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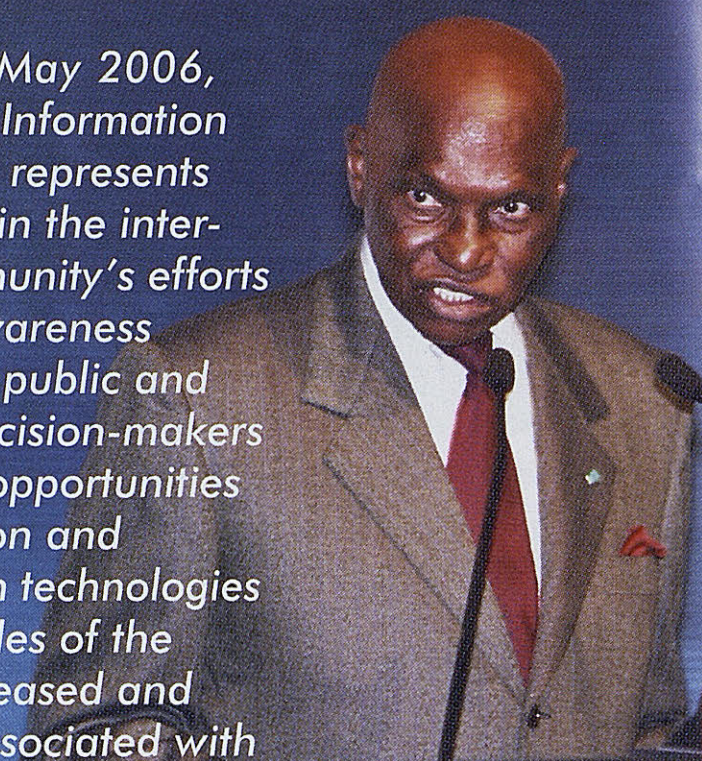
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President Abdoulaye Wade of Senegal

Inspiring the Digital Solidarity Fund

"Today — 17 May 2006, the first World Information Society Day — represents a historic step in the international community's efforts to raise the awareness of the general public and particularly decision-makers as to the vast opportunities that information and communication technologies offer the peoples of the world. I am pleased and proud to be associated with such an auspicious event as this commemoration today."



World
Information
Society
Day

Donald Sitaupili

■ **Mr President, what does this award mean to you?**

In bestowing this first World Information Society Award on me, jointly with Professor Muhammad Yunus, the International Telecommunication Union is in truth honouring my country, Senegal, my continent, Africa, and above all the team of people from every country in Africa who have sought to make a reality of an idea that I merely outlined. It is entirely fitting that Africa should receive this award, given that it was in December 2003, here in Geneva, that I proposed the concept of a digital solidarity fund.

I am happy to accept this award, not so much as a token of recognition but rather as an encouragement

to continue the work of bringing computers to the masses and providing the South with internet access so that it can take full advantage of information and know-how with which to make up lost ground.

I have always believed that a better-balanced, more harmonious information society should be founded on widespread access to computer tools, to ensure that those countries now lagging behind in this area will not be permanently marginalized. The aim of the Digital Solidarity Fund is to make it possible for everyone to be connected, listen in, make their voices heard and keep pace with our ever-changing world.

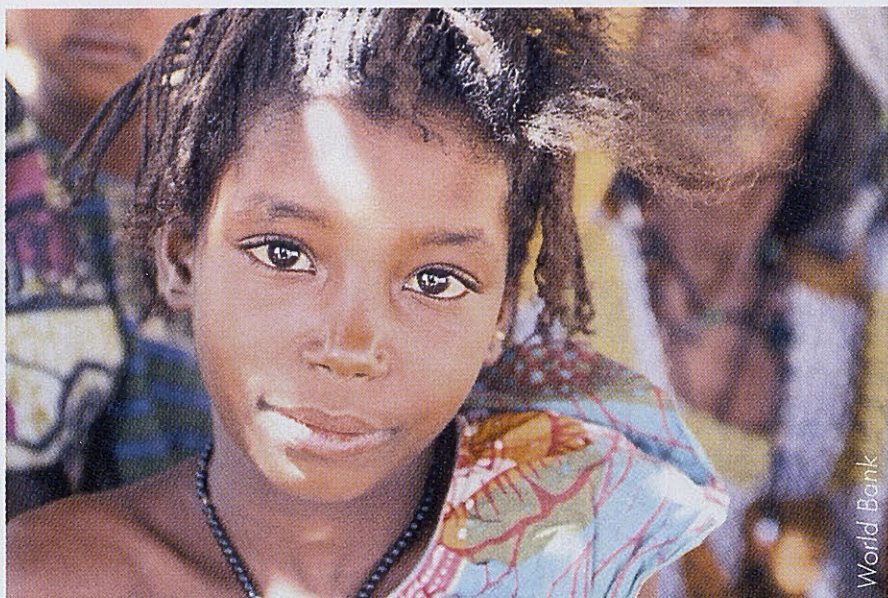
This is why, quite apart from this award, I greatly appreciate the fact

that ITU is keeping this issue of information at the forefront of the international agenda.

