

## **Ghana's drive to become West Africa's high-tech hub**

By Godwin NNANNA

**The effective use of ICT is becoming the most critical factor for rapid economic growth and wealth creation across the world. As Godwin NNANNA in Accra writes, despite its recent oil find, Ghana sees its economic future on this trajectory**

Viewed in comparative terms in West Africa, Ghana has some things going for it: prevailing peace, political stability and a culture of hospitality which are major attractions for foreigners both from within and outside the continent. In addition, its power supply situation is relatively better than what obtains in other countries around it.

Ghana's future economic outlook is also boosted by its newly discovered oil wealth, a resource it hopes will serve as a lubricator for the technology-driven economy it hopes to build. However, compared to some of the countries that gained independence at the same as Ghana, the country still has a very long way to go.

Unemployment is still very high. Crime is assuming an alarming proportion in recent times. Only last week, a branch of Ecobank in Madina, a busy Accra suburb, was invaded by armed robbers who had a field day operating for more than two hours in broad day light.

The country's industrial sector is in a sorry state. The impact of China and India is so strong. Virtually everything from spoons and plates to toothpicks, fruit juice, candles and matches for lighting, are imported. Ghana is a country of flags but ironically a significant percentage of the flags that its citizens hoisted during its 50th anniversary last year were made in China. One critic described the colourful display that marked the celebrations as 'patriotism made in China'. Such is the country's industrial state. The government acknowledges this incapacity.

According to a recent BBC comparative survey of Ghana and Malaysia, two countries that gained independence same year, Ghana is still by all standards a backward country. Today, Ghanaians get by on an average of about \$300 per year, while Malaysians earn over \$3,000. Ghana is still exporting raw products like cocoa and gold, Malaysia makes its own cars and boasts skyscrapers that rival anything in New York or London.

"The development of one product – palm oil – tells part of the story. Ghana grows and processes the rich red oil to make soap and cooking oil. Malaysia – which imported its first palm oil trees from West Africa in the 1950s – has not only become the largest palm oil producer in the world, but has also developed a high-tech industry which makes sophisticated chemicals and food additives from the raw berries," the report noted.

Its state of development notwithstanding, Ghana has an ambitious goal – to be the silicon valley of West Africa. The government in 2003 drew up its information and communication technology (ICT) for Accelerated Development (ICT4D) policy, encapsulating its vision to transform into an information-rich knowledge-based society through the development, deployment and exploitation of ICTs within the economy. The policy acknowledges that for the country to move her industrially weak and subsistence agriculture-based society towards an information and knowledge economy she will need to develop and implement comprehensive integrated ICT-led socio-economic development strategies and plans.

There are hopeful signs for the future of ICT in Ghana. Its telecom sector, which was liberalized before Nigeria's, is growing in leaps and bounds. Only recently Globacom was licensed as the sixth mobile operator in the country. The company has promised to invest \$200 million into infrastructural development within the next 12 months. Westel Limited, recently taken over by the Zain Group, owners of the Celtel brand, is also on the verge of a major overhaul.

Government officials and business leaders see high-tech as the best way to lift Ghana into a better position to compete globally. According to Hermann Chinnery Hesse, a Ghanaian formerly based in the United Kingdom, "technology is the only way for Africa to get rich". Hesse who runs Soft Tribe, an IT firm he founded less than ten years ago, insists that Ghana "can't compete in manufacturing". For him, the only way to reduce the number of Ghanaians leaving the villages to towns and those migrating to Europe and America is to encourage an ICT-led economic development.

His thinking is shared by Mark Davies, founder of Busy Internet, an ICT development centre in Accra. "This country is poised for all sorts of positive changes," says Davies. "We see Ghana as having a bright and important future in the global village." Numerous Ghanaian artists are already marketing their creations around the world electronically thanks to an innovative alliance Busy Internet has with Internet pioneer Novica.

The centre averages about 1,500 visitors a day, many of who use its 100 flat-screens all through the night. But the most startling part of its unlikely tale is that it achieved a positive cashflow within just four months of opening, a feat quite uncommon given its business model and the operational environment.

But experts say if Ghana must make real progress with ICT, its application must extend beyond the ordinary email, browsing and telecommunication experience to innovative application in such critical sectors as agriculture, education, healthcare delivery and governance. Seeing the fruits of today's powerful knowledge-based tool in the most impoverished communities will be the true test of the engaged, empowered and egalitarian society Ghana seeks to build.

Interestingly, the last few months have seen some innovative use of ICT in politics. Just like the phenomenal change that Barack Obama caused in political fundraising through the use of internet in the democratic primaries in the United States, Nana Akufo Addo, the flagbearer of ruling New Patriotic Party recently launched a fundraising campaign that encourages supporters to text contributions to the party's campaign.

Hackman Owusu Agyeman, top official of the party, said the 'text and contribute' initiative is to give every supporter of the party an opportunity of "identifying with and owning our goals, aspirations and eventual victory in the crucial 2008 election ". By texting 'NPP' to Onetouch or Kasapa, using the common short code 'One' and NPP or 1677, he said, a supporter "would be making a direct and personal contribution to the campaign effort of the party." Each text message that is sent, he said, would cost the sender one Ghana cedi (\$1).

The initiative which party officials say is already eliciting positive response from the supporters, marks a first in Africa. It signals a major departure from the traditional style of godfather politics where a moneybag funds electoral campaigns and after begins to manipulate the elected official from the sideline as was the case in the Chris Uba-Mbadinuju-Ngige experience in Anambra state.

If democracy is a government of the people, by the people and for the people, as it is widely defined, then it must incorporate the ordinary people also in the funding of the process that leads to the emergence of the representative. Interestingly, Ghana is pioneering this process of new system of democratizing campaign funding in Africa; something that some observers say if perfected, could reduce the tendency among politicians to siphon public funds for electioneering.

Another area where Ghana is bringing the benefits of ICT to bear on the populace is in its recently introduced e-zwich smart card. The e-zwich platform, according to the Bank of Ghana, would make possible electronic payments to all individuals whether banked, unbanked or underbanked because of its easy accessibility even in the remotest parts of the country, where electricity and telecommunication services might be unavailable or unreliable. The e-zwich smartcard has a biometric identification that allows the card owner to approve all transactions using the fingerprint. It can receive or transfer value in both online and offline modes.