this offers some priorities for the G8:

- Supporting the creation of “Open Digital Economies” to facilitate investment in, and growth of, Africa’s digital economies. She argued that they should support and extend ongoing reforms in Africa; work to deepen the regulatory capacity of governments and increase their commitment to the development and application of an African digital infrastructure. This infrastructure would include development of software, content, and transmission capabilities that are accessible to all (in the right languages, cheap and easy to deploy).
- Next, she argued for the creation of a global collaborative “Mobile Opportunities TaskForce” to harness the development potential of mobile devices. This would consolidate and map the impact mobiles are having on Africa and the future they are helping to create. Africa needs its own experiences understood, not just the application of experiences from other places – for example, understanding and taking advantage of the shared model of accessing technologies. Outputs from this task force would identify initiatives and support enabling environments for innovation.

In conclusion, she stated that the G8 should be sustaining growth in mobiles, by applying a broader approach to infrastructure, supporting innovation and understanding the sector as it stands.

Discussion

Topics raised as part of the discussion included:

- The importance of young people in pushing the adoption of ICTs forward. People felt that the mismatch between Northern and Southern attitudes to the opportunities offered by ICT is key here, as it is often the young who are most open to the opportunities but find that there are no resources on offer to support them in taking these up.
- The argument for ICT’s roles in reaching the Millennium Development Goals is not made as strongly as it could be. Though use of new technologies is one of the MDGs, ICTs can fit into other MDGs – for example the goal of education for all. This, however, would require a broader conceptualisation of ICTs than exists at present.
- The importance of ensuring donor strategies on ICTs are less ‘top-down’ and more ‘bottom up’ so that the development potential of new technologies, such as mobiles, can be realised.
- Potential strategies that could benefit Africa in developing a manufacturing base for ICTs. The idea of Northern companies ‘mentoring’ African companies was raised, as was the possibilities for developing micro-enterprise through initiatives such as technology zones clustering enterprises.
- It was noted that the growth in mobile phones occurred without G8 involvement and that much of the future development of ICTs in Africa depends on users and businesses there, not Northern governments. It was, however, countered that

taking advantage of the development potential of ICTs through social or other initiatives, would require NGO/donor involvement.

- An additional priority for the G8 suggested by one participant was to “increase the size of the pipes” going into Africa – in other words, increasing broadband capacity, so that it can join the internet community, as there is not much hope of this for a continent still dominated by dial-up connections.