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Better IT Connectivity Can Unleash Economic Potential, UN Officials Say

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Better information technology links can help Africa to unleash its economic potential, United Nations and business leaders said today in New York.

African countries have registered the world's highest mobile phone growth, ranging from 50 to 400 per cent in the last three years, Hamadoun Touré, Secretary-General of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), told a press briefing.

Africa's goal should be to replicate that success in broadband capability, also achieving "Internet access in every village, every school, every university, every hospital."

Lack of Internet access is holding back growth, according to ITU figures. Less than 4 per cent of Africans have Internet access, broadband penetration is below 1 per cent and 70 per cent of all continental traffic goes outside Africa, driving up costs for consumers. The cost of Internet connectivity in Africa, says the World Bank, is the highest in the world - some \$250-300 per month.

Africa needs a competitive information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure, Mr. Touré said. "By bringing optical fibres in some of the networks, by just closing the loops, you will avoid excessive Internet transit costs, bringing down the cost by two thirds," he said.

China and India have increased both public and private investment in ICT in Africa, and other countries could do the same, he said. "Once the infrastructure is there, once you have the proper capacity building, you can have real growth, with exponential figures," he said.

Mobile telephone use in Africa will undoubtedly follow the general trends of other developing regions, said Craig Barrett, Chairman of the UN Global Alliance for ICT and Development and Chairman of the Board of Intel Corporation.

In China, India and Latin America, "the private sector has gone in, and with spectrum allocation and with competition, has been able to bring inexpensive communications to all of the people. We expect to see that in Africa," he said.

Mr. Barrett said connectivity poses a challenge. The average monthly cost for a 256 kilobyte per second connection was more than the total hardware and software costs. Broadband connectivity costs should ideally fall by more than two-thirds by 2009, he said, adding that the gate to Africa's development would be "providing inexpensive connectivity over broad stretches of territory."

The success of Africa's telecom industry, said Mohsen Khalil, Director of Global ICT at the World Bank Group, had shown investors that in Africa they could "contribute to development and still make money." About \$25 billion in foreign direct investment had been invested in African telecoms in the last 10 years, he said.

Two factors, he said, have contributed to the success of the telecom industry: technological innovation in the mobile area and the adoption of liberal policies. What was now needed for broadband expansion were regulations ensuring an even playing field, and public-private partnerships.

"When you give access to a human being, you unleash the power of human innovation and entrepreneurship," he said. "It is really so powerful - all they need is access."

A "Connect Africa" summit in October in Kigali, Rwanda, will focus on making ICT capabilities available for economic development and connectivity. "We will try to push as hard as we can to get the public and private sectors together to achieve this," Mr. Barrett said.

Walter Fust, Director-General of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, voiced support for the Kigali summit to keep ICT for development high on the political agenda, to broaden the discussion to innovative financing mechanisms and local content, and to support "the mobilizing of the doers, not only of the talkers."

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