AFTERNOON SPEECH

Outlining a Policy Framework For a National Information Communication Technology (ICT) Policy In The Gambia

Theme: "Towards full utilization of ICT Potential"

Muhammadou M.O. Kah, Ph.D.
School of Business-Camden, Rutgers University, New Jersey, USA
E-Mail **mkah@crab.rutgers.edu**

Mr. Chairman, Ladies & gentlemen, Good Afternoon. Kindly, allow me to share some thoughts with you before sharing my power point presentation.

Please note that some of the ideas that will be generated from this forum will be both conceptual and practical. Some of these conceptual notions facilitate discussion and the development of theoretical models and policies; whereas practical concerns are geared towards somewhat more "realistic" options that can be examined, developed into policies that could be implemented by policy makers. The substance of these recommendations should come from you, nor I or consultants' but should emanate from the public and private sectors, NGO's, civil society and all concerned Gambians.

We should avoid going off tangent in our discussions and deliberations during the working groups, we should avoid shutting down ideas by any of the participants, every participant should have the right to voice his or her opinion during discussions on issues relevant to the working groups' given task, avoid discussions and arguments off topic, again focus your views to relevant policy issues and concerns. Be sensitive to time when making a point, do not take more time than necessary to put forth a point. The facilitator should capture all policy issues, concerns and propositions.

The working group should then take some time towards the end of their deliberations to come up with a list of agreed ICT policies for the Gambia, ICT policy issues, policy concerns, policy clarifications, policy challenges and policy proposition on each identified issue.

The working groups should then identify the vision of the policy issue, the objective of the policy issue, the proposed strategies of the policy issue, the potential strength of the policy proposition, the potential weakness of the policy proposition, the potential opportunity of the policy proposition, potential threat to the proposed policy. These will be captured on a sheet of paper taped around the hall.

We will all re-convene and each of the chairs of the working groups will quickly share the groups' propositions. We will then as a group rank order all the policy issues for each of the working group, rank order all the policy propositions and try to agree on the draft language of the ICT policy propositions as well as a draft ICT policy vision. These will then be typed and circulated amongst all participants for their feedback and please lets adhere to the expected return dates specified on the draft documents.

Your voice could only be heard if you return your comments on the draft document. The draft document will then be submitted to the ICT taskforce for final deliberation and writing of the actual Draft policy document that will be submitted to the SOSICT who will either endorse it and circulated it to NAM ICT sub-committee, who will table, endorse and circulate it to all NAM members for comments and suggestions with a return deadline to the SOSICT, who will then

prepare the final National ICT policy and present it to NAM for final endorsement and then submit to HE for his final signature and enactment.

Then, SOSCIT will then embark upon developing A National ICT Master Plan, a blue print to digitize The Gambia. This will be guided by the enacted policy guideline and ICT vision for the country. A Master ICT Strategic plan will be developed, SOSCIT will then implement it. They will also guide other SOS's to develop their own ICT strategic plan based on the SOSICT's Master Strategic Plan.

Also note that, in all these efforts one must allow flexibility and know that these plans/blueprints are not static, technology changes quite swiftly, perhaps before completing the blue print some of the assumptions might no longer hold and are invalid or proposed technologies are outdated. Thus, the reason to act and move fast cannot be overemphasized.

 ICT is unlike any process or government entity seen thus far. Failures will happen, mistakes will be made, although, these are not suppose to be too often, for the cost could be high. Requires a knowledgeable person to run things, a buddy system does not drive ICT, only competence should be the measure.

Qualified young Gambians should be scouted out immediately, provided with incentives and opportunity to fully participate in these efforts. It is this generation that will be writing our indigenous software applications and building our networks. So why not give them the opportunity. As a matter of fact, they are already doing it in the private sector and successfully, may I add, some of these Gambians are in this room, employing a lot of young, professional Gambians who would have been expecting jobs from government. .

Below is a conceptual model of an Information Based Economic Development Model for The Gambia. The illustration in Figure 1 shows how telecommunications fits into a general economic development model. Essentially, it is hypothesized that some specific features of telecommunications can impact information technology *and* economic growth; also other features of *information technology* can also impact economic growth. These, in turn, both directly and transitively, impact several other economic variables such as decision-making, economic and organizational performance, national information infrastructures, and the information-based economy (IBE).

