

**The Role of Information and Communications Technologies  
in Liberia's Reconstruction and Development**

**An Address to**

**The Georgia Institute of Technology**

**By**

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President Clough, Dean Rosser and Dean DeMillo, my West African friend Femi Oke,  
Executives of the Information and Communications World;  
Professors and Students;  
Fellow Liberians and Africans Present;  
Other Distinguished Guests;  
Ladies and Gentlemen.

I want to thank the organizers of this event for this invitation. It gives me great pleasure to be here; to see in this room so many of those who have traveled with us on this long road to where we are today. I bring warm greetings from the people of Liberia as I try to share with you their hopes and dreams, their determination not only to rebuild their nation from the dust of war and conflict, but to build a new nation crafted on an uncompromising commitment to achieve modernization and global competitiveness in as short a time as is humanly possible and reasonable. Such a new nation must still be constructed on the old and firm foundation of Liberia's eminent history and culture.

The juxtaposition of modernity and tradition, of building a new nation on the foundations of the old, is the very magic that makes African development so intriguing.

When we reconstruct a nation after the devastation of war or natural disasters, we should seek not merely to rebuild what once was, but to create something new that more truly approximates the very best possible, taking full advantage of the lessons of history, the knowledge and wisdom of the people, and the evolution of global society, all tempered by the judgment and discrimination of the enlightened and fair-minded.

So this morning, I come to share some ideas on the challenges facing our country, on our vision to build a society that enables our people to achieve their highest expectations. I come to share with you the challenges we face in pursuing the common search for the self-actualization of a Liberian nation, blessed with so much resource and potential, steeled by the harsh lessons of internecine conflict and the resulting devastation, yet empowered by a firm resolve to rebuild while using the best of human knowledge and expertise, to buttress the foundation of the nation against retrogression and any possibility of returning trauma.

If any field of endeavor has been so touted with the possibility of doing so much, it is the field of Information and Communications Technologies (ICT). I therefore wish to start a dialogue with you on how the knowledge, products, services and promise of

Information and Communication Technologies can advance and accelerate our national reconstruction process. Sometimes we feel that all we have to do is get out of the way so that our lives and destiny can be executed for us through the push of a few buttons. Several of you in this room know the feeling, because you are at the center of this revolution. By this visit I hope to impress upon you the need to make good on the promise of ICT; to provide the leadership and the guidance in our environment where this acronym is just emerging.

Several months ago, shortly after I took office, during my first official visit to the United States of America, a Liberian reporter asked me about Africa One, an optical fiber project that was supposed to ring around Africa. “If it is beautiful, “I told her, “We will wear it!” I have since found out that Africa One did not materialize which points to another side of the communications industry - the rapid changes of technology, and the threat of obsolescence. Yet Africa has moved on. I understand that African nations themselves, working with global partners, have built their own undersea cable SAT-3, along the coast of West Africa, linking to Europe and Asia. They are detailing a sister undersea cable to run along the East African coast.

We all know that technology is a powerful tool, but just a tool. Its efficacy lies in its ability to accomplish the will of man and society, at a level of efficiency, speed and economy of scale, so that we can create products and services, and reach more people over great distances, all exponentially, at more affordable costs to those who need them most. Put differently, technology in its rightful place and deployment can stretch the returns on human investment, permitting especially those with much less, to accomplish much more than they otherwise could. The goals, the method, the effect and the utility of technology must thus aim at the service of a better life today and tomorrow, all based upon human desire and command.

For this reason, in order to get the best out of technology while ensuring that it does not spring a life of its own and seek to conquer us, we must first be clear about what we need and want it to do for us, and ensure that we master its capacities and possibilities, while curbing its potential for excesses. For maximum efficacy and outcome, we in Liberia seek to craft a long-term strategic development, and dove-tail into it our short and medium-term objectives.

For those of you who might not have known our country, before the military coup and civil war, Liberia was a country of peace. Life was characterized by confidence of the people in their safety. The people were poor but proud. The country had embarked upon the processes that would lead to prosperity thorough exploitation of our economic potential. Of course, in the midst of that calm, the seeds of crisis had taken root, and festered ultimately to cause a national disaster.

