ICTs and Regional Cooperation in Africa - Implication for CSOs

Lishan Adam[1]

I.   Introduction

The effort towards regional cooperation and integration[2] in Africa has a fairly long history. From the Congo Basin Treaty that emerged from the Berlin conference of 1884 to the South African Customs Union in 1910, to the Lagos Plan of Action of 1980, and to the treaty that established the African Union in 2001, the African continent has been consummated with regional cooperation and integration. In effect, the efforts to bring about regional cooperation and integration in Africa surpass that of any other regions. The World Bank estimates that there are more than 200 regional cooperation organizations in Africa of which more than 80% are inter-governmental.

As a result, there has been a proliferation of schemes operating within the same geographic area with overlapping membership and duplication of mandates, which made regional investment, trade and political and economic integration rather slow[3]. Lack of political will, social and economic problems including low productivity, heavy debt burdens, poor institutions, infrastructure and transport facilities, and recurrent conflicts have also contributed to the slow progress in cooperation among Africa countries.

---

[1] Associate Professor, Centre for Knowledge Dynamics and Decision Making, Department of Information Science, University of Stellenbosch, South Africa

[2] It is important to distinguish between regional integration and cooperation here. Regional integration involves removing trade barriers and flow of labor, capital, goods and services. Integration is often a progressive process that involves one of the following a) free (or preferential) trade areas, in which member countries reduce or eliminate trade barriers between each other b) custom unions, in which members reduce barriers to trade between each other and adopt a common external tariff c) common markets, in which members expand the basic customs union by reducing the barriers to the movement of factors of production (labor and capital) or d) economic unions where members harmonize their national economic policies. Regional cooperation on the other hand involves working towards a common purpose in areas like policy harmonization or launching joint projects or programmes. For more info see Steven Radelet, Regional Integration and Cooperation in Sub-Saharan Africa: Are Formal Trade Agreements the Right Strategy?, Harvard Institute for International Development, 1999, http://www.hiid.harvard.edu/pub/pdfs/592.pdf

[3] Global Coalition for Africa, Regional Integration in Sub-Saharan Africa, Toward rationalization and greater effectiveness, GCA/EC/02/4/2001, http://www.gca-cma.org/eecdoc01.htm#int

However, regional economic communities like Southern African Development Community (SADC) and Economic Community for West African States (ECOWAS) are making some progress. The restoration of the East African Community to promote links between Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda is one sign of concern for regional cooperation. The transitions from the Organization of African Unity to African Union and the recent proposal for a New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) have also re-ignited the interest in regional cooperation. The enlargement of the European Union is a further evidence of global attention towards the agenda of regional cooperation and integration.

Fresh global initiatives like that of the Millennium Development Goals and the rising information society on global agenda are also driving regional cooperation. Both the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the World Summit for Information Society (WSIS) have called for enhanced regional cooperation. The eighth MDG aims to "develop a global partnership for development", calls for industrialized countries to assist developing countries in achieving the seven other Goals, and urges for better regional cooperation in the south to facilitate the sharing of knowledge and resources. The WSIS Plan of Action invites "international and regional organizations to mainstream ICTs in their work programmes, to assist all levels of developing countries, and to be involved in the preparation and implementation of national action plans to support the fulfillment of the goals indicated in the declaration of principles and in this Plan of Action, taking into account the importance of regional initiatives." [4]

---

[4] ITU, Plan of Action of the World Summit for Information Society, http://www.itu.int/wsis

For these reasons, despite the unsatisfactory record so far, the promotion of regional cooperation remains an important instrument for better diffusion of ICTs and for Africa's participation in global policy issues. Cooperation is a key tool for integration into the global trading regime from a position of strength[5]. Likewise, Africa's participation in the global ICT decision-making is more likely to be influenced by more sub-regional caucusing[6] and strong regional cooperation.

Regional cooperation is not only about up-stream negotiations of the global issues or joint preparation for major events like the WSIS. While up-stream cooperation for global negotiations is relevant and vital, collaboration in the downstream direction could also be useful to form a common understanding on the application of international policies, principles and standards. Both up-stream and down-stream cooperation cannot be achieved without a strong horizontal cooperation among countries.

