National ICT Policies and Plans towards Poverty Reduction: Emerging Trends and Issues

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Introduction

The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) launched the African Information Society Initiative (AISI) in May 1996, which serves as a guiding framework for building the information and communication infrastructure in Africa. Since the launch of AISI, ECA has been supporting member States to embark on the development of NICI (National Information and Communication Infrastructure) policies, plans and strategies which are instrumental to materialize the visions enshrined in the AISI at national level and to create conducive environment for ICT development. Thus far over 30 countries in the continent have embarked, in one form or the other, on the development of national ICT strategies and more countries have expressed interests to initiate national ICT policies. Accordingly, ECA came forward to assist the Department of State for Communication, Information and Technology (DOSCIT), Government of The Gambia to elaborate a national ICT policy, plan and strategy and put in place a guiding framework for the diffusion and utilization of ICT applications to accelerate the attainment of national development goals.

However, one specific element of the NICI process[1] is to realign the country's development goals, more precisely the PRSP (Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper) objectives with the emerging ICT Policy. It is not an easy task as traditionally the decision makers see ICT as a completely separate domain and often fail to see the role of ICT as a tool to attain the PRSP goals. Therefore, The Gambia NICI process was deliberately geared towards centering the ICT policies and plans on the country's declared PRSP elements. The NICI Policy that was developed consciously mapped the route to underlay the ICT tools that will help the country to reach its PRSP destination swiftly, efficiently and more responsibly to the people.

This paper presents the basic aspects of a PRSP as illustrated by The Gambia's Second Strategy for Poverty Alleviation (SPA-II) and its synthesis with the country's NICI Policy. The process and its evolved mechanism might serve as a model for ICT policy developers, planners and all stakeholders in general working in the area of ICT for development (ICT4D). The paper also draws upon the issues discussed under the pre-conference workshop on "ICT and Poverty Reduction" during the Accra Regional Preparatory Conference for World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) held on 29th January 2005.

2. NICI Process: A Case Study of The Gambia

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[1] The term 'NICI Process' is used broadly to describe the whole exercise of national consultations in various phases and subsequent deliberations at various stages and platforms leading to the drafting, validation and adoption of a country's NICI Policy, Plans and Strategy. In the case The Gambia the process started in May 2004 and after a series of consultations with stakeholders and workshops the draft NICI Policy is now due for validation and adoption in Feb, 2005.

The NICI process in The Gambia, as indicated above, is geared towards recognising the areas where ICT would contribute to the attaining the overall objectives of the four strategic issues identified in the PRSP besides other priority areas (called 'Pillars') of NICI:

1. Enhancing the Productive Capacity of the Poor.
2. Enhancing Access to and the Performance of Social Services.
3. Local Level Capacity Building.
4. Promoting Participatory Communications Processes.

A captious analysis of the prevailing socio-economic condition in The Gambia further highlighted the challenges faced by the country in attaining those visionary goals. The e-readiness baseline survey conducted by the National e-Government Technical Committee for e-Government (NATCOM) in July 2003 with the assistance of ECA was used to map the present status of the country in terms of ICT infrastructure and plans.

During the consultative meetings with various stakeholders from all sectors of the society – government, private and the civil society – efforts were made to further pin point the vital developmental issues concerning poverty alleviation of the people at the grassroots level that a comprehensive NICI policy for the country should address. The consultations were used to highlight and espouse the role of ICT not as and end itself but as a means to achieve the PRSP goals. These consultations led to the shaping a vision statement that underlines the link between poverty reduction strategy & ICT Policy as to:

> *To leverage the benefits of ICT for a people-centered, free market based and export-oriented socio-economic development strategy built on principles of public-private partnership for wealth creation.*

In a other words and in further details, the NICI policy was aimed at supporting the strategic objectives of the PRSP:

> *To achieve higher growth rates in all spheres of socio-economic activities using ICT as a platform to exchange data, information, knowledge and a tool to implement applications and provide services in order to 'leapfrog' several stages of development through a participatory approach in building human resources and a conducive environment.*

The PRSP priorities in The Gambia are focused on "attaining a high level of economic growth (with a special focus on the critical areas of private sector development, agriculture, natural resources, tourism, trade and industry), and a timely attainment of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG)". A recent assessment of The Gambia's position with regards to the quantitative development goals adopted in Tokyo in 1998 showed an encouraging trend in following areas[2]:

1. Universal primary education by 2015, with 80% completion in primary education by 2005.
2. A 50% reduction in 1990 illiteracy rates by 2005, with an emphasis on improving female illiteracy rates.
3. Attaining gender equity in primary and secondary enrolments by 2005.
4. A 50% reduction of the maternal mortality rate of 1990, and a further 50% by 2015.
5. A reduction of the 1990 infant and child mortality rates by a third (33%) by the year 2015.
6. Provision of universal access to reproductive health services by 2015.
7. Provision of safe water and sanitation for 80% of the population by 2005.
8. A reduction by 50% of the number of malnourished people by 2015.
9. A reduction by 66% of the number of women living in poverty by 2015.

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[2] T*he Gambia: Second Strategy for Poverty Alleviation (SPA- II)*: Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper

According to the September 2001 report of the World Bank[3] on attainment of these objectives, The Gambia is on-track towards the attainment of universal primary education by 2015, moderately off-track towards halving the 1990 illiteracy rates by 2005 and on-track towards gender equity in primary and secondary education. The Gambia was the only country listed as being on-track towards reducing infant and child mortality rates by two-thirds by the year 2015, and is also reported as being on-track towards attainment of the target on access to clean drinkable water.

Therefore, the first phase of the extensive consultations under NICI Process boiled down to four critical poverty alleviation issues addressed under the SPA-II for The Gambia as follows:

1. Enhancing the Productive Capacity of the Poor.

1.1   Promoting labour-saving devices for Women.
1.2   Providing Access to Credit.
1.3   Re-organising Agricultural R&D to encourage labour intensive agriculture and development of small ruminants.

2. Enhancing Access to and the Performance of Social Services.

2.1   Expanding access to Basic Social Services in Rural Areas.
2.2   Delivering responsive social programs to the poor.
2.3   Enhancing sustainability and quality of social services.

3. Local Level Capacity Building.

3.1   A Political and Legislative framework for decentralisation.
3.2   Empowerment of Local Government Authorities to assume Decentralised responsibilities.

4. Promoting Participatory Communications Processes.

4.1   Enhancing Participation beyond Consultation.
4.2   Addressing Gender at National and Local Levels.
4.3   Institutionalising Dialogue between Government, Civil Society and Donors.

3. PRSP in The Gambia

The Gambia is among the poorest countries in the World. It was ranked 160th (out of 173) in the UNDP Human Development Index (HDI)[4]. A series of exogenous shocks in the 1970s and 1980s, coupled with inappropriate policies led to a decline in average GDP growth from 7.25% during the 70s to 3.25% during the late eighties. The narrow resource base is a major inhibiting factor to economic resilience, aggravated by a high population growth rate.

Positive results in terms of stabilisation under the economic reform program and its successor program (PSD) could not be sustained as the economy suffered adverse shocks, including the coup of 1994, which adversely affected tourism and aid inflows, the devaluation of the CFA franc and the declining world market prices for the primary export crop, groundnut. Consequently, real GDP growth declined from 5% in 1992 to about 1.7% during 1993-1996.

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[3] *" An Assessment of Progress towards the Targets of the 1998 Second Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICADII)", World Bank Working Paper Series, September 2001.*

[4] UNDP Human Development Report 2003; OUP (2003)

Since 1998, the pursuit of prudent macro-economic policies and implementation of broad-based structural reforms have, together with favourable climate conditions, resulted in an improvement of the economic environment and laid the foundations for a sustained recovery. Real GDP growth increased to 5.3% between 1998-2001 and offers hope in the renewed effort to reduce poverty. The emerging situation presents an opportunity to investigate ways in which government can consolidate the achievements of successive stabilisation programs and embark on pro-poor growth.

The outlook for economic performance in The Gambia remains gloomy as the crop failure in 2002 and the rise in inflation are like to have increased the level of poverty. However, implementation of the PRSP has been weak due to limited capacity, absence of donor support and inadequate prioritization by the government[5]. The government has committed itself to address these issues during the preparation of the 2005 budget.

