

Keynote Address
by
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**Delivered at the 1st International Conference
on ICT for Development, Education, and
Training in Africa**

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
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Excellencies,

Invited guests,

Dear participants,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you all to Addis Ababa and to join you at the launch of e-Learning Africa, the Continent's 1st International Conference on Information and Communication Technology (ICT) for Education and Training.

This important event comes at a crucial time, where my country has been actively engaged in using ICT as an enabler for democratic governance, development, and to integrate technology into the education system. The Ethiopian government considers ICT as a tool in its efforts to transform our society.

Ethiopia can't wait long to break the present abject poverty and backwardness going through the traditional strategies; we want to deploy ICT as unprecedented leapfrogging instrument.

It has been abundantly clear that information and communication technologies have drastically changed the way individuals, organizations, and enterprises think and do business.

Therefore we recognize ICT as a powerful weapon that can effectively accelerate development initiatives and make them sustainable in many ways, particularly for those people living in remote and inaccessible areas. This has motivated us to set our vision for ICT development in Ethiopia so that "every aspect of Ethiopian life is ICT assisted".

It is a universally accepted truth that education is a fundamental building block of democratization, development, and the information society, yet it also represents one of the greatest challenges for development.

Given the state of education in many developing countries, including my country Ethiopia, we are far from meeting the requirements of a future society in which information and knowledge can truly empower people.

According to available data, about 860 million of the world's adults are illiterate. Over 370 million of the 1.3 billion school-age children in the world are not in school. These problems are concentrated sharply in the developing countries, and especially in Africa.

For developing countries like Ethiopia to emerge strong and competitive in the international arena, the way out of the present abject poverty in the shortest possible time is by raising the education coverage and using ICT to accelerate of it.

Nevertheless, using ICT in education also raises a number of issues, especially in light of the pressing problems faced by developing countries.

Lack of access to ICT has exacerbated the problem by adding yet another layer of inequality to the existing educational gaps. ICT should be used as a tool for education, rather than an end in itself. Its introduction into the education system could result in a change from traditional methods and thoughts to completely new thoughts and methods, hence transforming the society into a future-oriented one.

Establishing an informed society and a knowledge-based economy is the only way to address the present challenges. In a context where extensive needs must be addressed with very limited resource, ICTs have to be used in a strategic manner, as it saves a lot of time and all other resources.

If they are to have a positive development impact, their use must be aligned with the goals of Education for All (EFA) and other Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). It is important to recognize the need to develop sufficient capacity throughout society, including the marginalized and vulnerable groups, for this to bear fruit.

In recognition of the role of education in expediting development and transforming the society, the Ethiopian government has embarked on building institutions believed to be instrumental in achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in all sectors.

As a result of this, the primary education coverage that was 19% a decade ago has been raised to 89.41% this year.* Similarly, in secondary education, the coverage has reached 30.9% from 6%. Technical and vocational education and training (TVET) has risen to 137,000 annual intakes from 2000. Universities intake for degrees has increased to 36,000 from 3,000. At the completion phase of the third five-year Education Sector Development Program (ESDP III) in 2010, these will be raised to:

- 112.6% in primary education
- Secondary to 39%
- TVET to 312,000 and
- University to 150,000 annual intakes

At the present pace, Ethiopia is hopeful to meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by the year 2015.

Alongside raising the educational coverage, paramount attention has also been given to improving the quality of education. For this to happen, the federal government has designed policies and strategies and has allocated a huge amount of resources in a bid to integrate Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) into the Ethiopian education system. The school-net project has been designed to develop a wide-area network linking all schools in the country and making Internet and on-line education accessible to the students, teachers, and school staff.

* 19% and 89.14% are gross enrollment. Net enrollment this year is 70% and 2010 this will be 86.6%.

It has been proposed that the first phase of the school-net project will connect the over 500 secondary facilities, including the 199 vocational and technical schools established in the country.

Implementation of an integrated school-net system for Ethiopia will go beyond supporting basic teaching and learning.

