

Interview with Jay Naidoo

Jay Naidoo chairs the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition and is the outgoing chair of the Development Bank of Southern Africa. He was formerly Minister of Telecommunications, Post and Broadcasting of South Africa.

‘Coming from a developing country, and as a former minister of telecommunications, I am very committed to a vision of Africa that is connected,’ says Jay Naidoo, explaining why he accepted the invitation to join the Broadband Commission. ‘The Commission brings together a range of global decision-makers who are very influential and whose recommendations will be taken seriously.’

Two points are fundamental, Naidoo argues. First, ‘we have got to look beyond technology.’ The developing world is littered with technological white elephants, such as computer laboratories in schools that languish unused because they have never been connected to the internet and thus are of little interest or utility to students.

‘You can’t dump technology on people and hope it will be used productively,’ he says. ‘The issue is to provide affordable and reliable connectivity, with applications that have value to users, for example, that improve their education, stimulate the economy, or deliver government services more effectively.’

This means looking at broadband in a holistic way, combining provision of connectivity with training in essential skills and appropriate government policies and regulation. Governments, private operators, trade unions, communitybased organizations and other stakeholders need to forge a joint shared vision with a well-defined strategy, Naidoo says.

His second point is that the private sector is key. ‘We need a sustainable business model. If we create an appropriate regulatory environment, the private sector will carry the bulk of the investment burden. Companies know they are going to make sizable profits.’

In South Africa, he points out, the government imposed community obligations on mobile phone operators in order to ensure access for disadvantaged communities. Operators responded with the innovation of prepaid phone cards that have brought mobile telephony within reach of even the poorest.

‘A combination of policy and regulation with incentivizing mobile operators – that’s what works and we should do the same for broadband,’ Naidoo declares. ‘Private investors and operators are absolutely keen to get into this untapped market. There are hundreds of millions of people out there who want to buy or access a broadband service.’

Naidoo hopes the Broadband Commission will provide a practical roadmap for what governments, the private sector and others can do to overcome financial, human capital and technological constraints.

‘Access to broadband is fundamental to deepening democracy, accountability and transparency,’ he says. ‘If we want to deal with poverty and inequality, if we wish to advance human rights, this is the way we have to go.’