

NITDA and ICT in Nigeria

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Abstract

Governments and people around the world have started appreciating the ability of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) to stimulate rapid development in all sectors of the economy. ICT is redefining the way we do almost everything and it is a ready tool for all strata of society- it is as much a tool to the President of any nation in governance as it is a tool for the housewife in her daily chores! Thankfully, Nigeria is exploring the benefits of ICT as well.

The Federal Government of Nigeria started some reforms a few years. Licenses were given to Global System for Mobile Communication (GSM) operators and a Second National Operator (SNO). The First National Operator is also being restructured. Policies on Telecommunication, Information, Space and Bio-Technologies were also approved. All these contributed to the positive changes experienced.

The National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA) was established in 2001 to implement the Information Technology (IT) policy. NITDA has since embarked on a number of projects that are making the dream of using IT for development real in Nigeria. The Public Service Network (PSNet), Mobile Internet Unit (MIU) and Human Capacity Development are some of these projects.

NITDA has been able to start the process of integrating IT into the public service through a massive enlightenment campaign that was targeted at the top echelon of the service. The challenges of inadequate funding and lack of political will remains. However, the prospects of using IT for development has kept NITDA focused and determined.

Introduction

Governments and people around the world have started appreciating the ability of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) to stimulate rapid development in all sectors of the economy. ICT is redefining the way we do almost everything and it is a ready tool for all strata of society- it is as much a tool to the President of any nation in governance as it is a tool for the housewife in her daily chores! Thankfully, Nigeria is exploring the benefits of ICT as well. However, this hadn't always been the situation in Nigeria.

The ICT Revolution started in Nigeria after return to democratic rule in 1999. The country had gone through an extended period of military dictatorship prior to this time. This came with an attendant apathy for the development of a platform for developing ICT in the country. In some cases, it was even believed that ICT would pose a security threat! It dawned on the government that the digital divide would only continue to widen except the issue of developing ICT in the country was given the priority attention is deserved.

The Nigerian ICT Industry

The FGN took the following steps to address the situation:

1. Approved polices for the major sectors of the industry:
National Telecommunications Policy, National Information Technology Policy,
National Space Policy and National Biotechnology Policy.

2. Liberalised the sector
3. Accorded priority status to ICT

The transformation experienced since then, especially within the past two years, dwarfs that experienced in the sector throughout the existence of the nation as an independent state.

The FGN has attempted to liberalise the ICT sector. This has seen the licensing of a Second National Operator (SNO)- Globacom Limited- and the attempted sale of the other First National Operator- Nigeria Telecommunications (NITEL) Plc. The sale ran into some hitches and NITEL has been put under the care of some consultants who have the responsibility of reviving it.

The introduction of the Global System for Mobile communication was a real spring in the step for the ICT sector. With the launch of GSM in August 2001, the nation has come up from a teledensity, i.e. number of telephone lines per 100 subscribers, of 0.5 to 2.0 as shown in the figure below. Today Nigeria has two GSM providers MTN and Econet and two national operators.

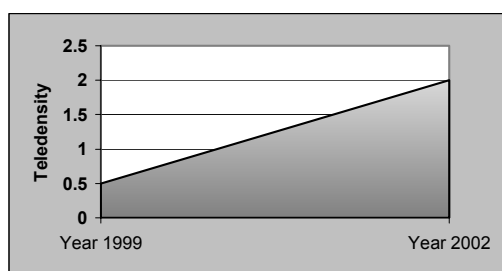


Fig. 1: Increase in teledensity between 1999 and 2002

The National Information Technology (IT) Policy and the National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA)

The Federal Executive Council (FEC) of Nigeria approved the National Information Technology Policy in March 2001. The National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA) was established in April 2001 to implement the Policy. The vision of the policy is:

To make Nigeria an IT capable country in Africa and a key player in the Information Society by the year 2005, using IT as the engine for sustainable development and global competitiveness.

The Mission Statement is:

To “use IT” for Education, Creation of Wealth, Poverty Eradication, Job Creation and Global Competitiveness.

The Policy takes the various sectors of the economy into account.

Projects of NITDA

NITDA has embarked on a number of projects during the year aimed at stimulating the growth of ICT in the country. The Public Service Network (PSNet) is one of such projects.