On the brighter side, real GDP is estimated to have grown by 7% in 2003 largely on account of a recovery in Agricultural output following the crop failure in 2002[6]. The external current account deficit is estimated to have improved and inflation as measured by 12-month changes in the official consumer price index (CPI) was 18% at the end-2003. There are no reliable data yet for 2004 on real activity or the external account. The CPI inflation rate, however, declined from 18% in January to 16% in April, 2004. The overall fiscal deficit remained unchanged from 2002 at 4.5% of GDP in 2003.

Against this back drop structural and stabilization reforms implemented so far focus on creating an enabling environment for private sector activities, which include the establishment of the Gambia Investment Promotion and Free Trade Zone, Gambia Public Procurement Agency, National Tourism Authority. Other key reforms are recognized in several other sectors for increased economic performance with programmes that support National Governance and Poverty reduction programmes. The major macroeconomic policies of the government includes:

a. Maintain real GDP growth of about 7% for the year (2004)
b. Limit average annual inflation to 14.5%
c. Contain the external current account deficit (excluding official transfer) to about 14.5% of GDP: and
d. Replenish gross international reserves to about 5 months of imports of goods and services

In 2005, the objective of the government is to sustain real GDP growth at 5% and reduce average annual inflation further to around 6%. With the expected return of donor support, the government intends to significantly increase PRSP-related expenditures. The government further envisages that with expected overall improvement in public finances in 2004 would allow some accommodation of these expenditures. Real GDP is now projected to reach 8 percent by end-December, 2004, compared with 7 percent in 2003, as a result of stronger than expected performance of crops, other than groundnuts[7]. Inflation has declined from 17.9 percent in September, 2003, to 12.3 percent in September, 2004, and it is now projected to further drop to 10.5 percent by end-December 2004. The projections in certain quarters of Government are that we may close the year with an inflation rate of 9 percent. Food inflation declined from 19.8 percent a year earlier to 14.2 percent, while non-food inflation dropped from 14.2 percent to 8.3 percent. The budget deficit, which was projected at 11.6 percent of GDP at the beginning of the year, will now close at 3.7 percent of GDP. There will be a basic primary surplus of D1021.8 million, or 8 percent of GDP, an improvement from the actual outcome of 3.7 percent of GDP in 2003.

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[5] *Memorandum of Economic and Financial Policies for July 1 – December 31, 2004*; IMF Staff-Monitored Program for The Gambia, DOSFEA (2004)

[6] The recovery in agricultural production contributed 3.5% percentage points to the estimated growth of GDP.

[7] Statement by the Secretary of State for Finance and Economic Affairs on the presentation of the estimates of revenues, recurrent and development expenditures for fiscal year 2005 to the National Assembly on 29th Nov 2004.

The Government has also undertaken structural reforms in a number of areas, including the passage by the National Assembly of the Budget Management and Accountability Act and the National Revenue Authority Act. The present sitting of the National Assembly will consider The Income and Sales Tax Bill, and also hopefully, a new Central Bank Bill.

To sum up, in the words of report from the IMF Staff visit in Oct-Nov 2004[8], the strengthening of financial policies that began in Sept 2003 has continued through the third quarter of 2004 and all the quantitative indicative targets that were agreed in June 2004 for end-September have been met. Given the current strength of policy implementation the target for end-December 2004 should also be met.

Against this backdrop, social and poverty reduction program expenditure has suffered in the past two years from the tight fiscal conditions and necessity to restore fiscal viability. The government has now committed to give priority to spending on these programs. Furthermore, it has decided to pay more attention to PRSP expenditures in preparing the budget for 2005 seeking to incorporate input from census and household survey, recommendations of PRSP Progress Report, World Bank's public expenditure review and reports from line ministries of Health, Education and Agriculture. To ensure implementation of these policies the SPACO will play a greater role in budget preparation process in consultation with DOSFEA and other line ministries.

