LINK ICTS, TELECOMS AND CULTURE FOR REGIONAL GROWTH

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The Caribbean is a crucible of dynamic cultural expressions. Our style and substance have captured the imagination of the world for many years. The link between telecommunications, culture and the Internet has created an increasingly attractive opportunity for the region's quest to reach global markets and allow Caribbean peoples to learn more about each other's cultures and societies.

In the Caribbean, as in any other regions dominated by micro-states, it is the combination of emerging technology, ethnic diversity, an intriguingly mixed cultural heritage, the natural environment and the on-going creativity of our people that will increasingly define Caribbean economic success whether in tourism, cultural industries or horticulture. Export of traditional crops, while still important, is proving unreliable as the way forward. While cultural expression is a development end in itself, the capacity to produce and market elements of this cultural expression represents an important source of value-creation and of economic development. It is both communication and

information technologies that will provide the digital capacity to create, showcase and disseminate these new economic products and services.

Next Generation Networks

The move from use of older analogue technologies to more state of the art digital applications is now being further enhanced by what are now being described as Next Generation Network services (NGNs). Technology-enabled services once delivered in vertical compartments or silos are now being delivered through horizontally linked and technology-neutral applications. The ability of these NGNs to better provide end-users with integrated services combining voice, image and text, is of great advantage to innovating societies seeking to digitally market products and services emanating from their creative imaginations. The traditional perception of telecommunications as simply communication lines having a single functionality for enabling connections in other industries has long given way to the wider notion of telecommunications as being a value-laden industry in itself, operating within newer, mainly service-based economies driven by information and cultural content.

Within such so-called knowledge-based societies, dominated by a double-edged globalization, the traditional constraints of global reach have been significantly bridged for many players, opening up the potential of expanded marketing in cultural products from around the world to connected consumers anywhere. This is a framework for intensified global competition in services, where product origin or indigeneity confers little special claim on global product marketing. The Caribbean, which offers many unique experiences and cultural artifacts, is no exception. Regional designations implied in such expressions 'Made in Jamaica', 'the steel pan', 'reggae music' or

'Blue Mountain coffee' can easily be attached to sub-standard or even equivalent items or expressions from a different origin and marketed globally.

If the region is to retain some hold on its native competitive advantage, it must benefit from improved patenting and marketing, greater intellectual property competences, wider Internet broadband access, improved literacy and education as well as better regional harmonization of policies and regulatory frameworks. In an increasingly competitive global environment, the growing number of regional content providers and telecommunications operating companies require both support and certainty in their varying levels of investment. Coordinated policy-making and joint negotiating positions with external players are essential if the desired transition to a new Caribbean service economy is to be successful.

In the context of the Caribbean Single Market (CSM), such common policy approaches must be seen as important in seeking to integrate disparate strategies into common goals and shared objectives. Freedom of movement of regional professionals is not enough. Caribbean telecoms and ICT policy makers must devise a regional strategic plan and policy framework covering issues such as online marketing, intellectual property protection, teleworking, network interconnection, spectrum management, numbering systems and common timelines for the pending switchover from analogue to high definition digital television.

Co-ordinated numbering systems could be used to increase intra-regional trade and network access through simplified methods of dialing as well as more efficient use of time spent in placing calls to other countries. As global telecoms analyst Bill Melody points out, incumbent operators may wish to

exploit the advantages of a dedicated number series as a form of "branding" for their services or products. But he warns that this could also lead to market distortions and inefficiencies (Melody, 1997). A systematic approach on how to effectively improve numbering systems, portability and other dialing reforms needs to be developed.

A Single ICT Regional Policy Champion

While the region should continue to rely on the acumen of private entrepreneurs to drive the operational side of the ICT and telecoms industry, the region also needs a single multilateral champion in the form of an institution guiding policy development. Such an agency should be well resourced and fully equipped to develop recommendations to industry and to governments in order to oversee harmonized regulations and in-sync planning.

Telecommunications systems are as strong as their weakest link in a complicated global network. Operating companies place high priority on cost effective and reliable interconnection to existing networks in order to deliver quality services to their customers. A great degree of cooperation is required between various telecommunications operators in order to achieve efficient communication across different service providers. But, interconnection negotiations among existing firms and new entrants are often protracted and acrimonious, as each entity seeks an interconnection arrangement, which will accord an advantage in terms of unimpeded access to subscribers and excellent links to partners in a competitive market.

This process of 'connectivity warfare', though not surprising could be mitigated and assisted by a set of regionally agreed ground rules, brokered by

the proposed champion agency and mediated by local regulators with a feel for the entire region. A common regulatory framework to guide interconnection negotiations should be an area of priority for the CTU, the CRNM and other policy centres concerned with eliminating unnecessary bottlenecks in the investment and service delivery processes.