There are a wide variety of economic and non-economic reasons for a horizontal cooperation among countries in Africa. The increasing digital divide, the unsatisfied demand for ICT services, and the capacity limitations of individual countries all necessitate its presence. A horizontal cooperation makes capitalizing on combined productive capacity, economies of scale and scope possible. It makes dealing with regional disparity easier.

Joint spectrums plans, like the one advanced by the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of Southern Africa (TRASA) could facilitate the allocation of these scarce resources in high priority areas and reduce cross-country interferences. Regional exchange points and backbones could cut costs by eliminating transit charges. Furthermore, regional cooperation is useful in the identification of common gaps in areas such as telecommunications development, electronic commerce, standards and skills, and the filling of these gaps collectively. The purpose of this memo is to catalogue the current landscape of regional cooperation in Africa and to present the various models and the implication of this to the civil society.

---

[5] Bhattacharya, Debapriya and Mustafizur Rahman, 1999. The least developing countries in WTO: Strengthening Participation Capacities, Meeting of Senior Officials on Future WTO Trade Agenda and Developing countries, Bangkok, 1999
[6] Gillwald, Alison, Strengthening Participation by Developing Countries, In International Decision-making: Case Study of South Africa, http://link.wits.ac.za/research/SA-CTO-P.pdf

II. The Landscape of Regional Cooperation in ICT Sector in Africa

Regional cooperation in Africa tends to centre around economic and trade promotion issues, although investment cooperation in the field of infrastructure has become a desirable area of collaboration recently. Regional cooperation in the ICTs field is rather a new phenomenon and still evolving. The institutions involved in regional cooperation vary in size and scope considerably. Most of the ICT cooperation in Africa takes place at:

a) the level of Pan African bodies like the African Development Bank (ADB), African Union (AU), African Telecommunications Union (ATU) and Economic Commission for Africa (ECA). These focus largely on the up-stream participation of African countries in global negotiations and the down-stream cooperation for the implementation of global regimes/ideals at local levels

b) regional initiatives such as the Regional African Satellite Communication (RASCOM), the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) and the E-Africa Commission that aim towards promoting horizontal cooperation for the expansion of ICTs infrastructure and applications through national and international investments

c) regional Economic Communities (RECs) like the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the East African Community (EAC), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Economic Community for Central African States (CEMAC), the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC), the South African Development Community (SADC) and the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU) that focus in all aspects of cooperation (horizontal, upstream and downstream). These often focus on trade facilitation including creation of monetary unions, modernization of customs, and simplification of export and import procedures. The regional association for regulatiors attached to these RECs such as the East African Associations for Regulators, Post and Telecommunications Operators (EARPTO), the Telecommunication Regulators Association of Southern Africa (TRASA), the West African Telecommunications Regulators Association (WATRA), and a recently established Association of Regulators of Information Technology and Communications in East Africa (ARICEA) play a significant role in promoting cooperation and harmonization in the telecommunications and ICT sectors in their respective regions.

d) thematic institutions like the African Advanced Level Telecommunications Institute (AFRALTI) and L'Ecole Supérieure Multinationale des Télécommunications (ESMT) that promote regional cooperation in human resources development in the telecommunications field. There is also a thriving cooperation between |Universities and research centres with the aim to build human resources specialized in a few ICT disciplines through horizontal cooperation among selected players.

e) Emerging loosely organized research networks like the Research ICT Africa! and the African Technology Policy Studies Network (ATPSnet) that aim to increase Africa-oriented independent research in the ICT field in order to feed these into policy making.

Each of the above institutions creates different spheres for regional cooperation addressing different aspects of ICT development. The most visible regional cooperation activities take place at Pan African organisations, such as the ECA, ADB, AU and the ATU. The ECA[7] has been a key player in the ICT arena for the last twenty-five years. It is an implementing body for the African Information Society Initiative and has extensive programmes in ICT Policies, Information and Knowledge Development, Partnership, Networking and Outreach. It organizes regional workshops, seminars and supports African participation in the local, regional and global policy issues.

The ADB[8] is a development financial institution engaged in mobilising resources towards the economic and social progress in the region. Its ICT programmes mainly relate to the development of telecommunications infrastructure in Africa. ATU[9] promotes major infrastructure and human resources development programme in the area of telecommunications.

