

## **Telephony - Part II: The 'I don't get it', ICT Conference**

### **By Lionel Bernard**

Sometimes the right people have the wrong intentions, sometimes the wrong people have the right intentions, but quite often the wrong people have the wrong intentions and the right people have the right intentions. You can guess which category the recent weeklong Information and Communications Technology Conference (ICT), held in mid-April 2007 in Monrovia, falls in. The ICT conference, dubbed as a visionary effort to spur discussions on the role of information technology in Liberia's development, could have evolved into a much more relevant and tangible effort had the right people had the right intentions.

I received an email from a good friend on the day prior to the conference's scheduled date of April 23, 2007 and I almost shouted 'halleluiah'. Could this galvanized effort focusing on information technology finally echo some of the sentiments about the potentially critical role that information technology could play in Liberia's economic development (despite what some may think; look at the impact of mobile phones)? I had argued, with friends, on countless occasions, about this very subject about including IT in Liberia's strategic planning. I was elated about the possibility that this single event could potentially serve as a forum for some brilliant Liberians and IT enterprises to passionately express their ideas and showcase their products and services; that it could connect IT entrepreneurs with investors and funding sources; that it could attract public and private initiatives to provide more IT education and training for war transitioning Liberians; that it could help break down and simplify incomprehensible technology speak for the average conference attendee to become enlightened about the potential that technology holds for the future of a scarred nation; that students from various high schools, universities, and internet café users and owners would be invited not just to fill vacant audience seats, but to engage in active dialogue about service shortcoming and ownership challenges; that it could influence the government to think beyond pusa rice and paved roads to a fiber optic based communications infrastructure as another key development component; that it could make sense.

Then I realized that the conference was scheduled for the next day. Why had I only learned about it now? Surely the technology gurus organizing the conference would have made an effort to market the conference to Liberians everywhere. They could have easily leveraged mass email marketing, banner advertising on popular Liberian news and gossip web sites, and established an interactive web site; all event marketing practices that are commonplace among organizers of various Liberian high school alumni association reunions. Essentially, why hadn't the conference organizers created a 'buzz' of enthusiasm about the event? A few had heard about it incidentally, but no one knew what to

make of it or simply 'didn't get it'. Was the lack of marketing caused by ignorance or deliberate? I became suspicious and decided to dig deeper.

It turns out that there was a conference itinerary, albeit vaguely placed on a government web site, that provided an elaborate who's who list of panelists. But all the panelist's names were those of high-ranking government officials. Could they ideally represent the expertise and insight required to present the message of this groundbreaking event? I checked the program's handout to evaluate the message and perhaps invalidate my concerns. Voila! Maybe there was some substance to this. The handouts indicated, tucked between refreshment breaks, lunch, and gala dinners, that the event included sessions with presentations on a range of topics including improving education, ICT investment opportunities, and intergovernmental communications with ICT. Even the great Microsoft and Cisco system were represented and played a sponsorship role.

Seemingly impressive, but had the ICT event really connected with the public and the decision-makers in its message of hope in information technology? I decided to ask several attendees to gauge the success of the event and its impact on the sector. The responses were overwhelmingly unfavorable. Some noted that the speeches were 'boring'; some noted that the invitee list was exclusive and not representative of the actual IT presence in Liberia; some especially noted that the event's true intent may have been to promote the careers of the organizers. The consensus was that the event could have accomplished so much more had it's organizers reached out to a broader public audience and provided a message more relevant to the needs of a third world country with a high illiteracy rate and a severely crippled, mobile dependent, communications infrastructure.

Despite the shortcomings, I must commend the participants for their efforts in assembling the ICT conference. It likely required considerable investment in time and financial resources and proved that something of that magnitude could evolve in a place like Liberia. However, there is a lesson to be derived from a reflection on the ICT's accomplishments and failures. The lesson for subsequent change agents is that they must relinquish self-serving interests and acknowledge that change is only effective if it is for the people and by the people.