

# 2008 50x15 South Africa Partner Summit Government Panel Discussion Transcript



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## Panel Discussion

Liz Dewing, Moderator

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Dr. Henry Chasia, Executive Deputy Chairperson, NEPAD E-Africa Commission

Hon. Etienne Sinatambou, Mauritian Minister of Information Technology and Telecommunications

## Introduction

Liz Dewing

Our last section today is dealing with government and how we can more effectively align and maximize the opportunities and minimize the problems.

Liz Dewing

*We are going to look at how to effectively work with governments to maximize the effectiveness of technology deployment. Most of us see that the most effective deployments of ICT are efforts that direct attention and resources towards the advancement of specific government policies, such as, youth education, literacy promotion, delivery of social services, etc. I would like to ask each of the panelists to talk about some of the public policies, that they are aware of, that are being prioritized and the strategies that are working in these areas.*

Dr. Chasia

I have worked with governments for most of my working life. A case in point that I could bring to the fore is the Nepad e-schools project that we are promoting across the continent and has worked in many countries. We've had no difficulty with this project in Mauritius, but have had difficulties within other countries. Generally, however, this project has been welcomed and governments have tried to support what is going on. We've had some difficulties in one country where we have equipment in a bonded warehouse. It has been there for eight months and we haven't been able to get that equipment out. Other difficulties we've encountered have been the inability to find someone in charge. Generally there are a number of ministries involved, e.g., health, ICT and education; therefore sometimes it is difficult to find the person in charge. This causes issues to bounce from one place to another and nothing is achieved. There have been cases when things have gone well and we've learnt from the difficulties encountered. I think that as we move forward we will be able to get over some of these difficulties to achieve what we want with this particular project.

Liz Dewing

*Dr. Chasia, you are in a situation where you're engaging with multiple governments in multiple areas to try and get an initiative activated. Kagiso, you are mandated by a particular government, with a particular mandate. How do you find that working relationship and how are the challenges you face similar or different to those mentioned already?*

Kagiso Chikane

We are in a different situation in that we are an ICT institute and our mandate stems from the 2002 speech in the South African parliament by President Mbeki. He stated in his national address that the country needed an ICT university. It ended up being an institute hosted and managed by the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR). We are looking at ICT research for the country and are working in partnership with the universities and communities that are developing indigenous software and innovations. We have a vibrant human language technology group developing text to speech technology and speech recognition technologies, which we will apply in our application innovation program.

We look at national priorities, such as a government that is interested in making sure that disabled people are employed. Therefore from the ICT point of view, we look at various assistive devices such as technologies for blind people; we have developed a screen reader using open source, which we have hardware for, and we work in partnership with people with disabilities. This is why the government supports us financially in developing these technologies and we have good partnership with the government.



We also look at future technologies and ask, “what is it that we can do with future technologies that can also benefit the country?” Then we pilot our technologies. We also look for community champions when we pilot these technologies. We go to the communities and tell them about some of the things that we are working on and then ask if we can work with them. We look at technologies and write proposals to the government and say, “this technology could also be good for the country.”

*Liz Dewing*

*You're already in an enviable position of being down that path and the question I'd like to ask the Minister to respond to is, when you are looking to engage with somebody to undertake this kind of endeavor and take it forward what do you look for? You are in a position where you can take proposals to the government and have a ready ear to listen. They have a confidence to let you run the program. When you're first starting to look for these people how do you open that door? How do you market your idea to government in a way that will be accepted?*

Hon. Sinatambou

I hardly work with anyone outside government so I will have some difficulty answering that question. I took your question as being, firstly, what are the policies that are prioritized and secondly, how do you then ensure that this priority is effectively implemented? The two examples I shared at lunch time were getting PCs in primary schools and getting ADSL [high-speed Internet access] in secondary schools.

When I became a Minister I learned that there were 330 IT teachers already recruited to teach IT in 275 primary schools. That's more than one teacher per school, but what amazed me was that those children were being taught IT from the blackboard. How can you teach a five year old what a mouse is from a blackboard? I said, what am I going to do because I don't have a budget for that? I understand that the South African budget for the public sector is about fifteen billion rand and my budget for Mauritius is only about sixteen million rand. I managed to get one and a half million dollars and I stated that I wanted us to have a procurement exercise. We would purchase as many PCs as we could for the year and whatever we bought would be divided among the 275 schools. Each of the schools would get the same amount of computers, etc. They managed to get five PCs and one printer in every school. I then said to my colleagues, if you don't find anything to improve on, then we would repeat this exercise every year and that's what we have been doing for the last few years. Now we have nearly fifteen PCs in each of the primary schools. Making this program a priority was one thing, effectively implementing it is another.