The school-net initiative can be perceived as a powerful means to utilize the emerging electronic messaging and to enhance the delivery of teaching and learning materials and information, as well as to support the management and administration of the school system in the country.

The other area where the government attaches importance is the government-net project. The gov-net's primary objective is to provide ICT services such as video conferencing, directories, messaging, and voice and Internet connectivity at the federal, regional, and lowest level of government throughout the country.

The gov-net is a powerful ICT tool that can transform the public sector service delivery and democratic governance, and thus transform the private sector and civil societies.

It is also our belief that the universities established in various parts of the country will be able to provide distance learning by using video- conferencing.

The Bahrdar University has already begun providing distance learning to over 5,000 students by directly and effectively using the infrastructure of the gov-net. Other universities are also making the necessary preparations to begin distance-learning courses through a video link.

Dear participants

We are living in an ever-expanding knowledge society in which connectivity allows us to access all kinds of information at unprecedented speed and in multiple formats.

The development of e-medicine and e-education in the higher education system is the other important point where my government attaches due considerations. For a country like Ethiopia, where the dearth of skilled manpower is particularly felt in the health and education sectors, the development of e-medicine and e-learning infrastructures will make great contribution.

An agreement has been signed between Ethiopia and India to implement projects to address this need.

This will enable Ethiopian health and higher education institutions to be linked to Indian institutions and receive the desired services. If this pilot project is successful, measures will be taken to expand it to other health and higher learning institutions.

I would like to seize this opportunity to thank the Indian government for taking this bold initiative aimed at establishing the pan –African e- network.

Dear Participants

We have now started the laying of 10,000 kilometers of optical fiber network throughout the country to link up with submarine cables. The program will be finalized in the next two years, as the laying of over 4,000 kilometers has already been completed.

The government has been also engaged in ensuring universal access and Internet connectivity to the over 15,000 rural villages established across the country through the Rural Connectivity Program (RCP). So far 5,000 rural centers have been connected, and work on the remaining ones will be finalized by 2008. This means that over 73 million Ethiopians will have access to telephone, Internet, and television services. The program could also enable every citizen to have access to telecom facilities within a walking distance of no more than five kilometers.

In all these bold initiatives, the challenges we are facing are worth mentioning

1. As we are overcoming lack of infrastructure and connectivity, we are now challenged by the lack of devices such as PCs.
2. The fact that our human resource development - as users of ICT - and the number of engineers,

technicians, and managers of ICT is still insufficient, poses a challenge.

The consequences of these two challenges in combination is exhibited in the under-utilization of the full potential of ICT networks we already have. Even though some moves are under way to overcome these obstacles, they still present a formidable hurdle.

Dear participants

This is a clear indication of the Ethiopian government's commitment to use ICT as an enabler for economic development and democratic governance. Here I would like to quote a speech made by our Prime Minister: "Not long ago, many of us felt that we were too poor to afford to invest seriously in ICT. We assumed that ICT was a luxury that only the rich could afford. We were convinced, and rightly so, that we should invest every penny we have on securing the next meal for our people, on putting some sort of shelter over their heads, on reducing or, as the experts in the development business would have it, alleviating absolute poverty, absolute poverty which has aptly been defined as poverty that kills. We did not believe that serious investment in ICT had anything to do with facing the challenges of poverty that kills.

Now I think we know better. Now we believe we are too poor not save everything we can and invest as much of it as possible on ICT. We recognize that while ICT may be a

luxury for the rich, for us - the poor countries - it is a vital and essential tool for fighting poverty, for beating poverty that kills and ensuring our survival. That is why we are fully committed to investing as much of our time, energy, and money as possible on ICT and to its effective use in our war on poverty."

Meles Zenawi
April 4, 2005

With the present trend, it is possible, and there is an ample chance on the ground to make poverty history in Ethiopia.

In closing, I wish you fruitful and productive discussions and a pleasant stay in Addis Ababa.

I thank you!

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