

High Level Policy INET Africa

Dakar, Sénégal

Broad and Equitable Access to the Internet

Report of high-level policy workshop held at Le Méridien hotel, Dakar, Sénégal, 16 October 2008, conducted by the Internet Society in collaboration with ISOC's Sénégal Chapter, and Agence de Régulation des Télécommunications et des Postes (ARTP) of Sénégal.

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Introduction

On 16 October 2008, the Internet Society (ISOC), in close collaboration with ISOC's Sénégal Chapter (ISOC-Sénégal), and Agence de Régulation des Télécommunications et des Postes (ARTP) of Sénégal, held a high-level Internet development workshop entitled "Broad and Equitable Access to the Internet".

The event was part of ISOC's INET programme and followed a three-day regional meeting dedicated to Internet governance and development sponsored by AfriNIC, ISOC, ICANN, and ARTP.

The objectives of the workshop were twofold:

- To address the regulatory challenges that African policy makers face in a new era of Internet and telecommunication infrastructure development and investment, particularly in relation to current African developments in wireless access, submarine cable deployment, and universal service requirements.
- To bring together and catalyse the people and organisations who can leverage both the high level political commitments and technical expertise to address these issues.

This event was primarily aimed at senior managers from regulatory bodies, policy makers, and government representatives, along with leading figures from civil society and the technical community in Africa.

The meeting was very successful in terms of the size and nature of the audience and the level of participation. Questions of Internet access, infrastructure, and regulation attracted influential opinion leaders, who comprised a sizable proportion of the approximately 130 total attendees.

Throughout the workshop, there was wide recognition among the participants of the importance of a multistakeholder approach to Internet development, and expressions of commitment to use the Internet model to leverage the political decisions needed to drive forward Internet development across the African region.

ISOC events such as the "Broad and Equitable Access to the Internet" are intended to trigger public policy discussions on the issues that African heads of states, ministers, regulators, and other policy makers have identified as important for Internet development. These discussions will develop the dialogue from other forums and, through ongoing regional dialogue, will help progress the preparations for the African Heads of States meeting planned to be held in Addis Ababa in 2010.

Workshop proceedings

Representatives of the three organisations responsible for the workshop opened the proceedings.

Daniel G. Seck, Executive Director of ARTP, opened proceeding and welcomed the participants to Senegal. He was followed by Alex Corenthin of ISOC-Sénégal,

who provided an overview of the activities of the Chapter and urged the participants to discuss pertinent policy and regulatory issues facing the continent.

Frédéric Donck, ISOC's Director of Public Policy, also welcomed the participants and explained the objectives of the event. In particular, he stressed that the challenges currently facing Africa require the support and cooperation of policy makers and regulators at the highest level. He added that the Internet Society is exploring and expanding opportunities to increase its work with policy makers, regulators, and civil society organisations through capacity building activities and improved interaction on policy and regulatory issues. This "Broad and Equitable Access to the Internet" workshop, he explained, is an expression of those efforts and is intended to help launch new initiatives in the developing African Internet and greater levels of cooperation and coordination with all key stakeholders in the African region.

The workshop agenda was divided along four broad categories:

- Setting the scene on main issues relevant to broad and equitable access to the Internet in Africa, including current infrastructure projects, development programmes, and policy and regulatory frameworks.
- Exploring policy and regulatory challenges surrounding submarine cable deployments.
- Examining the role of wireless technologies in spurring access in underserved areas.
- Addressing the promotion of universal access, with focus on technologies, tools, policy and regulation, and shared experiences.

Session 1 – Broad and equitable access in Africa: Setting the scene of the Internet infrastructure

Lishan Adam, a Researcher of Research ICT Africa Network highlighted some of the impressive progress now being made by African nations in building basic communications infrastructure. However, he expressed disappointment in the still very limited number of Internet users, particularly those using broadband services. Adam argued that, from a regulatory point of view, very few countries have embraced converged technology-neutral licensing frameworks, a problem that has severely hampered the development of the Internet in general and broadband markets in particular.

Despite this, Adam sees positive trends emerging, such as a growing level of regional cooperation, improved foreign direct investments in submarine projects and the emergence of regional operators, both in the private and public sectors.

Academic institutions are also becoming key players in developing Internet connectivity (including broadband), with the establishment of National Research and Education Networks (NRENs).

To continue this momentum, Adam recommended increased efforts to build the capacity of policy makers and regulators to address the new policy challenges, such as interconnection and spectrum management.

Next, Maimouna Diop Diagne, from Ministère des Infrastructures, des Transports, des Télécommunications et des TIC, Sénégal, presented her thoughts on how African policy and regulatory frameworks can adapt.

Reinforcing Adam's view, Diop argued that the regulatory situation in Africa has improved considerably in recent years, with most countries establishing autonomous regulatory bodies. This progress notwithstanding, she acknowledged that challenges remain in relation to:

- harmonising policies and regulatory frameworks
- fostering public-private partnership and private investment
- removing the barriers to competition
- deploying modern, ubiquitous networks
- facilitating the rapid development of convergent networks
- accelerate new technologies, innovation, commerce, and growth
- achieving full interconnectivity and seamless regional networks, and
- achieving universal access levels.

