

Keynote address by His Excellency Paul KAGAME, President of the Republic of Rwanda, at the Sub-Saharan Africa Information and Communications Technology Conference

San Francisco, California 19 March 2007

- ✚ The Right Honourable Prime Minister Jean Eyeghe Ndong, Republic of Gabon;
- ✚ Director Thelma Askey, United States Trade Development Agency;
- ✚ Ambassador David Gross, the United States Coordinator for International Communications and Information Policy, United States State Department;
- ✚ African Cabinet Ministers;
- ✚ Business Leaders;
- ✚ Ladies and Gentlemen

Let me start by thanking you, Thelma Askey, for the kind words, and the opportunity to address this assembly of distinguished American and African business leaders, policymakers, political leaders, and members of the academia on fostering a vibrant information and communication technology market on our continent.

I wish to express my sincere gratitude to the United States Trade and Development Agency and other organizations for supporting this important conference. I should also note that I can think of no better venue to host this assembly than the State of California and the City of San Francisco.

The similarity between California and many parts of Africa is not lost on me – especially the beautiful weather, striking landscape and impressive diversity of its residents.

I would however wish, in the near future, to see another kind of parallel. The Golden State is a remarkable example of a dynamic economy based on modern agriculture, aerospace, creative industries and ICT-related manufacturing. It is for this reason that California ranks among the most innovative economies globally – and San Francisco is at the epicentre of this activity.

Both the State and the City provide valuable lessons to us all – including a healthy policy and regulatory environment, a highly skilled workforce, as well as outstanding research centres that supply infinite ideas and modalities for generating prosperity.

These constitute the key features that make this great State and City an ideal location for investment, international trade, and a place in which to work and

live for millions of Americans as well as new immigrants. California should therefore inspire our continent – and most certainly my country – Rwanda.

EXCELLENCIES

As we embark on this crucial dialogue, we must reflect on two vital issues:

First, how are we in Africa to emulate California and other successful economies in creating a strong ICT base and market? Second, how can we form an effective partnership with our American colleagues to accelerate the development of ICT? Let us immediately acknowledge that significant progress in utilizing ICT on our continent is being realised.

We can say with confidence that there is hardly any corner of Africa that has not seen a noteworthy increase in ICT-utilization, especially in mobile phone density and internet access.

For example, it has recently been indicated that the number of mobile phone users in Africa is growing twice as fast as in the rest of the developing world – Africa is now the fastest growing mobile phone market in the world.

This increased mobile phone usage has dramatically increased business activity especially in the informal sector and in both small and medium-size enterprises. The mobile phone has, in effect, become the life line of most micro-entrepreneurs on the continent.

This is largely due to the fact that mobile technologies have extended business networks – thereby reducing the need for intermediaries, and unnecessary journeys that were previously the hallmark of African business engagements.

The power of the mobile phone to ease business transactions is not limited to the private sector; it is also changing operations of public services.

An example of such impact that I can share is patient care improvements especially in remote rural areas. In this respect, transporting hand-written health information from a rural-based clinic to the capital city by a messenger may soon become a thing of the past – as may this method of communicating a disease outbreak, drug shortage or a laboratory test result.

In fact, an ongoing pilot project in Rwanda enables healthcare providers to send medical reports, procure drugs, and monitor patient welfare from remote locations via mobile phone or internet in real time.

That such wireless technologies are improving the delivery of vital public services is not in question – rather the issue is how to expand and broaden their usages in many more sectors.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN

The Rwandan ICT story is similar to the rest of the continent – the mobile phone, in particular, is changing our way of life.

Consider the fact that of total telephone usage in Rwanda, ninety six percent is mobile – landline phones account for only four percent. It must be pointed out that the mobile telephone was introduced in Rwanda just nine years ago – whereas the landline telephone has been in the country for half a century. This is a clear illustration of the “leapfrogging” manifest in Africa today.

As has often been the case in key moments of technological advances in history, we are at present witnessing creative ways and means of accessing the new technologies. Individuals who cannot afford a mobile phone often share handsets with business associates, family members or friends. In more remote villages, use of public mobile phones now numbering in the thousands is expanding rapidly – often involving innovative adaptations, such as fitting phone devices with special antennas for increased reception.

A variety of alternative batteries or solar energy often replaces the conventional electrical power source – where the latter is not available. These factors explain why the telephone in Rwanda is no longer limited to the well-to-do but is widespread – and growing rapidly in both urban and rural settings across all social categories.

Another important element of the Rwandan story is the development of an ICT infrastructure in the past several years. Our Capital City of Kigali is now linked through a fibre optical network to the second largest Rwandan city of Butare some 135 kilometres away – meaning that smaller towns and centres that lie between the two are likewise connected. The challenge now is to enable more institutions of learning, medical centres and business activities to use this backbone for improved operations. We have sought to maximise the use of this infrastructure in government by, among other things, increasing connectivity of national institutions, including the Cabinet, parliament and individual ministries.

