

Accelerating **F**reedom and **R**ealistic **I**CT-led **C**hange in **A**frica

*Making ICTs Work for Africa's Economic
Emancipation through Youth Entrepreneurship*

presented by

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as Keynote Address at the ICT Break-Out Session of the

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Fifth African Development Forum (ADF V)

organized by

UN Economic Commission for Africa (ECA)

**November 14 – 18, 2006
Addis Ababa, ETHIOPIA.**

0 Salutations

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1 Introduction

A popular Nigerian proverb says, *“If a man is caught running, then he is either chasing something or something is chasing him.”* I have often been tempted to ask some elders the question, “how about a man who is both chasing something and is also being chased by something else?” I have a feeling that such a man must fly, not run. That is what Africa must then do, in relation to development – because we are trying to catch up with better livelihoods and global benchmarks, and are at the same time being haunted by poverty and the many other ills that dot our continental landscape. Maybe this was what advised the statement credited to one of the great sons of the continent, Philip Emeagwali, who said: “Africa must get onboard... Right now! ... Africa will be either on to the Information Age or off to the dark ... Age.... Africa is suffering from knowledge apartheid that forces its children to eat the crumbs from the dinner table of the information-affluent nations.”

Events and realities of the last few years have clearly shown that Africa’s economic health is not dependent on the finite resources that have often led to chaotic situations, opened nations up to exploitation and lubricated corruption; but on a new kind of resource that can be groomed for appropriate accelerated growth – the youth. Unfortunately, these young women and men are at the moment unprepared for the challenge of leading Africa out of her present situation. *The International Labour Organisation estimates that around 88.2 million young women and men are unemployed throughout the world, accounting for 47 per cent of all the 185.9 million unemployed persons globally; and many more young people are working long hours for low pay, struggling to eke out a*

living in the informal economy. There are an estimated 59 million young people between 15 and 17 years of age who are engaged in hazardous forms of work. Africa's youth population as a proportion of the total is increasing and projected to be over 50% by 2015. Youth currently account for 45% of the total labour force, and unlike other continents, Africa's population is becoming more youthful.
(ILO, ECA... confirm figures and source)

Thus, the decision of the UN Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) to choose **Youth and Leadership in the 21st Century** as the theme of this fifth *African Development Forum* must be commended. This could not have come at a better time! We all know that one of the key benefits of effective leadership is economic growth, and that the engine that is driving economic growth in the 21st Century is Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs); hence the need to appreciate the importance and strategic relevance of this break-out session.

2 Africa: Caught in a Web?

An average African Youth does not place so much premium on the continent, and this explains why rather than being the exception, the norm is a continuous brain drain that is gradually sweeping the continent clean of it's most potent resource – the youth. They look around them to consider the critical factors that make for a productive life and see that quality education and appropriate employment are not guaranteed – and even when any (or both) come, it is usually at a very high personal cost. Unfortunately, these youth are coming face to face with the reality that the world is now flat and their competitors can now be found anywhere on the planet. To prepare for this competition on the world's stage, many have sought solace in the confines of better-managed economies, and other lands that show promise – at least as seen on cable networks or international journals.

In the New Economy, it becomes clear that natural resources are not a final verdict on the wealth of nation, neither is population size or geographical location. The factors of production having silently shifted from land, labour and capital towards knowledge and technology, the New Economy respects Human Capital as the new resource-currency of the 21st Century. The challenge, therefore, for Africa, is how to marshal our strengths towards productive socio-economic growth by grooming a new generation of youth who are competent in their chosen spheres of career intervention and are also empowered to compete favourably with their peers globally. Noting that Africa's problems are best solved by Africans, subsequent generations that can build on the productive efforts of today's leaders (in government, business and/or civil society) can therefore not afford to lose hope in the continent, otherwise we will keep asking questions. Is Africa caught in a web? What must be done to break this undesired vicious cycle of underdevelopment?

