

## **Enabling Digital Africa and Giving Business a Real Boost**

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### **Introduction**

Enabling an inclusive digital transformation of Africa and giving business a real boost is a factor of pervasive quality Internet access for service delivery across all sectors notably governance and the running of government processes in Africa. Government is the biggest spender in Africa and the efficiency it brings about in the performance of its functions has the potential of engendering true transformation of African economy and the unleashing of Internet economy potential of Africa thereby giving business a real boost. Permit me to use the Nigerian government as a case in point. Since the return to civil rule in 1999, a lot has changed structurally in terms of how policies and laws are made thereby boosting economic performance but the desired level of efficiency is not yet there. At this point therefore, I can say that Nigeria is operating at one fifth (1/5) of its potential.

### **Meeting the WSIS targets enables Digital Africa**

As a derivative of WSIS outcome itself, AfICTA believes that when actors buy into the WSIS targets, the result would be a digital Africa with a robust Internet economy.

As a refresher, the WSIS targets are: i. to connect all villages with ICTs and establish community access points, ii. to connect all secondary schools and primary schools with ICTs, iii. to connect all scientific and research centres with ICTs, iv. to connect all public libraries, museums, post offices and archives with ICTs, v. to connect all health centres and hospitals with ICTs vi. to connect all central government departments and establish websites vii. to adapt all primary and secondary school curricula to meet the challenges of the Information Society, taking into account national circumstances viii. to ensure that all of the world's population have access to television and radio services, ix. to encourage the development of content and to put in place technical conditions in order to facilitate the presence and use of all world languages on the Internet, x. to ensure that more than half the world's inhabitants have access to ICTs within their reach and make use of them

### **Providing the needed enabling Environment**

Whenever an enabling environment is provided, a child will naturally develop well in all ramifications. So, who provides the enabling environment? Of course the parent. Talking about an enabling environment for an Internet economy in Africa, the prime enabler is the government. What the government does and does not do impact greatly on the realization of a truly digital Africa.

Here are factors governments need to address to foster entrepreneurship and innovation; and the giving of real boost to business.

1. Internal collaboration within its structure and agencies: A house divided within itself cannot stand. When government agencies are not collaborating among themselves and instead are working at cross purposes, they inadvertently undermine business environment. Government agencies with similar work scope should through MoU come together to address issues such as multiple taxation, right of way, enforcement of intellectual property rights, removal of trade barriers etc. Where there is no Digital Strategy, one should be developed to provide direction into the future. It is worthy of note that the Nigerian government issued 3 Executives Orders on ease of doing business recently and the effect was 24-point gain by Nigeria in the World Bank ease of doing business index.

2. Collaboration with business stakeholders: Governments should not only collaborate within itself, in addition, it should collaborate with business organisations and stakeholders to know how best to tune policies for business growth and provision of opportunities for entrepreneurship and innovation especially in the area of procurement which require more transparency. Much thanks to the government of Egypt and Nigeria who have signed MoUs with AfICTA and with that there exist some level of regional cooperation between government and business but apparently much still need to be done.

3. Support for result oriented incubation centre through granting and provision of subventions: The setting up of an Innovation Fund with established budget line and/or tied to a steady funding inflow comparable to the US National Science Foundation would go a long way to engender innovation and entrepreneurship in Africa.

### **Other important enablers of Internet economy in Africa**

4. Infrastructure: Ensuring the media of connectivity are available is the focus of infrastructure. Through fibre, spectrum and satellite links Internet experience has been provided for more than 30% of Africans but more still need to be done as many connected to the Internet are in the urban areas and with old narrow band technologies. A diverse retinue of new solutions and strategy may

need to be engaged to connect a large percentage of the unconnected. Such new approach to connect a disperse population is the use of TV white spaces. It is important that as existing policy frameworks are reviewed to ensure focus, policy makers should not overlook the need to create new policy guidelines that would enable business investment in the use of TV white spaces. The importance of power (electricity) infrastructure availability in this discourse cannot be over-emphasized. The thermal power gap can be readily overcome with solar alternative.

5. Affordability: Until broadband is 5% of monthly income according to UN benchmark, the digital Africa of our dream may remain elusive though many countries in Africa (notably Egypt and Nigeria) have met the Alliance for Affordable Internet (A4AI) 1 to 2 (1GB for 2% of monthly income) index. Generally, cost of a monthly broadband access is still high across Africa. So, what can be done to enhance affordability of access? What can be done include: removing multiple taxation, reducing taxes, reducing spectrum license fees, using Universal Service Provision Fund to reduce deployment cost and increasing availability via competition. Creating more Internet Exchange points and removing roaming charges throughout Africa would enhance affordability, boost revenue and increase business opportunities. The move by East African Community in 2014 for 1 network abolishing roaming charges across the sub-region which has produced humongous economic dividend is commendable (according to a 2016 World Bank report, business was boosted by more than 950% as a result). The Economic Community of West African State (ECOWAS) is set to follow suit and business is in anticipation that throughout Africa, this would be a reality by 2020. Also, worthy of commendation is Nigeria's regulator, Nigerian Communication Commission (NCC)'s refusal to approve request by telecommunications operators to increase tariffs. Instead of increasing tariffs, they should evolve strategies to boost traffic and reduce cost of operations.

6. Availability of content generally and in local languages in particular. The availability of relevant content build confidence and create new opportunities for development hence the need for Government to embrace Open Data Initiatives. Also when there is language familiarity with contents there would be more affinity and new economic opportunities would be the derivatives.

7. Skills impartation: Since building a digital Africa is not a sprint but rather a marathon. Basic ICT know-how and skills should be taught in schools across all levels. Interestingly, the Lagos State government in Nigeria last month inaugurated 2 Coding Centres under the CodeLagos initiative for students and 94 other centres are underway.

8. Payment methods. When payment is made easy for customers, the tendency is that there would be repeated transactions. The convenience of

digital payment platform boosts business which is a friction removed with respect to payment for goods and services. Little wonder why **mpesa** contributes up to 50% to Kenya's Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

9. Self development and resiliency. Everyone cannot be an entrepreneur in the Internet economy. However, whosoever would want to be an entrepreneur must invest heavily in self development acquiring necessary know-how to remain competitive and at the cutting edge of his/her products and services. Very importantly, would be a successful entrepreneur should be resilient and being able to stand in the midst of failures and discouragement along the way. Entrepreneurs should have marketable skills to thrive. Financing is important but you can create one with your skill-set.

In conclusion, when every actor in the Digital transformation spectrum steps up and play their respective roles, e-friction, according to ICANN sponsored study by the Boston Consulting Group, would be minimized giving countries up to 3% boost in GDP and business a real boost for a truly Digital Africa.