INTERNET USAGE IN SUB-SAHARA AFRICA

Using the Internet in the developed part of the world has become a necessity or a matter of choice. However, for the majority in countries of Sub-Saharan Africa, Internet usage is still an illusion since Africa has remained the least Internet-connected region in the world (Lishan, 1997). Such “digital divide” between the developed and developing countries has raised interests and concerns from different parties, ranging from indigenes and governments of these countries to international organizations or agencies. Since such a gap impedes development and progress in these countries, as well as limits the potential of a truly global and competitive e-economy, the need to understand the dynamics of Internet usage in these countries becomes relevant.

This chapter discusses Internet usage in Sub-Saharan Africa, citing examples from Nigeria, Ghana, and Kenya. The factors that influence Internet usage in these countries are presented, followed by two general propositions. Furthermore, organizational implications and suggested guidelines for connectivity are discussed, as well as future trends, followed by a conclusion.
BACKGROUND

Internet usage has grown substantially since its inception in 1969. It is predicted that there will be over 700 million users by 2001 and in over five years 900 million electronic devices could be connected to the Internet (Brown, 2000). Despite the significant growth of the Internet on a global scale over the past few years, the poorer regions of the world such as Sub-Saharan Africa have relatively slow growth. Almost half of the world’s online users live in US and Canada (136 million) and more people use the Internet in Sweden (3.5 million) than in Africa (2.5 million) (Moeller, 2000).

There is growing concern that as technology becomes an increasingly important part of the global economy, Sub-Saharan Africa, which has nearly 10% of the world’s population but just 0.1% of Internet connections, will be left behind (Brown, 2000). For instance, by 1996 only 11 African countries had Internet access, but by September 2000, 53 of the 54 countries had Internet connections at least in their capital cities. Although this indicates over 480% increase in Internet usage from 1996, this increase is confined mainly to the capital cities (Jensen, 2000; Fraser, Hamish, & McGrath, 2000; Fadeyi, 2000). Also, 70 to 80% of the population who reside in the rural areas of Africa have no access to the Internet (Ukwe, 1999). Subsequently, bridging the technology divide between the developed and developing countries such as Sub-Saharan Africa is attracting a lot of attention from various parties (e.g., individuals, governments, organizations, and international agencies). A synthesis of these interests and concerns reveals the following:

- Strong desire for countries of Sub-Saharan Africa to benefit from the versatility and immeasurable capabilities of the Internet.
- Acknowledgement of the enormous challenges and constraints [e.g., lack of adequate infrastructure, restrictive decisions and inappropriate policies vis-à-vis global telecommunications trend; lack of competition, especially in international service (Ugwoke, 2000a)] that limit increasing Internet usage in countries of Sub-Saharan Africa.
- Suggestions and initiatives to alleviate challenges on increasing Internet usage.

Hence, Internet usage in developing countries of Sub-Saharan Africa is plagued by a lack of awareness, accessibility, and bottlenecks to feasibility.
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