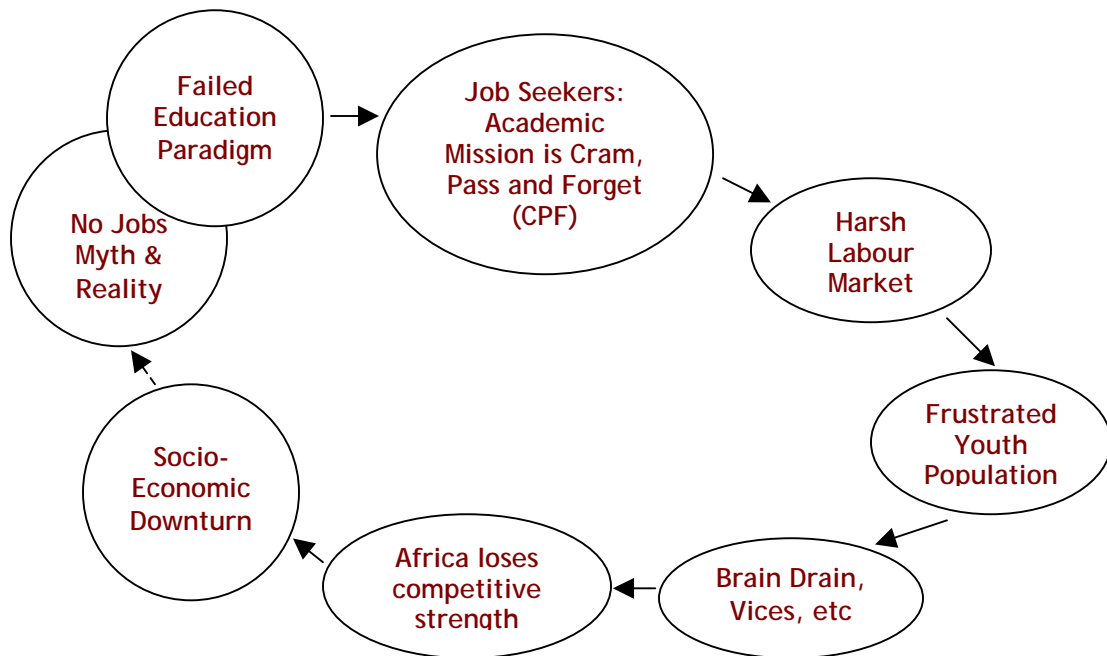


Figure 1: Vicious Cycle of Underdevelopment

3 What Must Be Done

The task of accelerating freedom and realistic change, for Africa, hangs on the shoulders of all African stakeholders. We must maximize the opportunities that come with the 21st Century, especially Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). Having been put to use by other Southern economies, ICTs hold the potential of strengthening development efforts, providing a platform for socio-economic growth and changing the face of employment in the nation where strategic use is made of such (ICT) opportunities. It is also important to ensure that education for the continent's youth does not only prepare them as job-seekers but that it places them on the path of entrepreneurship by introducing them to the dynamics of becoming job-creators themselves. Clearly, Africa needs to focus on the dynamic relationship between ICTs and Youth Entrepreneurship in order to break the vicious cycle of underdevelopment described earlier.

There are clear indicators, even on the continent itself that ICTs and Youth Entrepreneurship provide a creative force that can address some challenges of underdevelopment, especially in the area of maximizing the continent's best resources. In Nigeria, two clear examples exist:

- (a) The *Otigba (Computer Village)* cluster, where young people assemble (clone) computers – and has now also become the headquarters of mobile phone sales and repairs – is responsible for some huge volume of cash inflow on a daily basis. This *Computer Village* has attracted the attention of global Information Technology giants who have not hidden their amazement at the volume of trade and display of technical prowess in the *village*;
- (b) With the advent of digital mobile telephony in Nigeria, about 10,000 new direct jobs and over 1,000,000 indirect jobs were created. These wide array of new market entrants include mobile operator employees, recharge card manufacturers, second-generation mobile service providers (e.g. content providers, games, etc), recharge card retailers, public mobile

access service providers (who have become popular with their *umbrella offices*), etc.

