

MESSAGE BY MRS. RODAH A. MASAVIRU, PAPU SECRETARY GENERAL, ON THE OCCASION OF THE CELEBRATION OF THE PAN AFRICAN POSTS DAY – 18th JANUARY 2010.

It is with profound joy and pride that we celebrate the 2010 Pan African Post Day, a very special day indeed as PAPU marks its 30th anniversary. Thirty years in the life of an individual or an organization is neither a simple matter, nor a mere statistic. For the postal fraternity in Africa, it represents enduring memories of challenges and opportunities; of hope and growth; of great promise and determination to succeed against all odds. It is against this background that we mark 18th January 2010, the PAPU Day, with pomp and ceremony, by organizing a memorable celebration at PAPU Headquarters in Arusha, Tanzania, around the theme: **“The Post, a veritable means to bridge the digital divide.”**

It is highly unlikely that when PAPU was created back in 1980, the founding fathers had a clue on what lay ahead of the postal landscape a few years down the road. Back then, the business model of choice was the post and telecommunications entities operating as one unit, alongside banking services under the brand name, Post bank. A few years later, the push for separation of the post from telecommunications services, to pave way for privatization of the latter, came as a rude shock to even the most liberal public

sector bureaucrats of the time. Just like today, it was argued that the capital outlay required to modernize Telecommunications infrastructure, was too enormous to be borne by governments. Others saw a different perspective whereby private interests were perceived to target the more lucrative segment of the business at the expense of what was seen as a “social service”, in reference to the post. Clearly, the commercialization of postal services was yet to come. It was a dream.

Then came the “Internet explosion” followed closely by the mobile telephony and other equally pace setting new ways of communicating and doing business, all based on the ICT platform. The advent of this “phenomenon” literally turned everything upside down, and ushered in the much hyped liberalization, restructuring and a host of other paradigm shifts.

The 21st century, widely acknowledged as the century of Communications, has witnessed the technological progress related to computer science and the Internet, blossom into the Information Society. The information society has emerged from the Industrial society that in turn grew from the agricultural society before it. This technological progress, although it generates high economic growth, creates new forms of exclusion that is commonly referred to as the digital gap or digital divide. And this is where our concerns

as communication services providers in the postal sector, begin.

This expression refers to the socio-economic gap between those who are using the opportunities offered by Information and Communication Technology (ICTs) for their personal and professional needs and those who cannot use them because they do not have access to the equipment for various reasons, or because of lack of competence.

The following statistics illustrate this theme: according to a study in 2008 internet users were 5 times less in Africa (51 million internet users, i.e. 1 inhabitant over 20) than in North America (248 million internet users) whereas the African continent is three times more populated (955 millions of inhabitants) than North America (338 million).

One should note that the digital divide is not only measured between Northern industrialized countries and Southern countries. On the African continent, more than half of the internet users are in the Northern African countries and in the Republic of South Africa. In sub-Saharan Africa, only 3% of the populations are connected to the internet. At national level, it is measured between more or less privileged populations and underprivileged populations.

This definition of the digital gap being contrary to the harmonious and equitable Information Society that the

International Community is proposing to build, it is imperative to bridge it by all means, since it can't be entirely stopped.

In this process, the Post in general and the African Post in particular, can play a leading role through its traditional role of grass-root presence and a catalyst for socio-economic and cultural development in our countries. Indeed, of all the public enterprises, the Post is the one that has the largest contact network in the world. At world level, the Post has about 660.000 post offices. In Africa, there are 30,300 spread all over the territories, in urban as well as in rural areas, in far-flung lands. Depending on this large network and introducing the technological dimension in its reform policy, the Post is capable of enabling the access of populations to new technologies and in the process, to contribute to the bridging of the digital divide. The availability of the internet through cybercafés in post offices, can indeed offer to users services and opportunities such as:

- E-mail;
- Hybrid mail;
- E-commerce;
- Electronic money transfer;
- Online financial services;
- Distance learning.

Still conscious of the necessity for PAPU member countries to better meet the growing needs of

customers by modernizing their network and by introducing the ICTs, PAPU General Secretariat, in partnership with the African Telecommunications Union (ATU), Regional African Satellite Communication Organization (RASCOM) is implementing a Project known as the E-Post Africa Project. Through this initiative whose aim is to contribute to the bridging of the existing digital divide between Africa and the Industrialized World and within Africa, PAPU and its partners aim, eventually, to install multimedia terminals in all post offices on the continent, at an affordable cost for all.

With the implementation of this Project, access to ICTs in Africa will certainly make significant progress.

I wish to seize this occasion of the celebration of the 30 years of PAPU to, once again, call upon all member countries to support the E-Post Africa Project and embrace new technologies and innovations, in order to collectively and successfully usher in digital integration. on the African continent. The Post has the will and the capacity to see this great dream come true.

It is with this in mind that I wish you a successful Pan African Post Day!

RODAH A. MASAVIRU
SECRETARY GENERAL