CONFRONTING THE CHALLENGE OF THE INFORMATION AND KNOWLEDGE SOCIETY IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

Abstract. Developing countries such as Morocco face particular difficulties in addressing the opportunities presented by the ever-increasing presence and influence of ICT across the globe. This chapter will argue that only education can ensure the task of preparing citizens not only to use ICT tools, but also for the changes in modes of operation and culture that these will bring. It examines the reasons and mechanisms with which Morocco has responded to these challenges: the Education Training Decade and e-Morocco programmes. Finally, the danger of further widening the digital divide through inappropriate policy is addressed.

INTRODUCTION

Morocco is a land rich in human and natural resources. It is a land of dialogue, tolerance and entrepreneurial freedom. The conjunction of these elements makes it a land rich in opportunities.

(His Majesty Hassan II, the late King of Morocco)

Ten years after its integration in the Euro-Mediterranean market, Morocco continues to build the future of its economy under the sign of continuity. In this task it is backed by the confidence of a nation united under its new sovereign and supported both by Moroccan and foreign business sectors. The major priority of Morocco is to succeed its "entry into the third millennium guided by a clear vision of the future". The country is doted with several key advantages, not the least of which is its exceptional geo-strategic location and close proximity to European markets. Many of its traditional activity sectors provide excellent development opportunities (energy and mining resources, agriculture, fishing, food-processing and textile industries) and others are already proving to be vectors of rapid growth (tourism, electronic and pharmaceutical industries). Above all, it possesses a high quality labor force.

Nevertheless, slow growth rates in production and employment (the annual growth rate has stood at approximately 3% over the past decade), an insufficient level of savings and investment (gross capital formation per GNP has stood at about 20% for over a decade) and a large public debt are but a few of the obstacles it is struggling to overcome. Financial equilibrium remains fragile due to unstable revenue, overheads that are almost impossible to reduce and a trade balance deficit. Social indicators, too, remain relatively disconcerting. Despite uncontestable progress, schooling, literacy and social security coverage rates are
Inadequate unemployment rates in urban zones rose from 14.7% in 1987 to 17% in 1997, and the standard of living per capita has risen on average just 1% per year over the past decade. Social and spatial inequities are a matter of grave concern. In an attempt to overcome these difficulties, the government has recently implemented a global development strategy that is articulated around two central objectives. To ensure the transition:

1. from a relatively stagnant economy to a strong and durable growth economy serving as a vector for increased employment;
2. from a socially and spatially inequitable society to one that is constantly striving to reduce social and geographical disparities.

It is therefore imperative that Morocco learns how to integrate ICT and gains the maximum benefit from these powerful new tools. There is but one means of doing this – by investment in its people. In this way, ICT will contribute to creating an egalitarian society, the developmental policy of which will guarantee social cohesion.

MEETING THE CHALLENGE OF THE INFORMATION AGE

The mutations that modern societies are undergoing today are certainly greater than at any other time since the industrial revolution. They are profound, global and rapid. They concern far more than just technologies, and are a challenge to each and every citizen no matter where they live. Bridling these transformations represents a major economic and social challenge, especially for developing countries such as Morocco. Information technology is a heavy burden on the economy, surpassing the capacities of even the most solid traditional industrial sectors. By the same token, it is an essential vector for increasing the competitiveness of the economy and represents an indispensable lever to the development of all societies, the most advanced and developing societies alike.

The economic sector is a strategic sector. New occupations are emerging; it is necessary to learn how to fill them. Innovative products and services are emerging, people must know how to produce and provide them. Companies are being forced to evolve, to adopt integrated operating systems for all production processes from the design of products right through to their distribution to consumers. New dynamics are at work, and employment will play a determining role. By providing the necessary impetus and human capital, developing and emerging countries will ensure themselves every chance of success in this mutation.

All of these processes are being accelerated by globalization. Developing countries must also be capable of playing an active role, and not simply content themselves with being consumers. But at the same time no country can afford to lose sight of its own history, its identity, culture and environment, all harbingers of innovative projects. The very tools that are revolutionizing the workplace, education and modes of thinking also provide the means of producing and transmitting the