Following the presentations, participants' questions and comments highlighted the importance of taking the roles and the rights of consumers into consideration when developing and implementing policies and regulatory frameworks. Participants also spoke of the need to engage senior policy makers, right up to the level of Presidents, Prime Ministers, and senior ministers on ICT issues. There was a call to devise innovative strategies to reach out to those ultimate policy makers who hold the key to ICT development in Africa.

Session II – Policy and Regulatory challenges to develop submarine cables for broad international access

Coura Fall, from the Association for Progressive Communications (APC), opened the second session by discussing an APC study that shows that, thanks to the availability of the SATIII submarine cable along the Western coast of Africa, many countries have benefited from increased bandwidth. However, while the cost of access have also decreased accordingly, in some of those countries it still remains prohibitively high. The APC study recommends developing a regional framework for regulating public infrastructure and building the capacities of regulators.

Muriuki Mureithi, of Summit Strategies, then outlined the emerging submarine cable projects spearheaded by public and private institutions. He explained that these projects, particularly the East African Submarine Cable System (EASSy), have prompted policy debates around open access, a model that many proponents regard as essential to bring competition to cable use. Muriethi noted that once the fibre networks are in place, there will be a need to stimulate demand for the networks by connecting schools, public institutions, and hospitals, as well as extending access to underserved areas.

Session III – Spurring access in all underserved areas with wireless technologies

Much of the current growth in the African Internet is driven by wireless access. Adnane Ben Halima of Huawei, showed that wireless broadband is growing, along with the global transition from narrowband voice grade access to high speed connectivity. He also noted that the convergence of communication and information technologies is an inevitable trend.

Lishan Adam, presented again, this time on the topic of “Innovative policy and regulatory frameworks for new technologies and tools”. In his presentation, he noted that the key challenge to access in Africa is bridging the access gap at the bottom of the pyramid – in other words, bringing access to the next half billion of the African population. He stressed that wireless technologies present tremendous opportunities to bridge this divide. But, at present, the policy challenges to wireless deployment in Africa include:

- legacy spectrum management and allocation frameworks that often obstruct the deployment of broadband wireless access
- unfair interconnection regimes
- long and often cumbersome licensing procedures, and
- monopolies on backhaul connection and international gateways that put strain on interconnection and network access by small private and community operators.

Adam explained that innovative approaches and policies have been put in place in different countries in the recent years, including licensing small enterprises and community operators and promoting infrastructure sharing to reduce the cost of cables and masts. These efforts need to be encouraged. There is also a need for building the capacities of regulators and policy makers to develop and implement policies aligned with advances in wireless technologies.

Session IV – Access for all: Developing new strategies for a truly universal access

Khalilou Niane, ARTP, presented the experiences of Sénégal in promoting universal access and the policy and legislative framework put in place for extending access to underserved areas. Discussion among the participants also highlighted the need for universal coverage of electricity, the importance of extending the definition of universal access from voice communication to access to multimedia content using the Internet and the importance of cross-border cooperation for regulating radio frequency spectrum.

Conclusions

In concluding the event, ISOC’s Frédéric Donck, reviewed the most important observations that emerged from the workshop from a public policy angle:

- No major divergences appeared on the challenges which Africa is currently facing. Experts and political and regulatory decision makers agree on these critical issues and on the way forward.
- The main top level challenge is to create a new paradigm in Africa, in particular to demonstrate that the development of the Internet must also be seen in the light of the social and economic benefits which it brings to the continent. And therefore that this objective be reflected at the top level agenda of political decision makers.
- One needs to be convinced of the “ecological” model of those who contribute to Internet growth and recognise the value of the Internet model to tackle issues of Internet access. Policymakers need access to reliable information on

Internet challenges as they seek to improve the environment for Internet growth. Last but not least, once agreed upon at policy level, a clear and unequivocal framework for national regulatory authorities is essential. There are many highly respected 'champions' of the Internet at national and regional levels in Africa. ISOC's objectives are to closely cooperate with these champions and make sure their examples can benefit other countries in the region, strengthen their relationships, and catalyse action at regional level, especially in key regional political institutions, such as the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) and the African Union.

- This workshop in Dakar can be seen as a stepping stone to greater levels of collaboration. Ultimately, these activities are intended to trigger high level policy discussions on the issues that African heads of states, ministers, regulators, and other policy makers have identified as important for Internet development on the continent. Such discussions will develop the dialogue from other forums, leading up to preparations for the African Heads of States meeting planned to be held in Addis Ababa in 2010.

Full details of the "Broad and Equitable Access to the Internet" workshop are available on the ISOC web site at:

<http://www.isoc.org/isoc/conferences/inet/08/senegal.shtml>