

THE “e” IN eMPLOYMENT

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Introduction: Youth Employment in Africa

The proof of sustainability of any enterprise, people-group or structure is the young people the system can equip for the days ahead. If these youth are either unemployed today or unsure of employment when they complete their studies, there is the need to focus attention on the situation and offer creative and appropriate solutions.

Available statistics show that, because of substantial growth in the numbers of youth worldwide, more young people than ever before in history are about to enter the labor market. In the developing world there will be 700 million new entrants to the labor force between 2002 and 2010. According to the International Labor Organization, more than a billion jobs must be created to accommodate these new workers and reduce unemployment. Particularly in the developing world, where minimal economic growth is forecast, economies are unlikely to be able to absorb the available labor supply¹.

The complexity of the situation is enhanced by the fact that a significant percentage of youth population in Africa is either unemployed or underemployed. A 2002 report that puts unemployment in South Africa at 56% for youth and 23% for adults is an indicator of the strength of the menace across the continent. If there are opportunities to resolve the present situation – and I believe there are – then we must explore the possibility of engaging the processes thrown up by these opportunities.

eRevolution: Africa Responds to the Revolution

Africa missed out on earlier global opportunities but appears to be positioning itself for change in the new millennium. Attention has increased quite significantly across the continent with respect to the opportunities that Information and Communication Technologies offer for development and economic emancipation.

A few years ago, telephones were scarce commodities in Africa, but not today. Nigeria achieved its first 10 million-lines mark in early 2005 and is planning another 10 million in less than 15 months. While some will argue that this is built on wireless technologies that should not replace terrestrial infrastructure, it is worthy of note that the telecommunications industry has reached an almost-

¹ Judith Himes and Angelique Olmo, 2002. Population Resource Center

mature stage in Africa – a position that makes the continent an attraction to global players.

Internet access – albeit through public access points – has become commonplace, offices are now incomplete without computers for staff and daily operations, and policy frameworks addressing Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are becoming popular. According to the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, 35 African countries now have (at either beginning or ending stages) National Information and Communication Infrastructure (NICI) plans.

All these point to the response of the continent to what has been described as Africa's Last Chance² – the opportunity to use ICTs for accelerated development. Africa has just risen from its preparatory meeting (in Accra) towards the World Summit on the Information Society, where delegates agreed that Africa must take the opportunities that ICTs provide seriously, as they hold the potential of addressing some of Africa's dire needs – including employment.

ICTs and Employment

New economic indices reveal that the major factors of production are knowledge and technology³. The role of ICTs in increased employment opportunities cannot be ignored, as many nations across the world have been able to identify this and apply in their plan towards increased economic development.

India's prominence in the software industry, the ongoing *asianisation* of hardware technology and the response of such nations as the United Arab Emirates to ICT opportunities – and the attendant results – tell the complete story of employment opportunities provided by ICTs. In Nigeria, and many other African countries, some young people have been able to change their employment status by erecting temporary offices (kiosks, umbrella units, etc) where they provide telecommunication services such as mobile phone calls, sales of recharge cards and repair of damaged handsets.

It appears that the fact that young people are more comfortable with technology offers promises with respect to youth employment issues in Africa.

Youth Maximising ICT Opportunities

As much as ICTs promise dynamic opportunities for youth in relation to employment, ICTs are simply tools and must be engaged in order to produce results. Mobile platforms, web technologies, internet services and other ICT

² *Africa's Last Chance*: Sesan, 2004. www.gbengasesan.com/papers.htm

³ *The IEE Engineer and the Knowledge Economy*: Sesan, 2003. www.gbengasesan.com/papers.htm

delivery mechanisms are available for youth who are able to translate opportunities into livelihood ventures.

Fortunately, most of the employment opportunities provided by ICTs do not require huge start-up capitals – a mobile phone *merchant* can actually set up his *umbrella business* with less than \$100. Even if he has less, he can afford to grow his start-up capital from almost nothing by retailing recharge cards for sub-dealers.

If these opportunities exist in ICTs, why then are we not seeing dynamic change across the continent in the area of engaging ICT opportunities for employment? The answer is quite simple: some have not seen the opportunity; others assume that ICTs have a steep learning curve; and some others are ignoring opportunities – or are not prepared to follow the path of ICT opportunities because of their assumption that the *ICT pasture* is not green enough.

While the campaign for ICT opportunities in employment need to increase in tempo, youth themselves must seek to identify this dynamic opening. For those who think ICTs present high entry barriers (steep learning curve), they fail to realise that ICTs offer a wide spectrum of choices ranging from those comfortable with *newbie* to those requiring advanced attention and understanding. It is the choice of each entrant to choose which width of the spectrum best meets his/her needs, and individual learning capacity. Reality is that some ICT opportunities require no high-level thought process beyond the simple ability to sum up your income and calculate your profit at the end of the day.

Conclusion: Best Practice Examples

Across the continent, there are countless young people making a difference in their lives and that of others through ICT opportunities. From the young Nigerian multimedia design guru in Lagos (Nigeria) to the software *geek* in Namibia, and the South African *technopreneur* who is about shocking the world with his innovation, Africa has some not-too-few examples of youth to draw inspiration from when addressing the issue of youth and (un)employment.

ICTs provide a veritable platform for employment opportunities, and youth are mostly comfortable with these ICTs. This reality presents us with the opportunity of addressing a need with an appropriate opportunity. It will not be as easy as matching pegs with holes, but is worth all the necessary effort considering the present situation and the grave consequences of ignoring the situation.

Africa's response to employment opportunities provided by Information and Communication Technologies for its youth may define the final outcome of the present (un)employment situation across the continent.