Figure 1: INFORMATION BASED ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT MODEL FOR THE GAMBIA
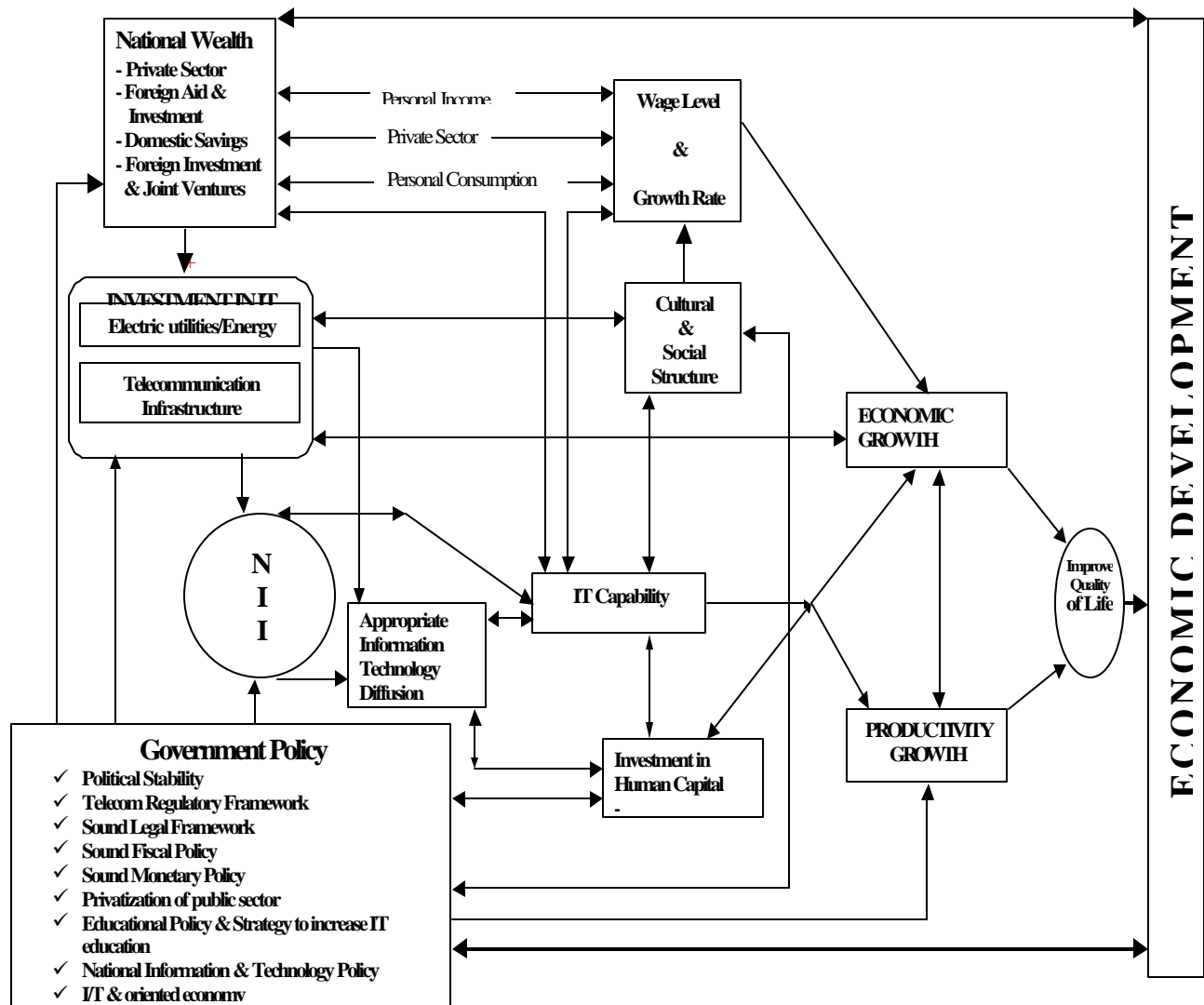
Source: Adapted from Kah (1999)

Information Based Economic Development Model for The Gambian Government: A Conceptual Framework

The starting point of the information-based economic development strategy for the Gambian government involves taking the decision to use information technology to harness economic growth. This should be done by moving beyond rhetoric to strategizing and implementing key policy changes in the telecommunications regulatory framework, nurturing a stable political environment (which impacts greatly on attracting foreign investment), and creating solid fiscal and monetary policies. Privatization of the public sector has already been started in the agricultural, education and tourism sectors. Through a national information and technology policy, privatization should be initiated and implemented in the telecommunications sector. The national information infrastructure is instrumental in determining viable policies, as discussed in this model (figure 1).

Investment in information technology includes not only telecommunications infrastructure, but also electric utilities/energy upgrades to meet the demand. Adequate and reliable energy is very essential to the development, delivery and use of information technology services.

We all know the disparities of access to Energy and historical unreliability of energy where access is presence. We as a nation have equity issues with reference to access to energy, majority of Gambians don't have access to one nor does majority of schools especially in the rural areas. We also know that, one of the infrastructure needs of ICT use and deployment is availability and reliability of energy, mostly, electricity

Appropriate technology diffusion will emanate from appropriate government policy, implementation of a national information technology strategy and adequate sustainable information technology investments. Investments in information technology cannot be considered in a vacuum without assessing the national wealth of the country and how to create or have access to investment dollars. National wealth is largely impacted by governmental policies, which create the environment with which to accumulate investment dollars at home, and attract foreign investment and joint ventures. Once the above-mentioned information technology investments and concerted policy changes are in place, wage levels and employment growth rates will rise. The government's investment in human capital, by creating more opportunities for people to train in information technology, will help to boost the country's information technology capability. This will require a commitment by government to put in place and implement a sustainable information technology strategy to build an IT infrastructure for the entire educational sector, a plan for IT training, management and use. This will require strategic partnership with the private sector and relevant government and parastatals.