■ **Some regard the internet as the solution to every problem, while others demonize it. How do you see it?**

The internet with all its various applications has become an integral part of today's world. Whether we live in the North or the South, our lives are affected by internet upheaval.

We are communicating for the better and also, unfortunately, for the worse. The digital world touches us all, either through our own actions or through the consequences of the actions of others. The full extent and scope of globalization, as conveyed



by the values of information and communication technologies, can be summed up in these terms. No one can choose whether to participate in globalization or to stand apart from it. We are all involved in it, and that is the way things are.

As I said at a seminar that my government organized recently on the topic of globalization, even if one may not agree on the fact that the Earth is turning, it will in any case keep on turning.

It is from the recognition of this simple fact that I would stake everything on the mass dissemination of information and communication technologies. For our peoples, it represents an appointment with history that we cannot fail to keep.

The world has down through history become increasingly divided into two camps: those who communicate, and those who do not. Fortunately, the internet now enables us to bridge that digital gap, and the Digital Solidarity Fund provides an appropriate mechanism for doing so.

I remain convinced that encounters between cultures have never brought people together as new technology can. The web must be seen, like the academy of ancient Greece, as a huge open space where information can be offered and accepted, where, as Léopold Sédar Senghor would put it, minds and knowledge can meet without borders or prejudices. I am

especially fascinated today by the Wikipedia model: a vast electronic encyclopaedia of global knowledge, continuously and generously updated free of charge, and accessible to every researcher.

■ What is Senegal doing to bridge the digital divide?

Given the country's relatively small land area, population and natural-resource base, it does not possess any special advantages. And so we have concentrated on our people. I am spending 40 per cent of the national budget on education and training: I believe we are the only country to achieve that level, while the target set by the African Union is 20 per cent. This is why the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has ranked Senegal as a world leader in education. By trusting in the creative genius of the Senegalese people, my ambition is to create an integrated system where, from kindergarten to university, computers are omnipresent in every student's education.

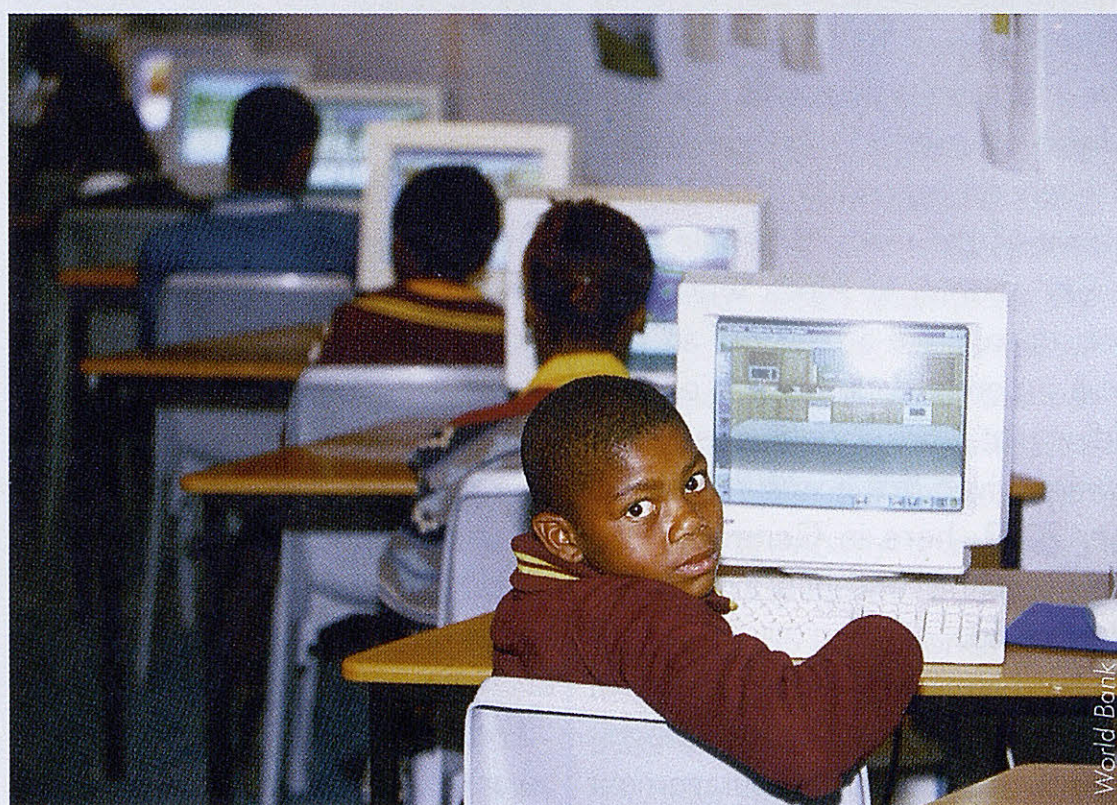
This was the approach we took when we launched the Children's

