MOVING ICT FROM TALKING POINT TO ACTION POINT
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Do you remember St .Paul of the Christian Bible fame? He was reported to have philosophised something to the effect that, when he was a child he thought like a child, spoke like a child and acted like a child. But when he grew up, he reasoned like an adult and acted accordingly.

Perhaps, this simple African proverb may summarise that philosophy in this way: "When you are a small cat, you catch small mice; but when you become a big fat cat, you must endeavour to chase bigger and fatter mice and leave the tiny ones for the kitten"

 Early last year, Information and Communication Technology related conference, dubbed "Government ICT Conference" was held at the Accra International Conference Centre here in our beloved capital city. Records show that that year's conference had been the fourth in the series, successfully organised by an IT company, CTN Technology in collaboration with Ghana's Ministry of Communications. It was under a broad theme: "Mainstreaming ICT: Harmonizing e-Government and Development".

Of course, one can trust ICT gurus and their technological jargons as they are wont to do. But, for once, this particular conference addressed concrete issues and attempts were made to tackle problems confronting the IT industry in the country.

Some of the topics resource persons talked on included: "Mainstreaming ICT skills Development in Human Resource Enhancement", where the speaker stressed the need to explore the various models for skills development in the ICT for the advancement of the sector in the country.

One major topic that drained curiosity out of most participants was, "The E-Ghana Project". It appeared many people were hearing of the E-Ghana Project for the first time from the horse's own mouth, the then Ghana's Minister for Communications, Hon. Albert Kan-Dapaah drew delegates' minds to rapt attention when he revealed among other things that, "this year the Government with the support of the World Bank would start the E-Ghana Project, aimed at supporting concrete initiatives to implement the nation's ICT policy strategy. "We must succeed with the E-Ghana Project. Our people have heard so much about the potentials of it and they are hungry to see some practical demonstration of ICT potentials," he stressed.

(This is what motivates this writer to caption the heading of this article 'Moving ICT from Talking Point to Action Point') The Communications Minister pointed out that the E-Ghana Project was expected to generate increased employment in the IT-Enabled services notably business processing outsourcing and enhance efficiency, transparency and accountability in government agencies and departments.
Hon. Kan-Dapaah did not fail to remind Ghanaians that there was the need to leverage the aspiration of making the government machinery efficient with the use of ICT to facilitate accelerated development. He explained that the government ICT Policy was

aimed at developing human and technological potentials of the country through the effective use of ICT and to make Ghana an ICT hub in West Africa. "This goal will, however, not be achieved if the government machinery is not positioned to be an effective user and innovator of ICT," the Minister concluded.

Another topic treated at the conference which this writer finds most revealing was, "Digital Inclusion Strategies". This was the singular topic that led resource persons to focus attention on ways in which the rural poor could be included in political process; what new and effective tools and strategies ought to be adopted to strengthen the process by making it possible and easier for the deprived rural brothers and sisters to have access to ICT tools.

Some observers are of the opinion that this **digital inclusion** concept of the ICT in the country must not be a mere slogan but concrete action must be taken for the benefit of the rural poor. One conference delegate who came from a district put it this way: "Those of us from various districts are gingerly waiting for the day all the 138 districts in Ghana will be connected to the Internet and networked so that together we can exchange ideas and share knowledge among ourselves at grassroots level.

The digital inclusion will also enable us to be part of the global market whereby we can do business directly with investors in any part of the world," he noted. It is absolutely important that the rural people in Ghana are not isolated from the ICT strategies for development. This is why it is commendable that Government is doing everything possible to ensure their digital inclusion.

This is amply reflected in the national ICT4Accelarated Development policy document (ICT4AD). The truth is that, whether we like it or not the rural people are very instrumental in the socio-economic prosperity of our country. And if today the world is embarking on knowledge economy the rural people must be given the opportunity to acquire the knowledge that will empower them to help move the economy forward. ICT is key to that knowledge.

It is important to place on record that this year's ICT for Government Conference was officially opened by Ghana's former Chief Justice, Mr. Justice George Kingsley Acquah .He threw a challenge to the nation's ICT players to step-up efforts to bridge the current "huge digital divide" as he put it, by making information access all-inclusive to Ghanaians. The Chief Justice pointed out that the concept of "E-Government" will only have a meaning if all citizens of the country are given equal opportunities to ICT. As far as he is concerned, E-Government should not only be about using ICT tools in public sector management and reform, but must border on economic and social equity as well. "It should be seen as a critical component towards an information and knowledge economy", he stressed.

One other aspect of the conference which was very significant in terms of practical demonstration of the event was an exhibition mounted by various. IT companies, ranging from manufacturers to service providers. Both public sector organizations including some

government agencies and private institutions had the opportunity to display to the general public wares and services.

One particular government agency that mounted an exhibition and made appreciable impact on the district delegates was the Information Services Department (ISD) . As part of Government efforts to make information available and accessible to citizens electronically, the Department exhibited the Government Website, popularly known as Ghana Portal.

The functions and facilities of the Ghana Portal were demonstrated to the general public. Visitors who patronized the ISD stand including media practitioners were told that the Portal serves as one-stop-shop for authentic and verifiable information about Ghana. As a matter of fact, many people were amazed at the kind of information available on the Ghana Portal which most of them did not know until then. For instance, some of the Acts of Parliament, Draft Bills such as Whistle Blowers Bill, Freedom of

Information Act Bill, various Policy documents, Reports of Commissions including the entire National Reconciliation Commission Report, profiles of the President, the Vice – President and Cabinet Ministers as well as the full text of 2006 national budget statement among others can all be found on the Government Website www.ghana.gov.gh

The Ghana Portal also has links of major Ghana-related websites including the Ghanaian media houses, Ghanaian missions abroad, Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs) that have their own websites that are functional and up-dated. One particular link that caused some sensation and excitement among regional and district participants of the conference was the ghanadistrict.com website.

As for media practitioners, most of them admire the "Meet the Press" page, especially the photo gallery on the Government Website where journalists are seen firing questions at ministers who appeared on the programme at the Ministry of Information Conference Hall. It is very interesting indeed! Some of the district officers could not believe their eyes when they saw the pictures of their own District Chief Executives (DECs) and their presiding members on the national website. In fact, most of them marveled at the information of investment opportunities and tourism potentials of their own districts that were put on the Ghana Portal. Most of them pledged and even promised on their honour that when they went back, they would submit more information on their districts to be uploaded on the Ghana Portal.

The establishment of the Government of Ghana Website which was officially launched by H.E. the Vice-President, Alhaji Aliu Mahamah in April 2003, even though it is yet to move from the stage of information provision to public services delivery online, is a practical demonstration of Ghana Government's commitment to moving ICT from talking point to action point. Development partners such as the International Institute for Communication Development (IICD) must be commended for support in the realization of this Ghana Dot Gov. Project.