Other examples dot the entire landscape of the continent – website designers, online content providers, software and hardware enthusiasts, and more. The little successes recorded by these few individuals can be replicated on a larger scale through deliberate partnerships. Fortunately, I am involved with one of such efforts (**Cowblock.net**) that seek to harness the strength of various *netpreneurs* (as Internet entrepreneurs are usually referred to as) to produce a world-class team of entrepreneurs who will solve problems and be rewarded for it from the convenience of their operational base.

Cowblock.net started at the Obafemi Awolowo University in 2002 when the Personal Computer density in the school's halls of residence began to increase. Students with deep interest in networks, servers and software engineering also began to increase. A co-founder of the group, Deji Aladejebi, said, "We started by calling a small hall meeting of all students with computers and encouraged them to join us in building a network rather than hanging in alone. At first, response was low because such ideas were not common but few of us went ahead and bought all the basic materials required to setup a network. Thus at that time (October 2002), we pioneered in Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife the first *Hostel Intranet System*". He continued, "[t]his quickly gained grounds as more students around the hub started plugging in until we had close to 32 systems within a short period. For us, the feeling was great because the collaboration it brought was awesome as we co-engaged in all sorts of initiatives, ideas and tech plays. We could bring up any idea and immediately gather momentum to start building or working on it. The network also quickly attracted Computer Science students to come and find a place to test, deploy and collaborate on school final year projects. Part of the few *demos* we set up include broadcasting the FIFA 2002 world cup across the Cowblock network, Stock Exchange software for mobile platforms, Weather Alerts, VoIP test calling, and Nigerian postal codes web service".

The youthful group had local web servers, developed an eMail platform, and created intra-hall messaging systems, among others. I have already told the Vice Chancellor of the school that we'll soon make Stanford University jealous as ongoing discussions have focused on combining the technical strengths of these *netpreneurs* with management skills of some other young people to showcase a practical demonstration of the effect of ICTs and Youth Entrepreneurship on the economy of a nation – and her people.

4 Conclusion

The popular African story of the gazelle and the lion demonstrates what Africa must do to remain relevant in the New Economy – we must run, faster than we ever did if we do not wish to end up, in a best-selling book, as a continent that once was, but could not survive the 21st Century. Africa's governments, Private Sector players, academia, media, development partners and non-profits must work together with the continent's youth to break the cycle of underdevelopment and accelerate freedom/ ICT-enabled change. While it remains the responsibility of government to move beyond promises (and declarations) to actually provide a conducive environment, the private sector must see the need to at least cooperate with the academia on capacity building while it also encourages self-motivated Corporate Social Responsibility. Non-profits must be consistent in its intervention, especially for rural youth empowerment and supplementary support. The African academia must embrace new learning models that focus on entrepreneurship – and not creating job-seekers. The media can help sharpen the saw by showcasing youth-led best practice entrepreneurial efforts and development partners should provide effective support – with a clear example in the ongoing support provided by the **United Nations Economic Commission for Africa** (ECA) to the **African Youth ICT4D Network** (AYIN).

Beyond all these calls for support, Africa's youth must learn to move from activism to action, and realize that we are the architects of our own future – and that of the continent! I remember the story told by my very good friend and business partner, Adeolu Akinyemi, about the young men who sought wisdom from the oldest and wisest man on earth. The old man demonstrated to them that until they desired wisdom as much as a drowning man would desire fresh breath, they would not be able to pay the price for wisdom. Since Africa is the source of some of the world's most repeated stories, I wish to end this with another story of a wise old man and three young men. The young men stared out to prove that the old man was not wise, so they caught a live bird and asked the old man, "what is in our hands?" When the old man said, "what is in your hand is in your hand," they laughed at him and said he had to tell them if the bird was dead or alive. The plan was to squeeze the bird to produce a dead bird if the old man said it was alive, or to release the bird alive if the old man said it was dead. The old man laughed, and told them, "whether that bird is dead or alive, the power is in your hands." In that same vein, the future of the African continent depends on today's youth.

Imagine how powerful this future would be if today's leaders invest heavily in the next generation. We can accelerate freedom and realistic ICT-led change in Africa, and we can make ICTs work for Africa's economic emancipation, by promoting ICT-enabled Youth Entrepreneurship.