The second example of getting ADSL into the secondary schools was also good. I called the ISPs and said, “I've got a very good idea. I want to put ADSL in all secondary schools in this country.” They said, “Yes Minister. What's your budget?” I said, “What's my budget? Listen guys there are about 110,000 youngsters in the 177 schools in Mauritius. I am giving you the best marketing stunt in your lifetime by putting you in a position to whet the appetite of 15 percent of the Mauritian population. How can you ask me for my budget? You should be paying me for giving you this opportunity!” Since 2005 we've had ADSL free of charge in the secondary schools in Mauritius. This shows that, yes you must prioritize your policy but sometimes you don't need strategies, you just need common sense, in addition to strategy, to get things implemented.

*Liz Dewing*

*What I'm hearing you say is, “start somewhere.” Dr. Chasia, if I can ask you, with your exposure to multiple, different government organizations, what do you think are some of the common challenges and constraints faced by African countries in the area of ICT?*

Dr. Chasia

First, they all say they have no money. It's true that budget is a big issue, but I think there are other issues as well. Power is a big issue we face in getting ICT into primary and secondary schools. Training teachers to teach ICT is another challenge. You need to have somebody who will show the pupils the way. There is also the issue of content. We need some kind of content in the schools. There are a number of things that could be mentioned, but these are the ones that come to mind.



*Liz Dewing*

*We've spoken extensively about power, the need for training and support, and content issues. What the audience are largely looking for is an understanding of how to access and understand what the priorities of governments and how to navigate their way when engaging with governments. This is an open question to the panel. What guidelines could you give us to get governments to attend these kinds of forums so they can participate and tell us how to work with them?*

Dr. Chasia

When dealing with African governments, we try to have some kind of agreement with them that spells out what the government will do, what we will do and what the companies working with us will do. This has worked reasonably well in ensuring that we understand what our obligations are to each other.

When you want things done in government you need to find out who is in charge. This is often not the person with the title. The person in charge is the person who will get things done. Everybody complains that there isn't enough money, but money isn't necessarily the most important problem. Our project is at the roll-out stage and this has required us to think about some very specific things like having a budget, and somebody to get things done.

We are currently talking to the European Union to see if they can help us establish a national implementing agency. They already have this agency in Mauritius. This agency will ensure that there is somebody, a corporate person who is going to be in charge of what needs to be done. When there are a group of ministries that are involved, you need to have a body that is bringing these three ministries together and people from outside participating. This body needs to oversee the work. When you can say that you have a body which has legal power and is recognized in the country, it will be able to attract funding. You could talk to the European Union to suggest that the money that comes in will go to this body and they will be accountable for what the money is used for. Without such a body it's difficult to even make a start.

*Liz Dewing*

*You've talked about health care, education and IT, and I'm sure Kagiso, that one of the issues you've encountered is that of duplication of effort. Projects and initiatives are operating in silos because ministries are often operating in silos. A national implementing agency would presumably help to create some kind of co-ordination. Kagiso, how often do you encounter duplication and how do you deal with this issue? What role do you play in this?*

Kagiso Chikane

We always try to align ourselves with national priorities. Governments will say that stimulating small, medium and micro enterprises (SMMEs) is important for the country. Then we have to ask, what type of technology can help the government to achieve this goal and we work towards achieving their goal. For example, we developed software to help SMMEs to link up with the markets, etc. In that way you are working with the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) and the local government, because it forms part of the national priorities.

*Liz Dewing*

*One of the things you're mentioning is development. I want to hone in on where you find that development is already taking place. How do you come alongside where it's already happening and either feed the funds or feed the need to make sure that whatever is already happening is aligning with what you need? Have you had situations like that? Do you do that kind of scan first to find out what is already going on?*

Kagiso Chikane

Yes, we do have people who research the particular needs of these particular communities, persons with disabilities, for instance. We approached various disabled people's organizations (DPOs) to ask what their needs were in terms of ICT. They said communication. We told them that one of our capabilities is to develop national accessibility portals. We then went to the department of education and looked at various schools for disabilities to link them up with the DPOs that partnered with us. The schools are part of the project management team and we have developed some technologies with them which we also pilot together. Netcare is now interested in having us deploy our system with their organization. The government supported us as we did the research. It's this type of partnership that works. You talk to the

communities and you talk to the government. It's about doing your research. I think for us as a research institute, we look into the communities where these types of devices would be needed.



