

Get to know about the WSIS and its processes

By Emmanuel Onyango

THE second phase of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) which will take place in Tunis later this year, is about the use of Information Technologies and their transformation for the development of human needs.

The summit which is organised by the United Nations and co-hosted by the Government of Tunisia will cover the general role in the development of the Information Society with the enormous potential of the Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) components.

These are vital tools used to improve people's economic, social and cultural well-being in a knowledge-based global digital economy. The first phase of the summit was held in Geneva in 2003 and was co-hosted by the Swiss government.

The WSIS originated from a proposal in a global discussion during the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), Plenipotentiary Conference in Minneapolis in 1998. It was decided that the summit should be held in two phases.

WSIS is not an ICT summit but a summit about the application of ICTs cutting across and affecting almost all aspects of human activity. It is vital in the world's history since heads of States across the globe will come together to discuss the challenges posed by the development of ICTs.

WSIS is a Summit with a difference, a Summit that is inclusive and which reflects the changes in the modern world as well as the pervasive and fundamental nature of the revolution brought about by the Information Society.

Apart from being a summit with a difference, it should also be noted that WSIS is a Summit of Solu-

tions that offers the means to realize many of the world's aspirations, including the Millennium Development Goals.

WSIS marks the formal transition that will give the tools to those who are willing and ready to consciously embark on building the information society in their countries or communities based on agreed principles and plan of action during the first phase summit.

The main principles that reflect in this summit is a rapid progress of the technologies and how the developing countries especially those in Africa which still lag behind in information access, get full control of the information knowledge. This will open completely new opportunities to attain higher levels of development.

The common vision of the WSIS is to build an information society that is inclusive and where all persons exercise their rights to freedom of expression and their access to a wide range of content.

The declaration principles agreed during the first phase summit in Geneva identifies ten key principles for building the information society. These are, ICT infrastructure, Access to information and knowledge, Capacity building, and building confidence, trust and security.

Others are enabling environments, ICT application, cultural identity, ethical dimensions, International and regional cooperation and lastly role of governments and private sectors. These are the most key needs for African governments.

Other needs for the ICTs in most African governments, is for the purpose of creating business opportunities, agriculture, transport, protection of environment and management of natural resources, disaster prevention, and culture. However, these help in promoting campaigns to alleviate poverty.

The usage and deployment of ICTs in African governments seek to create benefits and their applications are potentially important in government operations and services, health care and health information, education and training, employment and job creation.

Constraints facing ICT development currently is a continuation of services which are yet to be fully realized not only Tanzania but in African region. This is due to basic factors as related to poor infrastructure, weak and or the lack of policies and low level of human resource development.

In Tanzania, this combination has resulted in inadequate access to affordable telephones, broadcasting, computers and the internet. According to National ICT Coordinator, Eng. Augustine Kowero, Tanzania is not able to capitalize on ICT as a tool in enhancing livelihoods due to lack of seriousness to implement its national ICT policies.

The issue of the Digital Revolution fired by the engines of the ICTs, has fundamentally changed the way people think, behave, communicate, work and earn their livelihood. It has forged new ways to create knowledge, educate people and disseminate information.

The WSIS will put forward its major principles and action plan on the Digital Divide paradoxically, while the digital revolution has extended the frontiers of the global village, the vast majority of the world remains unhooked from this unfolding phenomenon.

With the ever-widening gap between knowledge and ignorance, the development gap between the rich and the poor among and within countries has also increased in Africa. It has therefore become imperative for the world to bridge this digital divide and place the MDGs on the ICT-accelerated speedway to achievement.

(ICTs can connect individuals, small companies or groups of farmers and artisans in the poorest and most isolated areas of the world and bring them to the attention of national and even global markets.

ICTs can also improve governance by giving a voice to people who have been isolated, or have been invisible and silent, allowing them to speak out regardless of their economic status, their gender or where they live.

The WSIS has to ensure that it's essential that everyone has access to these information and communication technologies. The task is challenging, but Africa must rise if it need to keep the promise of the Information Society.

WSIS is committed to realizing a common vision of the Information Society for people and for future generations and that young people are the future workforce and leading creators and earliest adopters of ICTs. They must therefore be empowered as learners, developers, contributors, entrepreneurs and decision-makers.

WSIS will focus especially on young nations which have not yet been able to benefit fully from the opportunities provided by ICTs, as long as it is committed to ensuring that the development of ICT applications and operation of services respects the rights of children as well as their protection and well-being.

The development of ICTs provides enormous opportunities for women, who should be an integral part and key actors in the Information Society. WSIS is committed to ensuring that the Information Society enables women's empowerment and their full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society and in all decision-making processes.