The domestic fund allocated to PRSP expenditure (excluding debt services) for 2005 is set at 28.3%, a slight drop from the benchmark of 30%. The government's stated policy and commitment is to align the budget with the PRSP and increase pro-poor spending[9]. However, much have to be done for a comprehensive classification of Poverty Reducing expenditures in both budget formulation and reporting. In this regard the NICI policy and plans envisages that the budget and planning departments of the state will recognize the investment in ICT led initiatives as poverty-reduction activities rather than investment in ICT par se. The NICI policy and plans, therefore,

4. Linking the Development Intent

> *ICTs are not just another sector of economic and social development. On the contrary...the ICT revolution can provide powerful new tools both for addressing people's basic needs and for enriching the lives of poor people and communities in unprecedented ways. ...Creating digital opportunities is not something that happens after addressing the "core" development challenges, it is a key component of addressing those challenges in the 21st century....Development efforts will not realize their full potential if they remain limited to traditional approaches to development and international cooperation[10].*

The paradigm shift in the poverty reduction initiatives in the recent decades has "gradually replaced the prescriptive, mainly donor-driven structural adjustment programs (SAP) of the seventies and eighties". A new vision of development co-operation based on "…partnership, ownership, country leadership, broad-based participation, development effectiveness and accountability", is a welcome change for Highly Indebted Poor Countries such as The Gambia[11].

Though the beneficial impacts of ICT in the overall development of a country is hardly questioned, incorporating the ICT tools in the 'transformational' process developing economies into the

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[8] *Concluding Statement of IMF Staff Visit*, Oct 21- Nov 3, 2004; DOSFEA
[9] Statement by the Hon. Secretary of State, DOSFEA on 29 Nov 2004 in the National Assembly while presenting Estimates of Revenue, Recurrent & Development Expenditure for FY 2005
[10] Creating Digital Opportunities for All: Meeting the Challenge, 2001
[11] T*he Gambia: Second Strategy for Poverty Alleviation (SPA- II)*: Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper

emerging Information Society is a delicate scenario[12]. While the link between ICT initiatives and socio-economic development results are to still to be thoroughly researched the controversy continues to surround ICT interventions in development programmes doubting these efforts being "techno-quick fix" or "unacceptable tradeoffs" in terms of investments[13].

Socio-Economic Development of any society today engulfs a much wider area today. Beyond money-matters it also touches more humane aspects of people's lives like standards of living. To cover this dimension of development our initiatives should offer multiple opportunities to achieve economic prosperity as well as to improve quality of life. In other words, the issue here is whether we are following an agenda for "ICT Development" as sectoral growth only or "ICT for Development" as the ultimate poverty alleviation goal. More precisely, under our PRSP activities are we ready to sustain ICT led initiatives with in-country human resources, budgetary allocations and supporting regulatory environment as an integral tool for poverty reduction?

The development of a NICI policy for The Gambia, therefore, provided an opportunity to deliberate on the goals of country's development efforts specifically those aimed at poverty reduction as well as the efficiency and transparency of its administrative structures, institutions and strategies. This collective reflection led to a road map from poverty alleviation objectives to the ICT policy and plans.

5. Illustrating the PRSP based ICT Policy

The draft NICI Policy of The Gambia contains a number of items that covers the PRSP objectives and tries to support those goals through ICT led plans of action. However, it is observed that a number of social, cultural, religious or other factors positively or negatively affect the adoption and diffusion of ICT. For instance, certain cultural or religious practices may prevent women to leverage the benefits if ICT as compared to their male counterparts. Therefore, potential linkages between different sectors of the economy focusing on cross-sectoral issues will help us to forestall potential problems in this regard. The following table/extract from the draft policy illustrates some of these major initiatives that proposed for next five years. This is a tentative list as emerged from country-wide consultations with the stakeholders and from presentation made by the participants at a National Workshop held in Banjul from 29 Nov to 1st Dec 2004. Many other activities / action items are expected to be included in the final plan that is expected to be validated by February 2005.

PRSP Objective	NICI Policy & Plans
1. Enhancing the Productive Capacity of the Poor.	
a. Promoting labour-saving devices for Women.	Rural Multimedia Centres for Women
b. Providing Access to Credit.	Credit / Loan Opportunities Information online
c. Re-organising Agricultural R&D to encourage labour intensive agriculture and development of small ruminants.	Agricultural Information Systems for rural community information centres
Enhancing Access to and the Performance of Social Services.	
a. Expanding access to Basic Social Services in Rural Areas.	Launching e-Government Initiatives / providing access at local area councils
b. Delivering responsive social programs to the poor.	

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[12] Tools for Development: Using Information and Communications Technology to Achieve the Millennium Development Goal: Working Paper; United Nations ICT Task Force, 2003.
[13] Ibid.

