

Address by the Right Honourable Theo- Ben Gurirab, MP, Prime Minister of the Republic of Namibia, at the opening ceremony of the African Youth Conference on Information And Communications Technology and NEPAD

Windhoek, Namibia

11 August 2003

Director of ceremonies,

Honourable Nahas Angula, Minister of Higher Education, Training and Employment Creation,

His Worship Councillor Mathew Shikongo, Mayor of the City Windhoek,

Mr. Pohamba Shifeta, Secretary General of the National Youth Council of Namibia,

Mr. Donald Charumbira, Secretary General of the World Assembly of Youth,

Excellencies,

Members of the Diplomatic Corps,

Distinguished Delegates,

Media Practitioners,

Ladies and Gentlemen;

I am thankful for the invitation and delighted to be here this morning and to officiate the opening of this important African Youth Conference on Information and Communication Technologies and NEPAD.

Let me; first of all, welcome all international delegates to this conference. I hope that you will find time to enjoy many beautiful sights and alluring sounds of Namibia and to return home to your respective countries with fond memories.

This conference is going to address various issues pertaining to Africa's future and role of the youth in planning and spearheading economic productivity and social transformation of our continent.

My warm congratulations go to the World Assembly of Youth and the National Youth Council as organisers of this promising indaba. I am also happy to note that the National Youth Council is serving many inspiring and uplifting tasks for our youth at home and in the region. In collaborating with the World Assembly of Youth in this worthy endeavour, the National Youth Council is renewing strong ties forged between the Assembly and Africa freedom fighters many years ago. We are a team together.

I am mindful of the fact that the World Summit on the Information Society on will take place in Geneva in December this year. I hope that the forward – looking outcome of your conference will find its way on the agenda of that crucial Summit I also hope that the African youth will be adequately represented at the world Summit in order to press game the special needs of our continent inviting with the UN Millennium Development Goals, including the constructive use of ICT power for peace, empowerment and development.

You are gathering under the banner of *Empowering Africans Future Leaders*. Youth are not only leaders of tomorrow, but are in fact leaders here and today. In Africa and the world at large, youth are making thoughtful and daring advances in many important areas of human life as leaders, thinkers, planners, builders, producers and consumers. They are mitigating the challenges and opportunities of the emerging information and knowledge-based global system.

Within the NEPAD programme, ICT has been identified as one of the key priority sectors to promote speedy realisation of our continents economic recovery and reconstruction targets, as well as African Unions strategy for achieving sustainable development in the 21st century.

As African leaders declared, the current economic revolution has, in part, been made possible by advances in Information and Communications Technology. ICT has reduced the cost and increased the speed of communications across the globe, abolishing pre-existing barriers of time and space, and as a consequence, affecting all areas of social and economic life. It further stresses that this would make possible the integration of national systems of production and finance and as can be seen from the incredible growth in the scale of cross border flows of goods, services, labour and capital.

If we ignore the importance of ICT in development, we would do so at our own peril and to the detriment of millions of our poor people who live today in misery in Africa. The days of handouts and dependency are giving way to an era when Africans must become masters of our own destiny. The African Union, NEPAD and regional socio-economic cooperation and integration groupings have set the direction and pace of people-centred change towards growth, employment and prosperity.

You are all aware that the global economy is undergoing a major revolution, transforming itself from an industrial economy into a knowledge-based economy with ICT as one of the key drivers. Urgency, speed, and convergence of thought and action are the main features of this technological transformation.

The established national social systems are compelled to innovate as part of the global economic village. Africans do not have a choice but to position ourselves to meet the challenges of competition. This we must do by developing ICT strategies that will ensure our competitive edge in the global market.

It is not enough to recognise this reality but what is even more important is for us to seize the available opportunities and to advance our cause for economic emancipation, lest we run the risk of being victims of perpetual marginalisation.

The knowledge-based economy has profound implications for all sectors of the society, as it is redefining the way people think, work, live and plan their future. Its impact on our social life is already being felt, especially at the workplace. While new hitech jobs have and are being created there is a clear pattern of increasing losses of traditional ones. A balanced mitigation is necessary.

The Namibian government, as is the case with most African Governments, recognises the centrality of ICT in economic development. We are determined to develop a sound ICT policy that gives overall direction to achieving the desired goal of sustainable economic growth, productivity, transformation and development.

The ICT revolution has ripped apart the market and this has resulted in a common pool of labour power to be bought by the highest bidder. At the same time, Africa's inadequate capacity and resources are stretched to the limit on a daily basis, by actions taken by some developed and middle-level developing countries that can offer attractive and highly competitive remuneration packages. To arrest this haemorrhage remains one of the most difficult but unavoidable challenges our continent is facing. The situation can, however, be revised by cultivating a culture of excellence and competence.

The existence of functioning ICT infrastructure allows communities to be integrated into the mainstream of the local, regional and international markets. This is particularly crucial in Namibia, which is still characterised by two economic systems existing side by side, where income disparities remain sharp and disturbing. The hardest hit are the historically disadvantaged rural areas where infrastructure is either poor or non functional. Financial recourses needed to overhaul the situation continue to present us with a major stumbling block. Such an environment makes it difficult for robust and productive economic activities to take place. This situation is further increasing the great trek of the rural masses to urban centres in search of livelihood.

Our government is implementing policies aimed at ensuring that all rural areas have access to viable and growing infrastructures necessary for social development. We are also determined to encourage the growth of a skilled ICT professionals community in the country, as well as enlarging the number of Namibians engaged in this field. In the long run, we would like to consolidate a whole range of ICT enterprise, including e-commerce, e-business and e-government that will turn Namibia into a success story of the information revolution.

While we are grappling with all of these sectoral strategies as individual African nations, we should do so being mindful of the fact our destiny is inextricably tied together as envisaged in the constitutive Act of the African Union and NEPAD objectives.

I am certain that with the energy, zeal and dedication of Africa 's youth, we can achieve our cherished goals of defeating poverty, hunger, fear and invest in human capital in order to generate wealth and employment for all. In the meantime, African youth must not relent in the war on HIV/AIDS pandemic and support for AIDS orphans.

I trust that this important conference will enable you and us all to deliberate on practical ways and means of interpenetrating the ICT and turn challenges into opportunities based on a clear programme of action and implementable projects set within specific time -frames. Your conference is not an event but an ongoing process. The ultimate success you will be able to make depends upon unity o purpose and concerted action bearing in mind the Millennium Development Goals that incorporate Africa's special needs, including youth development and empowerment as part of the global peace and development agenda of the 21ST century.

Youth activist agenda must emphasise strong advocacy and action on public issues of gender equality, domestic violence, children's welfare, care for the aged, corruption and crime. Investment in human capital must be holistic.

You are the Africa to come
You must show Africa in the Sun!
Do you want Africa to be ahead?
Do you want it to be liberated?
You cannot lead a continent when there's nothing left to cherish.
You dare not fail.

It is now my honour and pleasure to declare this timely and important youth conference officially open. God's speed.

I thank you.

(Retyped from original document)