Regional Policy Champion

Many industry players currently look to the Caribbean Telecommunications Union (CTU) for this kind of regional industry leadership. However, the CTU despite valuable initiatives, most recently in the development of a regional numbering policy, continues to be poorly resourced. It also has only tenuous links to the highest forums of decision-making at the level of Heads of Government and is not a strong player among the operating companies. Formed nearly two decades ago by CARICOM, the Trinidad-based CTU finds itself today in competition with the ICT Unit at CARICOM Headquarters in Guyana for 'paramountsy' in the regions telecoms and ICT leadership. This kind of bureaucratic snafu cannot be allowed to continue in an industry that is the fastest growing in the world and one with the greatest potential to supplant the ailing traditional sectors of the region's economy.

While the wider region's nascent policy champion struggles, it is to the credit of six regional micro-states that they have established a model sub-regional regulator in the Eastern Caribbean Telecommunications Authority (ECTEL). This small but stable multi-lateral agency seeks to guide the development of competition and industry policy alongside the National Telecoms Regulatory Authorities (NTRAs) of individual member countries: Dominica, Grenada, St Kitts and Nevis, St Lucia and St Vincent and the Grenadines. An example of the valuable joint work being done by ECTEL is

the development of a '**Draft Framework for the Determination of Dominance and Assessment of Market Competition'**, as a consultative document available for regional comment.

The wider region could well take a leaf out of ECTEL's book and move with urgency to forge a pan Caribbean consensus on issues of central concern not just to providers but also to users of the increasingly joined-up services available to the region. Those should include such issues as compatible technical standards to guide interconnection between different operators and networks, publicly declared customer service commitments, service level agreements and the sharper definition of economic and social obligations of incumbent firms.

Broadcasting Switchover

Though net users of these innovations, Caribbean nationals do not produce much of the technological hardware on which we depend for inter-linkage. New submarine cable services such as the *Fibralink* and *Arcos 1* networks from Columbus Communications now operate alongside older Cable and Wireless or consortium-owned cables such as *Americas 1&2* and the *Eastern Caribbean Fibre Service (ECFS),* all providing growing wired under-sea broadband connections. Satellite gateway switches, Internet-based VOIP services and other networks create the inter-modal diversity of the region's external links.

While regional interests are just moving into ownership of such networks, local ownership of television broadcasting services, Web-based services, content production and radio stations are growing rapidly within the region, sometimes

outstripping the availability of the locally assigned electromagnetic spectrum. If the products of these content providers are to reach the global markets, they will need to be created and disseminated on digital broadcasting platforms. Amongst the number of ICT imperatives of the Caribbean region, the mandate to arrange the smooth switchover from analogue to digital broadcasting systems is maybe the most immediate, as the viability of the region in terms of trade in broadcasting services depends on this transition.

While the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) proposes a global switchover by the year 2015, other regions, such as Europe and the United States are now in an advanced stage of cut-over and operating well ahead of that schedule. Digital broadcasting promises to deliver a range of new applications, including interactive services and online connectivity, to the home. (Sourbati, 2004). The convergence of digital broadcasting with telecommunications as available through the Internet, will reach new levels of global audience volumes. The adoption of digital broadcasting linked to the Internet, including through sites such as My Space and You Tube, can facilitate a greater spread of Caribbean culture by increased interactivity, enhanced sound and quality pictures and in the more effective marketing of the region globally.

Policy Harmonization

Should CARICOM be successful at further harmonising and standardizing telecommunications policies across the region, the opportunities for value creation in employment, education, culture, health and sports would be substantial. In this regard, the interest shown by the CRNM is a welcome intervention in a sector that will require negotiating leadership as well as greater

integration into the economic planning of both CARICOM and CARIFORUM. Even as the CRNM leads the negotiations in the Economic Partnership Agreements (EPA) with the EU for our farmers and other producers, greater involvement with the non-agricultural sector is the path of the future. Barbados, through its Crop Over Festival, has successfully linked traditional agriculture with its cultural industries, an alliance that can be forged with equal success elsewhere.

The crucial linkage provided by the mobile phone into farming and rural communities suggests that there is no wall between any aspect of our new and older economic sectors. However, if the emerging ICT industry is to link with and grow beyond the traditional agricultural export products, it will require more integrated and well-resourced regional leadership and an enabling policy framework that will support both regional competition and global competitiveness. Harmonization of ICT and telecommunications regulations, standards and policies, the provision of resources to the CTU as the latent regional ICT policy-making agency and arrangements for switchover to HDTV must become top priorities in the region's strategic development of an enabling regional framework for both ICT content and carriage.

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