

23024

ECA - CEA



**Economic Commission for Africa
Commission économique pour l'Afrique**

Opening Statement
by
K. Y. Amoako
UN Under-Secretary-General
and Executive Secretary of ECA

at the

Global Connectivity for Africa Conference

Addis Ababa
2 June 1998

Your Excellency Dr. Abdulmejid Hussein, Minister of Transport and Communications of Ethiopia,

Honourable Ministers,

Distinguished Representative of the Government of the Netherlands,

Distinguished Partners,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We welcome you to the Economic Commission for Africa, and to the UN Conference Centre. We are delighted to host this seminal conference on Global Connectivity in Africa, along with so many partners committed to supporting Africa's transition to the global information society. I would like to extend my deep gratitude to all the co-organizers - the World Bank Group, infoDev, the African Development Bank, the International Telecommunications Union and the Government of the Netherlands. I am also grateful to Siemens, Iridium, Teledesic, the WorldSpace Corporation and RASCOM, private sector companies who have pitched in wholeheartedly to support our efforts.

As seasoned actors from a diverse spectrum of public, private, and development constituencies, everything I say will be akin to preaching to the converted - since you all share a common conviction towards harnessing information and communication technologies towards Africa's transformation. I must admit to a slight sense of unease, because I am addressing such a well-informed audience. Also, taking the podium after four eloquent and authoritative speakers in this opening session, you will forgive me for perhaps sounding repetitive. Nevertheless, there is nothing wrong with having an excess of riches.

You are all fully aware that the nascent global information society is bringing about a fundamental shift in the way we do business. To land, capital and industry we must now add information as a factor of production. As we enter the new millenium, like it or not, we are becoming a knowledge-based society. Put in the context of Africa's current drive towards sustainable development, this shift makes information technology a critical tool for achieving the competitive edge we need if we are to be effective participants in an increasingly globalized world economy.

To get there, the vision has to be right. I firmly believe that, in the African Information Society Initiative (AISII), we have that vision. I will revisit AISII in a minute, but I should stress at the outset that even though the

conference title focuses on "connectivity", we are not simply here to hook people up. We are here to see how we can use information technology to help bring about better living conditions for Africans. That is the political credo that should underpin our efforts.

In the context of realizing our common goal, the first thing we should note is that this conference is not happening in isolation. It is a carefully planned, strategic moment in a series of action-oriented initiatives aimed at moving the agenda forward. It is a conference that will, I am certain, further strengthen the already impressive partnerships we have formed as a means of getting where we want to go.

The milestones on our road towards an African Information Society are familiar to most of you gathered here:

- the Regional Symposium on Telematics for Development in Africa held here at ECA in 1995;
- Global Knowledge, staged in Toronto in 1997;
- Last year's Cairo Conference of African Ministers of Transport and Communications; and
- the ITU-organized Africa Telecom'98, held last month in South Africa.

Of these, the 1995 Addis Ababa symposium, sponsored by ITU, UNESCO, the International Development Research Center (IDRC) of Canada, and ECA, was the first critical milestone for information technology in Africa. It was at this symposium that a wide cross-section of actors first stressed the importance of building Africa's information infrastructure as a tool for development. It was here that the concept of "leapfrogging" was first clearly articulated. It was here that a high level group was set up, which the following year came up with AISI -- the action-oriented partnership framework to build connectivity and develop national information infrastructures in our region.

AISI was endorsed in Addis Ababa in May 1996 by ECA's 53 member States, and shortly thereafter in Abidjan during the African Regional Telecommunication Development Conference by the continent's telecommunication ministers. I am pleased to see many of the ministers are here today, and met yesterday to follow up Africa Telecom '98, held in Johannesburg from 4-10 May 1998. The tenets of AISI were again on the agenda at Africa Telecom '98. The Common Vision Statement issued by

African telecommunications ministers provides guidance on the increased role of technology for innovative solutions towards Africa's development and for the continent's integration into the world economy, the related sector management and institutional strategies, and the role of public-private partnerships for infrastructure development.

The task is sizeable, but the significant progress we have already seen in the advancement of Internet connectivity and policy awareness in Africa since the adoption of AISI is most encouraging.