	PRSP Objective	NICI Policy & Plans
c.	Enhancing sustainability and quality of social services.	
Local Level Capacity Building.		
a.	A Political and Legislative framework for decentralisation.	Local Government Leadership Training for LG representatives
b.	Empowerment of Local Government Authorities to assume Decentralised responsibilities.	

PRSP Objective		NICI Policy & Plans
Promoting Participatory Communications Processes.		
a.	Enhancing Participation beyond Consultation.	Planning Feedback / Local Govt Representative Links up to the National Assembly level
b.	Addressing Gender at National and Local Levels.	Women Bureau's Rural Multimedia Centres as the participatory hub/link to the national development processes /programs.
c.	Institutionalising Dialogue between Government, Civil Society and Donors.	NGO / CSO links through NGO associations (eg. TAGNO, Action Aid in The Gambia)

6. Reinforcing PRSP and Millennium Development Goals through NICI

As the PRSP objectives influence the NICI policy & plans, the PRSP activities are in turn envisaged to be guided by the ICT led initiatives outlined in the NICI policy. It's a complementary process intermingled with the overall direction towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). In a graphic illustration (Figure:1) the areas where both PRSP aims and NICI objectives complement each other may be marked as a common priority area of MDGs. In other words, the NICI Policy and Plans are not only a means to achieve the PRSP goals but also a way to sustain the ICT led poverty alleviation activities through PRSP funding and planning process of the country. In this way the NICI plan activities are expected to be supported in the long run as a regular national activities rather than as one time, donor-driven, isolated pilot initiatives that are often abandoned after the donor has left of the pilot phase is over. In the case of The Gambia, for instance, as indicated earlier 28.3% of the domestic fund are set to be allocated for PRSP activities. The NICI plan activities are therefore aptly justified to seek a portion of this allocation for its ICT led activities that are in line with the PRSP goals.
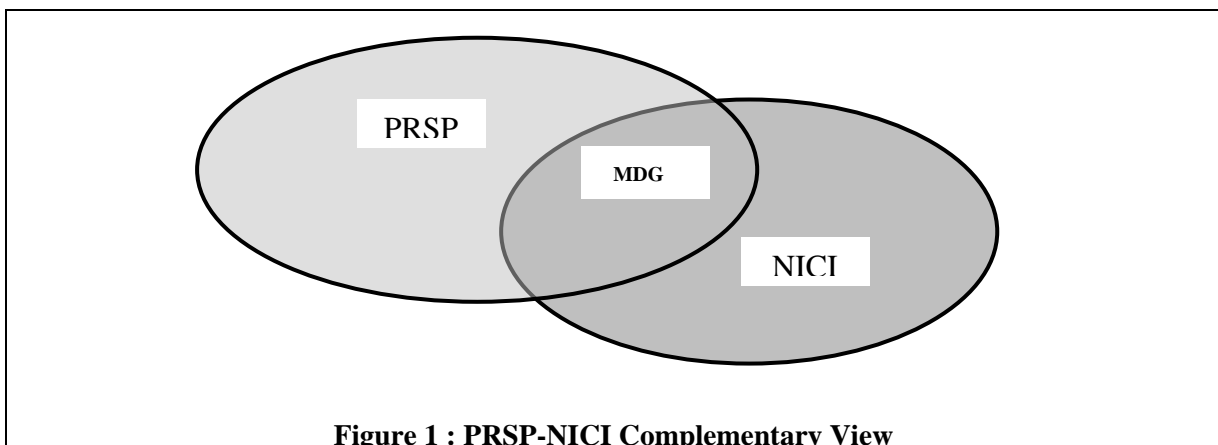

