CANADA FUND FOR AFRICA

Connectivity Africa

Project description

At the Kananaskis Summit, the Prime Minister announced, as part of Canada's response to the G8 Africa Action Plan, three initiatives in support of the work of the Digital Opportunity Task Force (www.dotforce.org), an international coalition of government, industry and civil society organizations, successfully led by Canada during the past year to help bridge the global Digital Divide. One of these initiatives includes the establishment of an initiative called Connectivity Africa, which aims to improve access to information and communication technologies (ICTs)[1] in Africa.

The International Development Research Centre (IDRC), in partnership with the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), will implement Connectivity Africa. The initiative will support research, development and innovative uses of ICT applications in education, health, and economic development. Connectivity Africa will be managed by staff based at each of IDRC's regional offices in Cairo, Dakar, Nairobi and MidRand and will work closely with IDRC's Acacia initiative, which has been working since 1996 to empower sub-Saharan African communities through the use of ICTs. Connectivity Africa will also partner closely with other Africa-focused ICT initiatives such as DFID's CATIA project and the French government's ADEN network.

The initiative will operate as a network developed from the ground up, based on local demand from African partners. Connectivity Africa staff will engage African institutions to develop and fund projects under the following four program areas:

- *Innovation in the Use of ICTs*: will focus on emerging information and communication technologies that may have application in the African context, in particular, innovations for low-cost, robust access in rural and urban areas;
- *African Regional ICT Futures* will help to connect national strategies with regional infrastructure priorities and seek to support the development of intra-regional connectivity throughout the African continent;
- *R&D in African ICTs* will build capacity in African institutions for innovation and research in the area of ICTs. In particular, it will support the develop of an African *observatoire* on the diffusion and use of ICTs in Africa; and,
- *Partnership and Convergence* will promote organization, electronic networking and information sharing among existing and new programs, practitioners, researchers and participants involved with ICTs for development in Africa. It will also develop co-ordination mechanisms with all donors involved with African ICT for development.

Connectivity Africa will also seek to draw on CIDA and Industry Canada's expertise in adapting the Connecting Canadians agenda to the African context.

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[1] Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) is the term given to define the sector encompassing all converging technologies that carry information—it includes traditional telecommunications, informatics, broadcasting (radio and TV), cable television, multimedia Internet, Geographic Information Systems, etc.

Complementary to Connectivity Africa is the Open Knowledge Network (OKN), a DOT Force initiative, which aims to promote the creation and exchange of local content as widely as possible across the South. The project focuses on five key approaches: providing access to Internet content without the need to go on-line, through the use of local PCs or Intranet telecentres; promoting local content creation; standardizing exchanges of digital content worldwide; knowledge networking and translators across the South; and developing new forms of copyright licenses. The results of OKN's work will be shared among partners of Connectivity Africa. OKN will be a significant partner of the Connectivity Africa.

Links with NEPAD, the Africa Action Plan and Canada's Response

The NEPAD makes it clear that there is a serious infrastructure deficit across the Africa continent. The programming and operational activities to be undertaken in support of Connectivity Africa will add value to existing activities of donor agencies and private investors in order to leverage the greatest developmental impact of investments in ICTs. This will occur most notably through the sharing of experiences among African practitioners, particularly the sharing of information related to national strategies and connectivity issues, as well as through the fostering of linkages between private and public sector institutions in Africa.

The NEPAD outlines key objectives that are directly relevant to the activities of Connectivity Africa, such as lowering the costs of ICTs and improving reliability of service. Signatories to the NEPAD wish to promote sustainable social and economic development through improved public sector capacity that will in turn promote economic growth and development. There is still a critical information and operational gap in the development of policy, which is the best enabling environment for investment in this area. Connectivity Africa will address this gap through the enhancement of community access to ICTs. The creation and funding of Connectivity Africa will ensure that Canada responds to the new reality of the role of ICTs in African economic development, particularly at the community level.

From a development perspective, it is fundamental that investments in communication, information and knowledge help to reduce poverty. ICTs can be effective tools used to empower poor people so they can grasp economic and social opportunities, as well as deal more effectively with misfortunes and disasters. To a large extent, this means that ICTs need to be conveyors of locally relevant content. They need to provide opportunities for local people to interact and communicate with each other, express their ideas, knowledge, and culture – in their own languages. Local content is the expression of the locally owned and adapted knowledge of a community. The OKN will support efforts by poor people in developing countries to create and exchange useful, potentially wealth-generating, content via ICTs. Connectivity Africa will promote the development and distribution of local content in Africa through its association with the OKN project.

Additionally, this initiative is in line with CIDA's *Strategy on Knowledge for Development Through ICTs*. The strategy specifically promotes the creation of strategic institutional partnerships, as well programming in three areas: (a) using ICTs as tools for development in various sectors; (b) building enabling environments through support for policy and capacity development; and (c) supporting knowledge sharing and networking with the help of ICTs.

Lessons Learned

Connectivity Africa will draw on Canadian experience gained through the development of the Institute for Connectivity in the Americas (ICA) and IDRC's Acacia program in Africa. It will also apply Canadian expertise and connectivity models, such as SchoolNet and its components, to the African context – especially in relation to education, health and community development.

IDRC has extensive experience in the integration of ICTs for Development in Africa through its Acacia program, which has successfully operated there since 1996. The experience of IDRC's Acacia program demonstrates that when civil society, public sector and private sector are engaged in the use of new ICTs the policy frameworks, products and services are effectively demand driven. A policy of inclusiveness is essential at the pan-African, regional and local levels in order to support useful, sustainable development and collaboration with other organizations and programs working in the sector.

Partnership Strategy

Connectivity Africa will operate mainly through a network of partners, practitioners, researchers and other interested stakeholders. A small, African-based staff will manage the initiative. Connectivity Africa will work to incubate a number of its core activities in partner institutions in Africa. These partners will come from a wide range of African organizations, such as the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), the African Development Bank, the Development Bank of Southern Africa, the Southern African Development Commission, the Economic Community of West African States, the West African Economic and Monetary Union, Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa, and the Arab Planning Institute. Additionally, Connectivity Africa will draw on expertise from Canadian agencies including Industry Canada, the National Research Council, DFAIT and CIDA.

Connectivity Africa is being developed in conjunction with the work of other DOT Force partners in connectivity issues, notably France, UK, Sweden, La Francophonie, Commonwealth Telecommunications Organization and the Institute for International Communication and Development (IICD) in the Netherlands. Connectivity Africa will also seek to complement the work of the DOT Force's International e-Development Resource Network (IeDRN) initiative, which is also being supported by the Canada Fund for Africa as part of the Fund's Canadian e-Policy Resource Centre (CePRC) for Africa program.

The Open Knowledge Network (OKN) is being developed under the leadership of OneWorld International (www.oneworld.net), with initial support from the UK Government and the IICD. The OKN will continue with the multi-sectoral approach adopted by the DOT Force, bringing together a range of partners from government, private sector and civil society. Bellanet (www.bellanet.org), a partner of OneWorld, CIDA and IDRC, offers a communications network reaching out to most partners involved and will be involved in both Connectivity Africa and the OKN.