---

[7] http://www.uneca.org/aisi
[8] http://www.afdb.org
[9] http://www.atu-uat.org

The African Union[10] is the primer regional institution and the principal organization for the promotion of accelerated socio-economic integration of the continent with the spirit of greater unity and solidarity between African countries and peoples. The African Union focuses mainly on the promotion of peace, security and stability in the continent as a prerequisite for the implementation of the development and integration agenda. The Union has a Commission that promotes human resources development, ICTs, and science and technology. However, the AU is the latecomer to the ICT arena. Its ICT initiatives have been advanced through the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) [11] initiative.

The New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) is a regional development blue print with the aim of improving the African progress through peace, security, democracy and political governance; economic and corporate governance with a focus on public finance management and regional co-operation. NEPAD seeks to exchange development in these areas with global commitments to support economic, social and political development. Its priority sectors include infrastructure, information and communications technology, and human development, with a focus on health, education and skills development; agriculture, and promotion of diversification of production and exports, with a focus on the market access for African exports to industrialized countries.

NEPAD ICT programmes are steered through the E-African Commission[12] - a body composed of representatives of entities responsible for ICT activities across the continent with a secretariat based in South Africa. The Commission oversees the structured development and execution of NEPAD's flagship programmes. Current NEPAD flagship projects include an East African Submarine Cable (EASSY) that intends to link South Africa to Djibouti, a project on broadband fibre Optic links from landlocked countries to submarine cable landing stations, an overlay satellite network and an e-Schools Initiative to connect African schools to the Internet.

Regional economic communities shoulder the bulk of regional cooperation work in Africa; much of the inter-African coordination takes place through institutions like COMESA, ECOWAS, CEMAC and SADC. These have played a particularly

---

[10] http://www.Africa-union.org

[11] www.nepad.org
[12] http://www.eafricacommission.org

significant role in some aspects of ICTs, such as telecommunications regulation. Their leading role in regional consultations and studies such as harmonization of policies, regulatory frameworks and infrastructure has improved significantly.

The Southern African Development Community[13] is the most advanced of all of the regional economic communities when it comes to ICT related activities. From inception, SADC has been keen with communications. It has created the Southern Africa Transport and Communications Commission (SATCC), which is directly funded by member states. In August 2001, the SADC Summit adopted a Declaration on Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and created a task force to transform the policy document into an Action Plan consisting of policy measures to transform SADC into an information-based economy.

 The SADC Committee of Ministers has also established an e-readiness Task Force (composed of representatives of the public sector, industry, and academia) that has prepared a comprehensive report on e-readiness status in SADC and a Plan of Action. Other activities of SADC in the area of ICTs include:

- the adoption of a SADC Protocol on Education and Training that promotes the use of ICTs in curriculum development and teaching and learning.
- the Southern African Transport and Communications Commission (SATCC) Model Regulatory Framework for Telecommunications that was issued in 1998 and which paved the way for enabling regulatory framework in the region. Of the 14 member states, 11 have operating policies and autonomous regulatory authorities.

---

[13] http://www.sadc.int

- creation of the Telecommunications Regulatory Association of Southern Africa (TRASA)[14] to promote regulatory harmonization in the region. TRASA developed a Model Telecommunications Bill within the spirit of the WTO Basic Reference paper on telecommunications regulation. It has issued guidelines on interconnection, tariffs and a frequency band plan for the 2.0MHz -30.1GHZ band range. TRASA has also produced draft guidelines on universal access and services, licensing fair competition and wholesale pricing. It is currently developing guidelines in the area of wireless and satellite regulation. The Association has also developed a partnership with NetTel@Africa; an E-learning platform for training regulators in aspects ranging from ICT applications to spectrum management.

The establishment of the Southern African Telecommunications Association (SATA) that handles issues of technical standards, tariffs, sub-regional information infrastructure (SRII), and cross-border investment in satellite and public/private partnerships has been another achievement of the Southern African Development Community.

The Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa[15] is another regional group that invested substantially on ICTs development. COMESA undertook a study on interconnection and tariffs in 1998 and that led to the establishment of a regional telecommunications network, known as COMTEL, with the aim of facilitating increased trade relations within the region of eastern and southern Africa. Other COMESA ICT initiatives focused on building the capacities of its member states to harness ICTs for harmonizing and upgrading cross-border information systems in transport, customs, import/export and trade. COMESA provides technical assistance in several areas, including customs data management, network connectivity and tariffs.