Figure 1 : PRSP-NICI Complementary View

Further, as discussed earlier the MDGs and their timely attainment constituted a benchmark for the development initiatives in The Gambia. While developing the NICI policy and plans the goals for the sustainable human development were taken acre of by mainstreaming ICT led action plans against each of the MDG goals. Poverty reduction is at the root of the human development efforts and this has been incorporated in the NICI policy and plans through attending the PRSP objectives as illustrated above. The other MDGs like universal primary education have been seen as a 'social interaction' dimension of development and as such ICT are intended to be used as a tool for more efficient and cost-effective channel of teacher training specially through Open and Distance Learning (ODL) mode, multimedia instructions as well as for educational planning and administration (e.g. EMIS)[14]. The prevalent bias in educational opportunities towards urban and male population in Africa can well be minimized through judicious use of appropriate ICT tools for delivery of knowledge and information at the doorsteps of the rural and marginalized sections (women / Youth) of the society. That brings us to another prime MDG: gender equality and empowerment of women. The most prominent obstacle to the women's access to knowledge and information leading to the limited opportunities for their economic upliftment is their restricted mobility. With access to ICT facilities these women can overcome both physical and socio-cultural distance and increase their capacity for income generation. The recently opened Rural Multimedia Centers for Women in The Gambia under the auspices of the Women's Bureau is an early fruit of the NICI Plan. More such centers are going to come up in near future. Social service delivery aspects of the other MDGs focusing on reducing child mortality, improving maternal health and combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other disease

7. Emerging Issues from the WSIS Regional Conference:

The Pre-Conference Workshop on "ICT and Poverty Reduction" organized during the Accra Regional Preparatory Conference for World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) held on 29th January 2005 was devoted to the issues of attending poverty reduction agenda of African countries through planned and sustained use of ICT tools in various developmental initiatives in different sectors. Presentations from the experts and interventions by the participants raised a number of relevant issues, challenges in this arena.

One of the issues was the question of defining poverty in terms of evaluation possible post-intervention impact of ICT. Defining poverty *par se* is a difficult and complex issue. Poverty is generally defined as when the level of total earnings is insufficient to obtain the minimum necessities for the maintenance of "merely physical efficiency," including food, rent, and other items. In other words, when people, for one reason or another, cannot fulfill their full potential due to physical, social, psychological and monetary factors. Selected Poverty Reduction Strategies includes enhancing opportunities for poor people by stimulating overall growth and by building up their assets e.g., land and education and increasing the returns on these assets through a combination of market and non-market actions.

ICT initiatives primary aligned with poverty reduction programmes in Africa often highlights a 'double trouble' in rural areas where ICT resources do not reach[15]. The digital divide is plural and bifocal and tend to boost the existing divides between rich and poor, gender disparity and so on. In Africa, more then half the population is illiterate or low literate making it difficult for the possible success of ICT led intervention that are biased towards Internet based services. This situation calls for a pragmatic blending of the existing ICT facilities like Community Radio broadcasts and national TV Channels. We need to plan the extensive use of traditional media and ICT linking farmers, their representatives and rural service providers with one another to enhance resources and services minimizing operational costs and increasing financial sustainability of such initiatives in the rural areas.

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[14] Education Management Information System
[15] Chisenga, Justin: Presentation on "FAO Strategic Framework for Bridging the Rural Digital Divide" at Accra Regional Conference on WSIS, Feb 2005

The gender disparity is more prominent in poverty reduction initiatives. ICT can play a vital role in meeting this challenge. Cycle of seclusion of women should be broken with rural women joining their counterparts in the city in sharing their experience, problems and seeking solutions from lessons learnt elsewhere. An illustrative area of ICT initiatives aimed at bridging the gender disparity is helping African business women by providing information for (and on) women entrepreneurs. The online service of Entrepreneurship Development Facility[16] for Women launched in Addis Ababa in July 2004 provides the much needed support to empower women entrepreneurs to handle their business more efficiently. Similar one-stop website for women entrepreneurs is required to provide women with necessary business related information.

One of the major poverty reduction strategy is to improving quality in education in a given society and ICT can definitely help in training more efficient teachers that will improve the quality of education in school system throughout Africa. The improvement in the quality of education is a major challenge to attend the poverty reduction strategies that can be supported by ICT tools. Teachers are not adequately equipped and most of them don't have capability development opportunities after their initial teacher training. While the capacity of a nation depends on quality of education, these teachers are not able to deploy qualitative education[17]. Literacy isn't about reading or writing in English. South Africa was 46th (bottom of the list) in the international evaluation (Ghana was 45th). This situation demands a change in the way we've been doing things in education sector. It appears that national ICT policies in many countries do not promote ICT literacy throughout society – specially in poorest communities. Perhaps, we need to bring the rural educated youths into the process to help in spreading ICT education in rural areas through community based organisations. We also should identify potential successes and scale them up to get a desired multiplier effect.

