

Short Profile: Cheick Modibo Diarra **Chairman for Africa, Microsoft**

As the Chairman for Africa at Microsoft since April 2006, Dr. Diarra is responsible for the company's broad scale citizenship, education and developmental activities on the continent. In his view, 'Africa is one of the last frontiers where challenges and opportunities abound in the spheres of education, health, technology, production and infrastructure'.

Born and raised in the small town of Nioro du Sahel in Mali, West Africa, Dr. Diarra graduated from Pierre & Marie Curie University in Paris, France. He went on to attain his Ph.D. in mechanical and aerospace engineering from Howard University, Washington DC, USA. After 6 years as an Assistant Professor at Howard, Dr. Diarra joined the National Aeronautic and Space Association (NASA) Jet Propulsion Laboratory in 1998. As an interplanetary navigator, he oversaw five NASA missions, including the *Magellan* mission to Venus, the *Ulysses* mission to the poles of the Sun, the *Galileo* mission to Jupiter and the Mars Observer mission. He then served as the navigator and public outreach manager for the Mars Pathfinder mission.

In 1999, in his personal capacity, Dr. Diarra created the Pathfinder Foundation for Education and Development – an organisation that encourages of Maths and Science and supports female students in their pursuit of scientific education. To date, through Pathfinder and the associated Summer Camps of Excellence in Science, more than 300 young African female graduates have gone on to study further a field in the areas of Maths and Science. In 2002, Dr. Diarra was appointed as CEO of the African Virtual University (AVU) – a project that quickly grew into an organisation offering internationally-recognised undergraduate science and business degrees (and other academic courses) to students in 27 countries in Africa for a fraction of the traditional cost. In late 2003, Dr. Diarra returned home to Mali and, driven by a curious mind, began working on his farm to find solutions to the continent's challenges with food security and nutrition. Two years later, he was approached by Microsoft and, ultimately, the company's Chairman, Bill Gates, to take on the Africa Chairman role.

Dr. Diarra is UNESCO's Goodwill Ambassador for Science, Technology and Enterprise; the Vice-President of the UN's World Commission on the Ethics of Scientific Knowledge and Technology; a member of the Independent Commission on Africa and the Millennium; a member of the High Level African Panel on Biotechnology; the Founder and President of the African Summit on Science and New Technologies (SASNET); and the Commandeur de l'Ordre for National Education in Gabon and Commandeur de l'Ordre du Merite du Lion in Senegal. Dr. Diarra has been awarded the African Lifetime Achievement Award, the World Bank's Award for Outstanding Contributions to Science, and the Africa-America Institute Award for Excellence in Science (for inspiring youth worldwide to explore the cosmos). He was also voted one of the 100 Africans of the 21st Century by Jeune Afrique.