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I want to add that it is not just a matter of going to the government to ask for funding, but we also have to ask whether we have any solutions we can bring to the government. Bringing solutions makes it easier to get funding. We also have to be prepared with seed funding. Seed funding shows the government that we have done the spadework and they can top it up. We are not just experimenting with government money, because there are many priorities the government considers.

*Liz Dewing*

*One of the strategies that came out in the group that was discussing regulatory change and innovation was "building up a body of evidence" that can be used to take to governments to support what you're asking them to do.*

Hon. Sinatambou

I want to say one thing about duplication. The two previous speakers have looked at duplication from a national or macro level. I would like to share an example of duplication conflict at a micro level which will probably have dire consequences for Africa and Dr. Chasia knows this very well.

This is the issue of EC cable. The cost of an E1 full-circuit capacity in Europe is about \$10 to \$20 and in India it is about \$350 to \$400. The average cost in Africa for the same circuit is about \$5,000. The EC cable is 9,900 km of submarine cable due to start from North Africa down the Eastern Coast and up to Durban. Prices would have probably been brought down substantially if this was a government-sponsored project, but it's gone to a private consortium. Even if they are planning to give government some share of this project, the costs are not going to be as low as they could have been. Unfortunately, the same project had two sets of promoters: on the one hand, a private consortium and on the other hand, the government. The aim was a hybrid consortium made up of the private sector and the government. What I know is that the contract has already been allotted and what I find disastrous, for me at least, is that all my efforts to get landing points in Mauritius will now fail. That's one example of the costs of duplication of a project.

#### **Audience Questions.**

*There are a lot of good initiatives, mostly which are project-support related, from development partners. One major concern that has been brought up is the issue of budget. Governments don't have enough money to implement the projects, so for effective implementation do you think project support is where we should be moving? Or should we move more towards a budget support whereby the government actually gives the money to drive the execution?*

The other thing related to this issue is that we have a lot of vertical systems, health care systems and education systems, with all of these being very specific and focused. I get a sense of the lack of integration. How can we better harness integration and come up with solutions on that level to avoid the whole issue of duplication? What is being done or needs to be done? What is the way forward?

Hon. Sinatambou

On the issue of project support, I believe I should run my life as I would run my home, as a good father would run his home. I run my business like that and I run my country like that. I do what I can at home, according to my budget, and no one comes to give me money to help. Mauritius also doesn't qualify for any aid because we have attained the status of a middle-income country in economic terms and maybe so much the better. I have to wrack my brain every month to answer the questions, "Are we are running out of money? What is the next best thing that can be done with the little money we have left?" At lunch, I spoke about how my budget is less than one percent of the South African budget for the same sector. I am not a proponent of project support. I know before I start a project, I plan it so that I know the projections, costs and how to raise my money to make sure that I get the results. I can't start the project and then expect X, Y, or Z to give me support. In my sector, I believe that if I like my country as much as I like my family, I should apply the same principles to my country. I'm quite sure that people think otherwise in many other countries, but I'm compelled to think in this way because I don't get the support and neither do I have the money to get the support elsewhere. I always work through procurement or it's always in strict compliance with very severe rules of governance. I can't even issue a



letter in my country to, say, help this person. I sometimes wonder what a Minister can do because we are always under strict rules of governance.

Kagiso Chikane

When you look at South Africa you have different clusters, such as the information systems engineering technology (ISET) cluster, which is chaired by the Director General of science and technology, and this is inter-governmental. Organizations have to ask what the government would like to achieve, so there is that inter-governmental working together on certain national priorities. Government has put money into the Department of Science and Technology for ICT and the Department of Communications is also involved with ICT. Organizations should go to these departments, ask what they are interested in and what they can fund. You will find that there is funding.

Telecenters was one such government initiative. People ought to ask how they can utilize these centers because at times, people think of putting computers where there are already telecenters in place. There is no way the government will support you when it has already researched a facility.

I would also like to add that sometimes we don't get government support for proposals because a technical person can understand the concept of your proposal, but nobody in government can understand. What are you bringing to government? What would you like to achieve? The person reading your proposal does not understand and has other priorities so the proposal will be put aside.