This enhanced information capability will impact upon cultural and social structures, changing people's expectations and demands of their government. This, in turn, will impact upon government policies. Productivity and economic growth should be achieved once all the different components depicted in figure 1 start working synergistically. This will feed back in human capital and information technology investments, thereby bringing about improved quality of life and economic development in The Gambia. Figure 1, below, schematically shows an information-based economic development model for developing countries.

The government's role is central to the development of information technology in developing countries by providing political stability and the regulatory and legal framework to allow IT to flourish. The government's role in ensuring that education policy takes into account the human capital needs of an information economy is also highlighted in this diagram. Governments in developing countries can develop and implement Information technology policies through a National Information Infrastructure (NII) board. The diagram shows how appropriate information technology policies are linked to wealth creation, which can translate into economic growth.

Conclusion

The Gambia case reveals two lessons: Firstly, national telecommunications and information technology policies are inseparable, even when their formulation is not well integrated. Secondly, information technology policies are dynamic, and shift as the internal and external context changes. Information infrastructure is obviously an important source of economic and social value, even though it is difficult to quantify precisely the economic value of information services. The strong, two-way link between economic growth and investment in

telecommunications infrastructure (see Karlsson, 1993) resonates with the theoretical views of Reich (1991), who sees human capital and infrastructure as key determinants of development, and Porter (1990), who identifies a strong link between economic success and the development of national infrastructure and support. The Gambia is partly equipped to be a major player in the information economy given its Internet gateway/infrastructure, modern fiber-optic laid infrastructure. However, the following are recommended:

- ✓ Gambian policy makers should plan for a comprehensive and carefully targeted ICT human capital stock to reap the benefits of ICT and to remedy the challenges of shortage of capital and technology know-how;
- ✓ Adequate knowledge of ICT and the adoption of appropriate information technology management principles in addition to building and implementing a sustainable information technology infrastructure in all government entities;
- ✓ Realize that ICT is not Software, Hardware and Networks only, it is much broader than that, have a broader perspective of ICT and be cognizant of the basic requirements and ingredients.
- ✓ Have a thorough evaluation and mapping of our institutions and their unique processes, unique management context, inter-relationships and then view ICT as both an actor and enabler.
- ✓ Have professionals with adequate ICT knowledge work with knowledgeable institutional professionals who might not necessarily be knowledgeable about ICT but are thorough with the local institutional realities and processes.
- ✓ Create an environment to harness private sector investment through partnership with the public sector, including strategic equity partnerships, joint operating schemes and business co-operation contracts;
- ✓ Increase the use of information technology in the public sector via computerization of all government entities and the school system. It is quite important to carefully and gradually adapt e-government and e-commerce.
- ✓ Establish information technology community centers across the country to enhance access equity, avoiding concentrations only in the urban areas and provide incentives for private sector participants willing to venture or expand to the villages.
- ✓ Network all education institutions and institute a mandatory computer literacy programs in all educational entities in the country coupled with continues training of all educators..
- ✓ Strategically position the newly established University of The Gambia by appropriately integrating ICT in all of its curriculum and forge alliances with carefully build up "high end" ICT training institution to be establish by the public sector or in partnership with the private sector or preferably by competent Gambian entrepreneurs with the support of government and position it as an "ICT training hub" not only for the Gambia but also to the entire West Africa region. This requires huge investments and a commitment on the part of policy makers, but the long-term returns are huge. Information technology skills must be a mandatory requirement and carefully integrated in the entire curriculum of the entire educational sector.
- ✓ Market liberalization and openness is crucial to allow the injection of competition and investments. Competition leads to better technical solutions, better delivery of services and lower prices.

✓ The telecommunication sector should be re-structured and strategically aligned in order to expand, maximize utility of its modern infrastructure and attract investment.
✓ Establish an independent multi-sector regulatory authority with competent non-political personnel reporting directly to the parliament(NAM) in addition to appropriate legal framework (copyright, security and intellectual property)
✓ Develop a Gambian information infrastructure strategy taking Gambia's local and cultural context

The above-suggested recommendations are not exhaustive nor are they meant to be prescriptive, rather to add to the many suggestions already provided.

In order to transform The Gambia into a viable economy that will benefit in this information economy, policy makers must urgently conceive and implement appropriate national information, communication, technology strategy that will undergo continuous improvement with a local and regional context view . This will facilitate furthering the economy to move-up the value-added chain by driving and aligning ICT into all sectors. This will also facilitate the process of appropriate and sustainable computerization and then "informatization" of The Gambia. A strategic ICT for The Gambia also facilitates the role of government to develop, maintain and continue to improve an appropriate ICT infrastructure and to maintain a positive investment climate to attract investors as well as sophisticated users to be part of and benefit from the thriving info-economy.

I will now turn to my Power point presentation to share with you suggestions and thoughts on outlining a Framework for developing an ICT policy in The Gambia.