As a result, today, the picture is different. When my Government took office on January 16, 2006, following twenty five years of decline and fourteen years of devastating war and conflict, we inherited a Liberia with uprooted social and family institutions; a criminalized and ruined economy; a woefully destroyed economic and social infrastructure; a lack of basic services and the virtual absence of good governance and the rule of law.

In the months since we took office, we have worked virtually round the clock to assess the situation we inherited, in order to identify and quantify our challenges, to understand the starting block, so to speak. Our 150 Day Action Plan was a product of that assessment.

We now seek to define a tangible future for Liberia through popular consultation in search of consensus. We are working hard to identify the resources available to us, not only financially, but in terms of human and intellectual resources (at home and abroad). We seek opportunities, goodwill, partnerships, and more. We aim to measure our resources against our needs in order to determine the deficit. This process is still ongoing, but we now have a clear picture of where the country must go, where we are leading it to, what we want to build, and how we want to do so. We also know the nature and extent of our capacity and of our resource deficit, and it is from that knowledge that we are driving our outreach for global support and partnership.

The Liberia we seek to build may be characterized by the following objectives - a reform of the security sector that ensures the future security of our people; the revitalization of our economy so that wealth is within the possibility and reach of all of our people; early rehabilitation of our social and economic infrastructure to give our children educational opportunities, to reduce the vulnerability of our elderly, and enhance the mobility of our citizens; and a strengthening of good governance and the rule of law to ensure dignity, human rights, freedom and equal opportunity for all of our people.

How does ICT fit into that reform agenda?

In order to get the most out of the promise of ICT; in order to develop the ICT sector in Liberia, to attract investment and support, and ensure the smoothest operation of all participants with minimum interference amongst competitors and collaborators alike, it is important to establish the *modus operandi* and the appropriate policy, legal and regulatory framework and environment for promoting and managing the sector. Accordingly, we are considering the establishment of a National Steering Committee, consisting of expert Liberians from around the country, to draft a National ICT Policy. They will be given the responsibility of formulating a vision and mission for ICT in the country, of crafting the framework for the strategic development and the most beneficial deployment of ICT to meet Liberia's strategic needs. We will ask the Committee to direct their focus especially on Community Access and Development, Government, Learning, Health, Economic Development and the Growth of the ICT Sector, Infrastructure and Security, Legislation and Policy.

Our vision in this regard is for Liberia to become "a globally competitive knowledge and information society where lasting improvement in social, economic, and cultural development is achieved through effective use of ICT. We want to create an enabling

environment for the growth of an ICT industry in the country; to provide universal service and access to information and communications facilities in the country; and if realistic, to make Liberia a regional ICT Hub so as to make the country's service sector globally competitive.

We hope by this means to build a culture of lifelong learning that maximizes the potential within all citizens and accelerates innovation to develop knowledge-based systems. We want to make Government services available electronically; increase economic diversification and foreign investment, including ICT-enabled services based in Liberia. We want to promote access to relevant, localized and understandable information for all citizens. We hope to establish an ICT access point in many villages and to provide ICT support for enhanced disease control and health care programs. We expect to build an efficient and cost-effective ICT infrastructure; and establish clear ICT legal framework.

We know that the key to the successful development and implementation of Liberia's ICT Policy will be the enabling legal and regulatory framework, and its administration by an independent regulatory authority. In this regard, we have already established the Liberia Telecommunications Authority (LTA), the key tasks of which are similar to your

Federal Communications Commission (FCC). The Liberian Telecommunications Authority will not just regulate the sector, issue licenses and supervise compliance with the terms of the licenses. It will not only manage spectrum allocation and use (to prevent inappropriate or rogue use of this precious national asset), but more importantly, it will have prime responsibility to drive the development and growth of the sector. At the end of the day, we want to build an Information and Communications Technologies business sector in Liberia, one in which Liberians and other Africans can acquire and deploy critical ICT capabilities, working in close consort with global partners. That is our ambitious but ultimate goal.