*I feel that a decision needs to be made at a higher level to impose ICT as much as they impose agricultural development. I see in some countries that the government does not want to adopt ICT as a policy because there is so much the government has to hide.*

*ICT can be used as a way to get money and as a donor I understand why some of the countries are reluctant to give money away because they are not sure how that money is going to be used. However, if there was a clear e-procurement service I would feel at ease giving that money. What can be done about this?*

Dr. Chasia

We try to see if the project we have in mind is a commercially-viable project. If it is, we will find out whether there are any stakeholders who would want to be involved in the project in a commercial manner. This is the way we've operated in relation to the infrastructure projects, submarine cables, for example. When we are able to get a commercially-viable project, then we do it that way. There are cases where you might have a mixture, for instance, using satellite networks to connect schools. This may be where somebody actually has a business that could pay its way. There may also be, as spoken about earlier, a national implementing agency that would help with this. ICT projects generally tend to be those that are commercially-attractive and are possible to get going. We are currently looking at a project that will provide an e-commerce service for tourism and a payment gateway. These are commercially-lucrative projects, and I don't think we've had any difficulty finding capital to do this in our continent. There are many projects that can work without having to ask for handouts, and then obviously there are other cases that are more difficult, such as electricity in schools.

Hon. Sinatambou

You say you wonder whether the general bodies or authorities should be imposing ICTs in their countries. This was decided as long ago as September 2000. Number eight of the UN Millenium Development Goals (MDG) is about sustainable development. I think target number 18 of the MDGs is making sure that ICTs are brought into our countries. The problem is that the money very often originates from the North, transits to the South and goes back to the North. There was a project called the Regional ICT Support Program funded by the EU for the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) countries. The envelope was for 21 millions Euros. I thought, okay there are twenty countries in COMESA, so I will get one million Euros per country. The first thing that was done with the money was that 14 million Euros was given to a Danish consultancy firm to say what to do in our countries. How on earth is this goal or target being implemented? I think it is up to us, the countries, to shake ourselves and the leaders. The objective has been announced and the decision taken, but once again it's called, politely, the enforcement deficit.



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*The fact is it's up to our countries and governments to find a way to make things happen. Earlier I had a feeling that it was all about government's priorities. I find there is a disconnect between government priorities and what's happening on the ground with people and innovation. Everybody in this room works in an innovative way with centers, institutions and organizations that are not connected with the government directly. When you talk about aligning with government priorities it makes it very difficult for innovation and it becomes very difficult to question the governments and say, "No, we don't want what you're doing. We want to do it differently, because it's about the people you're governing on our behalf." I think this is something that needs to be questioned and put more clearly with regards to the interests of most of the African governments, which very often have very little to do with the people or the needs of the people. Realistically I don't see that much room for movement with regards to the vision that I may have and want to achieve unless the government is willing to pull down a lot of the barriers we face in trying to make development happen, especially when it comes to using ICT. You talked about using ICT in a corporate way. When ICT is going to make money, the government often has very little problem with it moving forward; but when its going into a school to have digital technology in rural areas where we aren't actually generating any money, it becomes an issue to move forward because of the barriers we face. There are two different visions here. There is a big disconnect. My question to you is how does that link in as a government person and working within government?*

Hon. Sinatambou

You have to work with government. You have to work with public servants. I don't think it's governments in terms of people, like people who are ministers, because ministers come and go. You must delink the political decision-maker of the day. I'm the temporary one; the public servant is the permanent one. Do you think a minister would like things to be delayed? No, of course not. The decision makers want things to happen, but the system has a problem. I was taught early in my youth to not try and change everything, but to start by changing yourself and adapt to those things you can't change. What I'm trying to say is, don't think that we have to end all the bureaucracy in all the governments. Let's start by trying to do what each of us does best.

### Closing Comments

*Liz Dewing*

*What are the traps you shouldn't get into when approaching or engaging with government? What will make the barriers higher?*

Dr. Chasia

Government doesn't solve problems, so don't go to government thinking they will give you the solutions.

Kagiso Chikane

Be proactive. Tell government what you can do in partnership with them.

Hon. Sinatambou

Plan and strategize before doing.

*Liz Dewing*

*The final thing I'm hearing is it's not one or the other. You've got to have the lobby contingent working while the innovation contingent is finding the alternative route.*