The Public Service Network (PSNet)

This project is to address the major problem of ICT infrastructure, which will serve as a pipe for ICT services. It consists of a Very Small Aperture Terminal (VSAT) sited in the State Capital. This VSAT will provide Internet access for that central location and all other locations connected to this centre using Broadband Wireless Access (BWA) technology as shown in the figure below. The various sites around the country are then connected to each other through a Virtual Private Network (VPN). Nine states(9) have already been completed in the 1st Phase of the project.

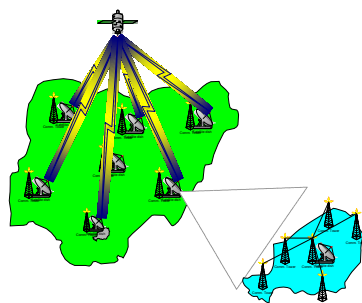


Fig.2 : Public Service Network

Human Capacity Building

Human Capacity Building is another focus for the year. It is one of the prongs on which the IT Policy is based. The other “prongs” are Infrastructural Capacity and Institutional Capacity Building. Towards realizing this goal, NITDA has forged a thriving partnership with public and private organizations in what has become a Public-Private Partnership (PPP). The Enterprise Technology Centre (ETC) is one such PPP that is worthy of note.

The ETC is a partnership between NITDA and two private companies to provide IT training for Civil Servants. In Nigeria it is rather difficult for a private company to embark on the training of very top officials of the Civil Service. The ETC, which is located within the Federal Secretariat, has provided training for these top officials. The Head of the Civil Service of the Federation led all the Permanent Secretaries for a two-week training. This enlightenment has greatly aided us in our bid to integrate IT into the Public Service. With the training of the top officials, NITDA has provided an enabling environment for the private sector to train civil servants from the lower cadre. This top-bottom-top approach has been very successful.

NITDA has also collaborated with several multinationals and international organizations to deliver specialized training in some train-the-trainer workshops. These institutions include UNESCO, International Centre for Theoretical Physics (ICTP), Cisco Systems, etc. For instance, NITDA collaborated with ICTP by hosting the first African Workshop on Open Source and Web Technologies for Development earlier in the year 2003. There has also been collaboration with UNESCO on the Virtual Library and Virtual Laboratory projects for Nigeria.

Mobile Internet Unit

The Mobile Internet Unit (MIU) is a locally made bus that has been converted into a mobile training and cyber center. Its interior has 10 high-tech workstations all networked and connected to the Internet to facilitate access to several IT resources. It is equipped with printers, a photocopier and a number of multi-media facilities. Internet access is provided via a Very Small Aperture Terminal (VSAT) equipment with a 1.2m dish mounted on the roof of the bus.

The unit is also equipped with a small generator to ensure regular power supply. The MIU provides everything you'll need in a high-tech cyber centre and it has the added advantage of being mobile. It takes the Internet to places that have no other means of access e.g. the rural areas. It has also been deployed to various schools (primary and secondary) and the plan is to get all states and possibly Local Government Areas (LGAs) to have their own MIUs so as to facilitate the penetration of the Internet and ICT around the country. Mr. President commissioned the MIU on the 10th of September 2003.



Other Projects

A number of other projects have also been embarked upon. These include National ICT Inventory, Strategic Action Plan for the IT Policy and the e-government (e-accounting and e-statistics) in collaboration with the Italian government.

The Impact of NITDA

From our experience, very little can be achieved in ICT in a nation unless the decision makers are carried along. The process is an arduous one, akin to steering a “big ship”. However, the good news is that a lot of momentum is generated when this “big ship”

begins to move. In the past two years NITDA has committed a lot towards ensuring that the public service, particularly those in the top echelon, embrace IT.

The rewards of this drive have been most encouraging and rewarding and NITDA has been able to get top-level civil servants to champion the course of IT in the country. IT is now a major part of the current Civil Service Reform currently on and Mr. President has given instructions that NITDA should serve as a clearinghouse for all IT projects in the Public Sector. This will allow for a more coordinated approach in the development of the sector in the public service.

Challenges and Conclusion

The greatest challenge has been that of providing adequate funding. Experience has also shown that verbal commitment doesn't guarantee a political will for implementation. The delayed passing of the IT Bill into law has also been a cause for concern. The IT Bill will give Legal backing to the establishment of NITDA and will provide for its sustenance.

The challenge of using IT as a tool for development in Nigeria has been a great one. However, we are grateful that the paradigm shift is taking place and we are very hopeful for the future.

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