More recently, COMESA has initiated programmes to harmonize ICT policies in the region as a basis for creating large markets to attract foreign investment to the region. It has adopted a drafted Model of ICT policy, which draws heavily on the SADC experiences. IT has also established an Association of Regulators of Information and Communication

---

[14] http://www.trasa.org
[15] http://www.comesa.int

in Central and Eastern Africa (ARICEA) to stimulate regulatory harmonization based on the experiences of the Telecommunications Regulators Association of Southern Africa (TRASA). It has completed a study on ICT policies in its member states.

The Economic Community for Western Africa States (ECOWAS) [16] has also become a key player in ICT areas. ECOWAS has been working on the harmonization of national sectoral policies in the region, and through a Consultative Regulatory Committee for Telecommunications it has carried out a study on harmonization of laws and regulations. ECOWAS has also established a West African Association of Regulators (WATRA) [17] that is actively engaged in promoting standardization and interconnectivity in West Africa.

The Economic Community for Central Africa States (CEMAC) [18] could also become a key player of ICT growth in that region. IT has organized a workshop on ICT for regional integration in September 2002 where the governments in the region adopted a Declaration on the harmonization of the ICT sector in the CEMAC countries, the sharing of resources, and the creation of an Association of Regulators for Central African countries.

IGAD[19] is another regional economic block that strives to promote the use of ICTs in the areas of peace, security and sustainable development. The original mandate of IGAD was to combat drought and desertification and to achieve food security. However, in 1996 this was expanded to include co-operation in political, economic and humanitarian affairs. The main focus of IGAD is now on policy harmonization, focusing on trade and transport; assisting the horn of African countries to eliminate physical and non-physical barriers to trade; and promoting regional economic integration. IGAD is promoting regional economic integration by implementing projects in transport, telecommunications, agriculture, energy and natural resources.

---

[16] http://www.ecowas.int
[17] http://www.watra.org
[18] http://193.251.137.10/
[19] http://www.igad.dj

The East African Community[20] has programmes that aim at promoting connectivity between Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. EAC has been working on a fibre network to connect Dar es Salaam, Kampala and Nairobi. Its regulatory harmonization initiative takes place through the Eastern African Regulators Postal and Telecommunications Oragnization (EARPTO).

Thematic institutions like the African Advanced Level Telecommunications Institute (AFRALTI) [21] and L'Ecole Supérieure Multinationale des Télécommunications (ESMT) [22] aim at improving regional cooperation in specialized areas of telecommunications training in English and French speaking countries respectively. Universities and research centers have also begun to enter into cooperative arrangements whereby each will specialize in a few disciplines, rather than spreading their resources thinly and ineffectively in an effort to cover a large number of academic or research areas. One good example is the establishment of the University of Science, Humanities and Engineering Partnerships in Africa (USHEPiA) [23], a program involving eight Universities across Africa to provide postgraduate fellowships, lecturing exchanges, short courses, and joint research projects. The Institute of Computer Science at the Makarere University in Uganda launched a regional progarmme in computer science and network security with a similar initiative where regional institutions share resources and fill each other's gaps. Another regional effort that harnesses ICTs for regional cooperation is the Association for Strengthening Agricultural Research in Eastern and Central Africa (ASARECA), which brings together the National Agricultural Research Institutes (NARIs) of ten African countries.

---

[20] http://www.eachq.org
[21] http://www.afralti.org
[22] http://www.esmt.sn
[23] http://web.uct.ac.za/misc/iapo/ushepia/middle.htm

Emerging loosely organized networks of researchers such as the Research ICT Africa (RIA) [24] and the African Technology Policy Studies Network (ATPSnet) [25] aim at creating regional platforms for independent research in ICT and development, policies and regulations. The ATPSnet is a multidisciplinary network of researchers, policy makers and other end-users interested in the generation, promotion and strengthening of innovative technological and industrial policies in Africa. With a regional secretariat in Nairobi, it operates through national chapters in 17 countries with an expansion plan in place to cover all of sub-Saharan Africa. Research ICT Africa seeks to fulfil a strategic gap in the development of a sustainable information society and knowledge economy on the African continent by building information communication technology (ICT) policy and regulatory research capacity in the region to form effective governance. Through a network of African researchers in over fifteen countries, it generates the information and analysis needed for appropriate but visionary policy formulation and effective regulation of ICTs across Africa.

