Africa after the Africa Commission:

What priorities for the German G8?

Opinion

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

Richard Heeks, Development Informatics Group
University of Manchester

'As part of the broader recognition of the central role of science and technology in development, we need to get ICTs back on the G8 agenda.'

Why does the G8 move in the opposite direction to Africa on information and communication techologies (ICTs)? At the turn of the century, the G8 was gung-ho for ICTs and development, forcing its agenda on often reluctant African leaders. The 2000 Okinawa summit gave birth to the global DOTForce that produced an ambitious action plan in time for 2001 in Genoa. Like the 'dot.gones' of the commercial world, though, in 2002 the DOTForce disappeared at Kananaskis before it had achieved much.

Meanwhile, in Africa, interest in ICTs has steadily grown. The NEPAD framework committed to action on building ICT infrastructure and applying ICTs in health, education and enterprise. The Africa Commission identified action areas for ICTs in governance, in conflict early warning, in healthcare, in commerce and in international trade.

ICT policies are being rolled out country-by-country but serious constraints remain. Yet if African leaders seek to engage the G8 on these issues they will likely be met by a 'been there, done that, moved on' attitude. As part of the broader recognition – by the African Union in January; by the World Bank in February – of the central role of science and technology in development, we need to get ICTs back on the agenda.

Suggestion 1: **Put ICTs back on the G8 agenda**, as part of a recognition of science and technology's role in African development.

Current market and regulatory regimes are failing Africa in its attempts to harness ICTs for economic and social development. African bandwidth suppliers must pay full end-to-end economic costs for connections, whereas Northern suppliers can cost-share: an issue only global Internet and telecommunications governance can solve. Governments impose entry barriers through high licence fees, yet regulators lack the teeth to force incumbent suppliers to lower charges and improve quality: an issue for improved local Internet governance. When they can pay for access, local ICT users find themselves hampered at all three layers of ICT infrastructure:

- ICT networks lack the Internet exchange points required for open connectivity.
- ICT applications rely heavily on proprietary applications, leaving the promise of free and open source software underexploited.
- ICT content relies heavily on foreign – often foreign language – data, preventing the open creation of relevant local data content.

Suggestion 2: Commit to support at global and national levels for Open Digital Economies that **remove the legal and infrastructural barriers to African participation** in the digital economy.

Mobile telephony has grown explosively in Africa. There are now at least five times more cell than fixed line subscribers in Africa; growth rates – more than 50% per annum –
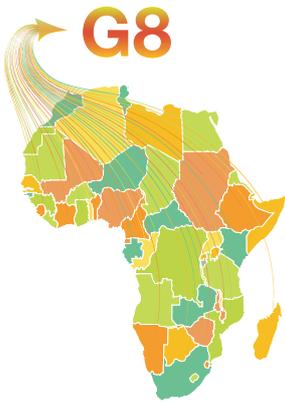
are the highest in the world; and 95% of subscribers are digital. Although digital cell phones cannot yet offer the functionality of an Internet-connected PC, we have an unprecedented and fast-expanding foundation for 'digital development'.

To date, however, this potential has been nowhere near realised and mobiles are not providing 'developmental value-added'. There is a need to encourage local development of innovative mobile applications. There is also a need to map existing innovations and find ways to share them and, particularly, scale them up. This applies to commercial innovations: micro-finance, micro-banking, micro-business. And it applies to social innovations: finding ways to channel education, health, welfare and other information and services via cell phones.

The scale of the potential, and the scale of the current barriers, are such that only a major concerted effort – imitating but learning from the mistakes of the DOTForce – will do.

Suggestion 3: Initiate a MOTForce – a global collaborative Mobile Opportunities TaskForce to **harness the development potential of mobile devices**.

Even more of a blind spot for Northern governments and donors than the mobile revolution in Africa has been expansion in Africa's IT sector. Not Indian-style software monoliths, but thousands upon thousands of IT microenterprises working on data entry, computer training, Web design, database construction, network installation, PC assembly, etc. Our recent work suggests there could be at least 100,000 such enterprises in Africa.

Yet they remain shut off from even basic forms of small enterprise support. Banks, donors, government agencies don't understand the IT sector. As a result, these tiny enterprises stay tiny or die. An opportunity to harness ICTs in direct creation of new jobs, new incomes, new skills, even new exports, remains underexploited.

Recognition on the Northern development agenda of the existence and needs of these myriad IT enterprises would be a start. A next step would

be to facilitate transfer to Africa of three business innovations that have helped lock ICTs into development in Asia:

- Offshoring: the tentative moves in North and South Africa to offshore IT-based services could be aggressively promoted in other regions.
- Social outsourcing: government and commercial organisations can be encouraged to follow India's successful example in outsourcing IT goods and services to social enterprises created from within local communities.
- IT fair trade: combine offshoring with social outsourcing and you get IT fair trade – already part of corporate social responsibility in the US, and able to deliver globalisation with a human, developmental face.

Suggestion 4: Support a Digital Enterprise Initiative for Africa that would **incubate new enterprises**, and kickstart the developmental use of outsourcing.

Finally, how can ICTs help deliver on other aspects of the development agenda? E-health and e-education applications have drawn some of the limelight. But other applications have not; certainly not as ICT applications that could be locally developed. More support needs to be given to the digital opportunities outlined by NEPAD and the Africa Commission: to back-office systems supporting financial probity; to e-procurement systems helping fight corruption by 'disintermediating' human decision-makers; to new technologies for gathering and processing statistical data; to geographic information systems for disaster early warning. Where developed locally these can deliver the double win of both a production and a consumption contribution to development.

Suggestion 5: **Support capacity-building for African ICT-based innovation**.

Investment and innovation are central to the Heiligendamm G8 agenda. African nations will not become world leaders in fundamental computer and telecommunications science R&D. But, with G8 support, they can become leaders in the development of innovative business and social applications of ICTs that help deliver on African development goals.