The debate about how ICT can solve the age-long problem of poverty, the question of "bread or computers" is far from over. Socially harmonized ICT interventions emphasizing interrelationship between ICT and poverty reduction will need partnership with the poor themselves in order to understand their needs. A collaborative approach will help overcome the cost restraints of helping poor people have access to tools and resources. The macro-economic dimension of poverty reduction strategies calls for taking economic growth to the poor[18]. Unless policies are introduced that support a pro-poor approach in economic growth, poorer sections of the society may not benefit from economic growth. There is the possibility that nations have increased economic growth while the poor don't get better – even though the rich do.

Though it is the most fundamental aspect of information society, our ICT programmes are often follow a sectoral, isolated approach without properly creating enabling environments for giving people an opportunity to improve their standards of lives. Often an agenda for "ICT Development" becomes more prominent as a sectoral growth only rather that "ICT for Development" as the ultimate goal. Therefore, **p**overty reduction strategies (PRSP) should be integrated to the NICI Policies & Plans. NICI Policies and plans are complimentary to PRSPs as poverty reduction is a major long-term objective of the NICI process itself.

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[16] Koki, Paule Assoumou, Presentation on "Women Entrepreneur's access to the Information Society" at Accra Regional Conference on WSIS, Feb 2005. Further Visit www.edf-rifed.com

[17] Anamuah-Mensah, Jophus:, Presentation on ICT in the Promotion of Teacher Development at Accra Regional Conference on WSIS. Feb 2005.

[18] Batchelor, S: Presentation on ICT Contribution to Economic Growth and Poverty Reduction at Accra Regional Conference on WSIS. Feb 2005.

8. Conclusion

In developing ICT policies for poverty reduction, "ACTION" model may be followed through six phases in the NICI process: <u>A</u>nalysis, <u>C</u>onsultation, <u>T</u>argets/Pillars, <u>I</u>ntegration, <u>O</u>rganisation and <u>N</u>ational Commitment. In this process the MDG should be focused as the common ground between the NICI and PRSP processes. Success stories like Virtual Extension Research and Communication Network (VERCON); Rural Radio; Farmers Information Network (FarmNET); Information Management Resource Kit (IMARK) should be followed.

As content is the key for information and communication, the pro-poor ICT initiativej should attend to the increase in youth and adult literacy in a long term approach to poverty reduction through ICT tools. In providing a channel of communication between public and the government ICT facilities should be available to the marginalized in order to carry crucial input back to the poverty reduction initiatives with feedback for further review and planning of the PRSPs. Community Radio broadcasts can be used to empower the rural women with opportunities to opt for innovative and small entrepreneurial solutions in villages.

Geoinformation systems should be used in poverty mapping and planning interventions as Geoinformation helps identify, based on calligraphic representations, what needs to be done and how to plan such programs. Online resources for the entrepreneurs should be supported in a regional basis and more locale specific sites in this line should be initiated. ICT is traditionally seen as a separate sector or department putting it apart from other sectors like Agriculture or Education. To attend to the poverty reduction need of the region, the cross-cutting nature of the ICT as a tool for development should be recognized with both fund allocation from the national budgets and a participatory multi-sectoral approach in program implementation.

To sum up, poverty alleviation strategies all over the world focused on the basic humane issue of improving quality of people's lives. In pursuing that prime objective many a time we created straightjacket agenda narrowing our vision to a few sectoral and specific objectives. NICI Policies and Plans, as envisaged under the AISI framework, seeks to broaden that view integrating country's PRSP to the NICI policies and plans and sew all cross-sectoral issues in an ICT thread to support the poverty reduction strategies in a more efficient and responsive way. In all these ICT led action plans, what the NICI policy aims to achieve is not the development of ICT sector itself (though it may for a sectoral agenda) but the socio-economic development of the people through pragmatic use of ICT. To conclude with the words of Dr Ben Ngubane, the Minister for the Arts, Culture, Science & Technology of South Africa:

> *The impact of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) on Development has been amply charted in the last decade of the outgoing century as a multi-dimensional, multi-stakeholder and pervasive process. So significant is this impact that those that have the capacity to apply these technologies have witnessed rates of development that continue to fuel the Digital Divide[19].*

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[19] Preface to *Guidelines for Sectoral ICT Policy and Planning A Consultation Document)*; The Commonwealth Network of IT for Development (COMNET- IT) and The Commonwealth Secretariat, 2001

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