We are keen in particular to foster the use of new technologies to advance the cause of learning. It is for this reason that there are many ongoing programs, especially in the education sector aimed at equipping both teachers and students with necessary capabilities to function in the global knowledge economy. One notable example is the New Partnership for Africa’s Development’s e-school demonstration project that is currently operating in sixteen African countries.

In Rwanda, there is at least one e-school, serving up to a thousand students, in each of our country's administrative regions. This program provides teachers with stimulating internet- and server-based curriculum content for teaching, while learners have access to study materials. This scheme has been particularly effect in countering the scarcity of textbooks in rural settings.

The broader community uses these demonstration schools during weekends to search for information related to farming and other economic activities. Some people believe this to be too little too late – but in Rwanda we could not disagree more. Surveys have shown that the participating schools find the program extremely beneficial and are constantly demanding more content, while neighbouring schools without such access are flooding their facilities. For us, the challenge now is to scale up this successful pilot.

I take this opportunity to thank Cisco and Microsoft for their valuable support in this endeavour.

DISTINGUISHED PARTICIPANTS

Now the question arises: where does Africa go from here in terms of using ICT for faster socioeconomic transformation?

It must be emphasized that the achievements outlined above have occurred organically, and often without deliberate and coordinated strategies. Taking the ICT sector to a new frontier, however, demands a more holistic and comprehensive approach based on multi-faceted considerations.

Fundamental to such strategies is the promotion of sustained investment in Africa's ICT to render it a more organized, well-resourced and dynamic sector. Such focused approach will not only pave the way into software and hardware innovations – which constitute the heart of the ICT industry, but will also intensify its use as a powerful tool for transforming existing economic activity.

The question posed earlier on how we in Africa can emulate California and other successful economies in creating a more vibrant ICT market revolves around this issue – comprehensive and sustained ICT strategies.

Towards that objective, several related policy actions are required for achieving our vision of a strong ICT sector in Africa.

We must continuously improve our policy and regulatory environment to attract increased investment in ICT nationally as well as regionally.

We must transform our primary, secondary and tertiary education as a means of creating a critical mass of African professionals equipped with new skills and motivation to sustain ICT sectors. There is simply no alternative to having a

strong educational foundation in science, engineering and technology to facilitate innovation and wealth creation. Put differently, African universities and other knowledge centres, like their American counterparts, have to play a more active role in the ongoing ICT revolution.

Furthermore, the partnership between governments, private sectors and knowledge institutions in maximising the benefits of ICT is something that cannot be emphasized enough. More broadly, and based on the fact that real wealth comes from adding value, it is fundamental that we Africans actively shift from consumerism to the creation of wealth through production – lest we remain trapped in the status of raw material exporters bypassed by the ongoing ICT revolution. This has been up to now the legacy of the African continent.

In a very modest way, we are trying to tackle this issue in Rwanda. At this very moment, a local investor in partnership with a Chinese company is setting up a plant to assemble mobile phones as well as manage their warranty and repairs in our country. This investment will help us achieve several objectives. It will lower costs of mobile phone handsets to less than thirty United States dollars – effectively cutting in half the current cheapest device, thus making phones more affordable. Further, it will create jobs, while increasing the potential for regional export.

From a governance perspective, this investment will facilitate the supply of handsets to more grassroots administration officials for decentralised and improved public services. This might seem a small step, but for us in Rwanda, it is a giant leap both symbolically and materially – symbolically because it shows what Africa can do with its latent wealth; and materially because job-creation in a poor country is an achievement.

DISTINGUISHED LADIES AND GENTLEMEN

Let me conclude my remarks by addressing one of the issues I raised earlier, namely, how we Africans can form an effective partnership with our American colleagues to harness the power of ICT.

With us today are African ministers, business leaders and technology practitioners. Their presence is a demonstration of Africa's commitment to the use of ICT as a development tool.

On the American side, are representatives of industry, governmental organisations, and members of the academia interested in African development endeavours. We have also on hand leaders of international organisations.

This occasion therefore provides an opportunity to forge a productive partnership. It is evident that our hosts did their homework in preparing this conference. They identified specific export and investment opportunities in the

Sub-Saharan Africa region; they also invited prominent investors from the United States as well as decision-makers from our continent.

This means that this gathering is not a talk shop – on the contrary, it is a platform to transact in the business that drew us all to San Francisco – investment in ICT in Africa.

Let the next three days therefore, prove be a unique occasion to both sides for gaining insights and experiences on how to nurture and entrench a more dynamic ICT sector on our continent.

I THANK YOU VERY MUCH INDEED FOR YOUR KIND ATTENTION