House [*Case des tout-petits*] programme some years ago, in which young children two to six years of age are introduced to modern toys including computer games. This means that the Children's House generation will be a very special generation for whom it will be second nature to use the latest technology. Indeed I do believe that computer tools are, first and foremost, tools. And yet this obvious point is frustrated by the digital divide.

■ But is it not a luxury to give everyone access to ICT?

What the digital divide means, in effect, is that something like a computer is a luxury or aspiration that can be enjoyed only by a select few, regardless of whether they have a love of learning and achievement. Someone who genuinely appreciates knowledge knows that sharing it creates an opportunity to grow that will benefit everyone. The programme I launched some years ago in Senegal, "A computer for every student, a computer for every teacher", forms part of this approach.

It is no longer just a dream, now that the mayor of Besançon and the chief executive officer of the AXA Group have offered me 30 000 computers for reconditioning. That means that



the digital solidarity network I am setting up in Senegal may get more computers than it can handle. But I shall not be satisfied until every Senegalese has a computer of his or her own, because the computer is not a luxury despite what some may say. Someone said once, "But instead of talking about computers, President Wade should be talking about resources that we can use to feed our people." That

of partner universities and take courses in real time via satellite. When they complete their programmes, these students, who will not have had to travel to the United States or Europe to pursue their studies, will receive the same diplomas awarded by the partner universities, rather than simply equivalents. We expect that this will help to combat Africa's brain drain.

of a national information-technology agency within the Government of Senegal. This has made it possible for Senegalese engineers and IT specialists trained and working abroad to return home and apply their skills and expertise to the country's benefit.

In addition, Senegal is now working with a partner company to release software in Wolof, one of our national languages.



comment simply reflects a lack of understanding, because the computer is as useful in farming as it is in offices or factories. Lots of modern farms are managed today using computers, and they can be run even better with various sorts of economies and a dedication to efficiency.

■ Can you tell us about other initiatives that Senegal has taken in the area of ICT?

I have started the University for Tomorrow's Africa [*Université du futur africain*] (UFA), on which construction work is well advanced. UFA's mission is to accept all African students, whatever country they may hail from, provided that they meet specific academic criteria and are bilingual.

This university of the future will be equipped with state-of-the-art telecommunication infrastructure so that its students can connect to a network

Another initiative is the government intranet which connects the various centres of local government in Senegal, and is to be connected eventually to our foreign missions. Thanks to this intranet, we have already managed to reduce the government's telephone costs significantly. We have also initiated an intranet programme within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and will soon do likewise within the African Union, with the cooperation of international firms specializing in this area.

I am told that Senegal is only the second country in the world, after Japan, to link its government offices with a dedicated optical-fibre network. That achievement was made possible thanks to the expertise of young Senegalese experts and financial support from the World Bank, and was facilitated by institutional reforms that led to the establishment

■ Are North-South partnerships the only form that digital solidarity can take?

South-South cooperation in regard to digital solidarity is only now beginning to happen, and it is equally important. Indeed, India and Africa have just launched an ambitious cooperation programme in telemedicine, governance and distance education using a satellite network that connects every country in Africa to India, and has its hub in Dakar. The potential of digital solidarity, through the diversity of its resources and the variety of its fields of application, offers humanity an unprecedented opportunity to overcome ignorance, fight poverty and ensure that everyone has a decent standard of living that maintains human dignity.

This sweeping revolution must not leave anyone by the wayside; and truly this is possible. The young people of the South, competing on the same playing field as those of the North, are perfectly capable of putting out the strongest possible performance. I like to say that computers are the most completely democratic realm there is, where people in Senegal, in India, in China, in the United States, in France or in Sweden, when placed in front of the same computer, all have an absolutely equal possibility of moving forward at the same speed, and that is the speed of light. ■