III. Implications of Regional Cooperation Initiatives for the Civil Society

The above shows a multitude of platforms for regional cooperation in the ICT sector in Africa that often were overlooked by the Civil Society and international community. Regional cooperation organizations were historically inter-governmental and had limited space for the civil society's participation. They primarily focused on economic and political integration that required inter-governmental commitments with limited or no civil society involvement. There is, however, a growing recognition of the role of the civil society by most of the regional cooperation institutions. Thishas opened windows of opportunities for CSOs participation in regional ICT governance issues. For example, the African civil society is increasingly being represented at the forums organized by Pan African organizations like the Economic Commission for Africa.

But the civil society is generally absent from the rest of the regional cooperation platforms particularly from that of NEPAD and regional economic communities that are increasingly becoming important for the development of ICTs in Africa. Conversely, this role of regional economic communities like SADC, COMESA and ECOWAS, thematic

---

[24] http://www.reasrchictafrica.net
[25] http://www.atpsnet.org

cooperative institutions like USHEPiA and research networks like RIA does not seem to have gained broader attention. For example, there was very little discussion of WSIS issues by these organizations; regional economic communities did not play a significant role in the development of common African positions that might have had more resonance with national stakeholders[26]. This implies that there is a need for encouraging the participation of CSOs in regional platforms created by economic communities and other networks as well as improving the role of regional cooperation institutions in order to link their strong local presence in the ICT sector to the upstream negotiations at the global levels.

The civil society has a major role in bridging the gap between the activities at regional levels and the global governance issues. The major advantage to the civil society of working with regional groups is that most of these institutions are small in size and scope, thus flexible. Apart from the intergovernmental Pan African institutions like the African Union, the majority of regional cooperation institutionsinvolve many countries without formal regional boundaries. Regional economic communities like SADC have also established credibility with their constituencies that make it easier to influence collective policy decisions.

The civil society could play the following roles:

- **<u>Empowerment of regional cooperation institutions</u>** - The majority of regional organizations need introduction to complex issues of ICTs for development and related global governance. They require effective knowledge management and working information systems to provide efficient services to their stakeholders and to meet broad objectives of accelerating social and economic development, promoting peace and security, and attaining common political values. The experience of the civil society in managing knowledge and advocating for specific issues is relevant here.

- **<u>Issue identification</u>** - bringing public interest issues such as affordable access, effective resources management, privacy, security and intellectual property rights to the regional cooperation tables.

---

[26] David Souter, African Participation in WSIS: review and discussion paper, http://rights.apc.org/documents/africa_wsis_review.pdf

- **Information organization and analysis** - participation in dissemination of knowledge on on-going and proposed programmes, outcomes of forums, declarations, resolutions and best practices at the regional levels.

- **Monitoring** -serving as a watchdog to ensure that institutions and countries adhere to regional agreements. The fragmentation of ICT initiatives across various regional cooperation platforms appeals to the civil society' oversight of the duplication of efforts.

- **Mediation** - serving as a bridge between strong inward focused, horizontal initiatives of the regional economic communities' with global governance issues. It could encourage the participation of regional economic communities and other regional cooperation institutions to participate in the global governance issues.

- **Promoting change**- exerting pressure on regional institutions to produce change in key ICT for development policies and concerns

- **Promoting participation of all actors** - securing the active participation of various stakeholders in development of ICTs, policies and programmes at regional levels and thus minimizing the dangers of exclusion

Traditionally, there has been strong interest in attaining a single African voice at global levels; however, this has become increasingly difficult and impractical. Experience of regional cooperation institutions, particularly the regional economic communities and other flexible cooperation platforms indicates that sub-regional cooperation or collaboration on specific themes is less difficult to achieve than a single African voice. This implies that less-binding and more project-oriented initiatives in infrastructure, research and policy coordination could be more effective in improving African positions at global levels. The promotion of a less ambitious model of regional cooperation in specific areas could improve local conditions and could promote the participation of African countries in global policy issues. The civil society has a major role in this transformation from more ambitious, large scope cooperation to practical collaboration among countries in Africa.