As we work on crafting this enabling policy; regulatory and legal framework, we are quite clear as to our critical needs and priorities in ICT – infrastructure, to take advantage of some twenty years of technological advances and innovation; affordable access to basic telecommunications services such as telephone and internet; value added services to enhance the domestic economy and attract foreign investment; online services to expand Government services potential; security to ensure personal safety and have security with affordability.

From all I have said, it is self-evident that Liberia offers solid opportunities for investing in the Information and Communications Technologies sector. The demand is vast, which means the opportunity is equally vast, and the demand is not just from government only. The private sector which is working hard to rebuild, has needs for ICT products and services just as we do. Our own partnership with the Liberian and private sector creates yet another dimension of opportunity.

Inevitably, the level and quality of receptivity of government and its people to foreign investment determine to a great extent the eagerness with which the potential investor approaches the market. On the top of the list of requirements is transparency, a clear and rationale process and procedure, the rule of law, and various tax incentives.

We are putting in place an investor-friendly set of incentives that will facilitate your investing in Liberia. If you told me this morning that you are ready to invest in Liberia today, I can assure you that I will ask my team to work immediately to draft an attractive package that will also apply equally to other investors who come after you.

In this regard, we are working on new Investment Incentive Code to encourage Foreign Direct Investment in Liberia and I want to assure you that we will welcome such investment with open arms.

I would like to acknowledge some of our existing development partners within the ICT sector and to reassure them that we stand ready and open to further and continued collaborations.

The Soros Foundation has been a great partner to our development and has already funded work to further assess the state of the ICT sector in Liberia and to help us as we develop our National ICT Policy. I know that Dr. Nana Tanko, who runs their West Africa office, is here in the audience and I look forward to interacting with her after my presentation.

Microsoft Corporation works with governments and civil society throughout Africa to help empower us with the tools and capacity to live in an information society. Our representatives had a good interaction with them at the Microsoft Forum for Global

Leaders that was recently held in Cape Town, South Africa and I am delighted that they have agreed to establish Community Technology Centers in Monrovia and throughout Liberia. I know that Dr. Akhtar Badshah, Senior Director for Community Affairs, is here in the audience and I look forward to confirming our relationship with him later today.

The World Bank and USAID have also been important development partners within the ICT sector assisting us to develop a new telecommunications law and I look forward to continued collaborations with them.

Finally, President Clough, you know that Georgia Tech is one of the world's preeminent science and technology universities and Atlanta is a city that I have personal connections to and have a fondness for. So I am delighted to acknowledge an emerging set of ICT collaborations between Tech and Liberia. Dr. Michael Best, who is with us today, is your faculty lead on these collaborations, I look forward to meeting him and some of his students involved in this research. But above all, my country needs the human and intellectual capacity to turn our dreams into reality. We ask Georgia Tech to work with us to train and develop Liberian IT professionals.

In concluding, I would like to share with you a view of African development from our side of the Atlantic Ocean. In seeking to redefine “development”, an African friend of mine and a leading world expert on ICTs and development, Dr. Joe Okpaku who is here in this audience, in his book, *Information and Communication Technologies for African Development* wrote that:

*Central to (development), are knowledge and information, their capacities, both inherent and catalytic to other capacities, and their extensive scope and versatility.... Knowledge and information hold incredible potential for propelling the development process with reasonable promise of quantum achievement. The engine that drives the deployment of knowledge and information is what we collectively call ICTs. ” ... To realize a vision for new and better, more rewarding or simply more exciting conditions, we must realize “the mobilization of [these] resources and the galvanization of a collective genius in an effort to propel society over the hill of challenge to the valley or plain fields of resolution beyond, to new vistas and new conditions”*

After eight months at the helm of the government of Liberia, I see nothing but hope and immense possibilities for the renewal of our nation.

We are determined as a people to rebuild a national and human security system; to renew and capacitate our governance structure; to revitalize our economy and reconstruct our infrastructure thus putting the nation back to work, putting our children back in school and keeping our people healthy. We are determined as a people to build a new Liberia out of the ashes, pain and anguish of the old. We are convinced that we can become once again a proud and noble people, mindful of the shortcomings of our past but challenged by the hope and promise of our future. We know that we have the will and the capacity to become America's success story in Africa.

Thank you and I now turn over to Femi to guide the stimulating comments and questions.