

Keynote Address
By
His Excellency, President Olusegun OBASANJO
President Federal Republic of Nigeria
At the Inauguration of the Digital Solidarity Fund,
Geneva, March 14, 2005

Your Excellencies
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen

I am delighted to be here today for the official inauguration of the Digital Solidarity Fund, created as a follow up from the decisions taken at the first phase of the World Summit on the Information Society held in December 2003 here in Geneva.

It is particularly pleasing to have such a distinguished gathering of world leaders, professionals and personalities gathered together today for this historic event and I wish to thank you all for honouring our invitation to attend this inauguration ceremony. I want to pay very special tribute to my brother, President Abdoulaye WADE of Senegal for championing the cause of the South in the emerging Information Society. President WADE has been a solid pillar for promoting special financial mechanisms designed to enable developing countries, especially the low-income countries to be included in the emerging Information Society. His commitment and leadership are very infectious and are very much appreciated. At the closing of the World Summit on the Information Society in Geneva in December 2003, the Republic of Senegal and the city of Geneva decided to found with others the Global Digital Solidarity Fund to ensure the implementation of a very significant aspect of the conclusion of the Summit.

During the first phase of the World Summit on the Information Society, we declared “our common desire and commitment to build a people-centred, inclusive and development oriented Information Society, where everyone can create, access, utilize and share information and knowledge, enabling individuals, communities and people to achieve their full potential in promoting sustainable development and improving their quality of life, premised on the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations and respecting fully upholding the Universal Declaration of Human Rights”.

We all know that to achieve the goals encapsulated in our Declaration just stated we need to work collectively to dismantle existing obstacles to empowering poor communities and nations, enhancing the free flow of information and technology, checking prohibitive pricing of technology and technology products, expanding access to training, and ensuring that new opportunities are democratically distributed and utilized.

Today, the benefits of the information revolution are unevenly spread and the digital divide between the poor and the rich, the developed and developing nations, and rural and urban dwellers is so wide that unless serious, focused, committed and urgent actions are taken, it could precipitate new contradictions, distractions, and conflicts in the global system. It is unacceptable that though the developed world has only 15% of the world’s population, it controls more than 75% of Internet users. In spite of the efforts of developing country governments, most school children have never had access to manual typewriters, much less modern ICT infrastructure that are now critical to development and learning.

This has far-reaching implications for the ability of societies to build the informed or global citizen; it compromises the ability to work for the common good, and negates the goals of international organizations to build global citizenship. This is exactly why we need special efforts and mechanisms to address the direct and indirect exclusion of most citizens of the world, nations and communities from the emerging Information Society.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, the challenge of the world today is how to build solid, holistic and sustainable foundations and infrastructure for peace, growth, and development. It is also about how check the spread of diseases, improve the environment, promote interactions between peoples and nations, expand productivity, strengthen good governance, build new leadership, and empower peoples to reach the highest points of the creative and productive capacities. These and more require access to technology and information.

While African countries are confronted with the challenges of digital revolution, these are equally other constraints that must be addressed as part of the quest for the democratization of digital culture. These include the provision of basic infrastructure without which ICTs will not function. Electricity supply is inadequate, schools are in a state of disrepair and political conflicts and violence remain prevalent.

Fortunately, most governments in Africa are now committed to reform and democracy. But their efforts and sacrifices are mediated by conditions in the global system such as unfavourable terms of trade, declining investment and foreign assistance, and the debt overhang. Debt and debt servicing obligations ensure that the indebted economies never recover and again, unless the global community, especially the development countries, give serious attention to debt relief, especially on the agreed Evian Terms, debt-pressured nations will remain incapable of generating the internal contexts for supporting an ICT revolution. It is easy to see therefore that there is a global burden that we cannot afford to ignore.

I am aware that there are some leaders and countries that would like to rely on existing global infrastructure in addressing this issue. Allow me appeal to such leaders that we must learn to move forward, to improve on what we currently have, and to acknowledge the fact that we are in a new world with new challenges, stronger institutions, new expectations, and new possibilities for progress. We cannot afford to ignore these options and possibilities by sticking entirely to old structures especially in terms of equipment, capacity, and infrastructure.

It was the lack of consensus on financing mechanisms and internet governance, which are salient to the realization of a new Information Society that necessitated the request by the Summit to the UN Secretary General to set up two Working Groups to study these issues and report back to the Summit in 2005.

However, before the Working Groups began their work, the coalition of the willing, decided to create the Digital Solidarity Fund. I wish to take this opportunity to commend and congratulate the founding members and initial contributors to the International Digital Solidarity Fund namely : the Republics of Senegal and Dominica; cities of Dakar, Geneva, Lyon, Paris, Santo Domingo and Curitiba as well as the Provinces of Turin, Rome and urban community of Lille and the Spanish Basque Government deserve our commendations.

Excellencies, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, the International Digital Solidarity Fund relies on voluntary commitment of stakeholders and is complementary to existing funding mechanisms. Its uniqueness lies in the mobilization of a network of states, local authorities and private sector funding. In addition, the funds would be raised voluntarily through public bids whether for local or national projects related to ICTs.

While looking forward to generous contributions to the fund from our development partners, I urge you all to continue to see the digital divide as a unique problem that deserves a special response and solution. I also expect that countries of the South would in their on way look inwards to raise funds.

This can be done by mainstreaming issues and projects in their development plans at all levels of government, cutting waste, checking all forms of corruption, redefining national priorities, expanding local and foreign investment, expanding productivity, redefining tax policies, and establishing an enabling environment that encourages savings. In addition, developing countries must pay very special attention to the content and context of their educational systems, mobilize local support for ITC development, and build sustainable networks to mainstream and prioritise ITC in the larger society.

In Africa, we have agreed to mobilize our peoples and institutions to support and make contributions to the Digital Fund as well as implement the Declaration of Principe and the Plan of Action. I am pleased to note that the international community is responding more actively to the Fund as they receive more information on its objectives, funding sources, disbursement and management. It is my hope that stakeholders and development partners gathered here today will demonstrate their support for the Fund by contributing or pledging generously.

The decisions on the utilization of the Digital Solidarity Fund will be arrived at in a transparent, fair and democratic manner with full accountability while due attention will be paid to the socio-economic realities and cultural specificities of five continents when constituting the Board and in project distribution.

We must strive for a win-win situation and today should mark the beginning of the success story that we shall in Tunis later in the year.

On behalf of the Government and people of Nigeria, I make a first installment donation of Euros 500,000 to the Digital Solidarity Fund and also pledge administrative and technical support for the Fund's projects.

Once again, I express my deep appreciation for your anticipated donations and wish you God's guidance and blessings as you journey back to your respective destinations.

Thank you.