- Forty seven African countries have Internet connectivity today compared to a mere four in 1995;
- Strategies have been developed at regional level to guide national information and communications infrastructure plans;
- An increasing number of member States are demonstrating their commitment to putting in place the requisite regulatory frameworks for telecommunications development; and
- Coordination mechanisms have been put in place to assist interested development actors, bilateral partners and member States.

Information technology has a way of moving at speed, and we have indeed come a long way in a very short time. Yet Africa's participation in the global information society remains insignificant. Only a tiny percentage of Africans enjoy Internet connectivity. Excluding South Africa, only one person in ten thousand has access to the Internet, which is in any event dominated by content produced in the northern countries. An overwhelming majority of Africans remain at the very margins of the information age. We do not even register a blip on the screen. We remain to all intents and purposes invisible.

We know why this is the case. For many of Africans, the basic issue is one of telecommunications infrastructure, or rather the lack of it. You know all the statistics better than I, so I won't repeat them here. All I will say is that the present sorry state of affairs cannot not remain as it is.

We also know that development-serving policies to foster Africa's participation in the information revolution are indispensable to the continent's renaissance. From Toronto, we have a very good idea of the kinds of policy options we need to consider -- among them policies for harnessing knowledge and information for sustainable development, strategies for

resource mobilization, and application of technological innovations to solve development problems.

Now it is a question of moving the process forward. Addressing that conference, UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, outlined seven key challenges to creating the policy environment for global knowledge:

- Promoting greater, fairer and freer access to information for developing countries, through infrastructure improvement and technological advances;
- Liberalizing government control and censorship;
- Fostering an environment that allows greater communication between developed and developing countries, so that the transfer of technology becomes faster and more effective;
- Using innovative approaches to education and learning at all levels, taking into account the cultural contexts, in order to promote knowledge;
- Welcoming foreign investment -- especially now that private capital flows dwarf official development assistance by a factor of six to one - and making it an agent for knowledge;
- Establishing pilot projects in fields of inter-active distance learning, telemedicine, telebanking, micro-credit schemes, environmental protection and management; and
- Ensuring that the young are the first to gain this knowledge.

Honourable Ministers,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

These challenges represent the strategic actions African policymakers and their partners must take to reap the significant development dividends offered by the information revolution. Among the highest in terms of priority is the development of the continent's telecommunications infrastructure.

The agenda of this conference is designed to facilitate discussions, towards concrete outcomes, on the impact of the information society on Africa and the potential application of various cable and satellite technologies in support of the continent's development agenda.

Information technology is evolving at a pace that offers us vast opportunities and choices for the development of the infrastructure for Africa's global connectivity. These opportunities and choices need careful and critical assessment. We hope the outcomes of the Conference will in some way serve to guide us about the right choices and the right options.

The sharing of best practices and guidance on how to proceed with the following areas will be particularly helpful.

First and foremost, I hope that in your deliberations you will focus on the policy options for addressing Africa's underdevelopment in the field of communication technology and infrastructure. One aspect of the policy option deserving attention is the fact that the sector remains heavily dominated by state-run post and telecommunications monopolies. Given the challenge facing Africa by the information revolution and the low telecommunications coverage in Africa, do governments have a choice but to improve the quality and affordability of service of telecommunications providers in their countries? Does the private sector have a role to play in this field, and if so what role?

Second, the increasing demand for advanced communications technologies is also putting increased pressure on the limited infrastructure base in the sector. For instance, bandwidth is becoming a scarce resource in our region. Isn't it time we developed a comprehensive short as well as long-term bandwidth development plan for all countries in our region?

Third, globalization is bringing about unique challenges in the information technology field for Africa. Without successfully adjusting to the information society of the future, Africa will severely be disadvantaged in its competitiveness in the emerging global economy. Globalization has led to the proliferation of applications that require a diverse range of communication technologies. Convergence and cost reduction have created opportunities for leapfrogging. Yet, the plethora of options available means that we have to be equipped to make informed and well-rationalized choices.

Fourth, we have at our fingertips a wide range of strategies for mobilizing resources and creating public and private sector partnerships. Before we actualize these strategies, however, shouldn't we first be establishing appropriate regulatory frameworks, consistent with international agreements, taking local realities into account, to attract investors?

Finally, we must have regional approaches to the development of the infrastructure for Africa's connectivity. As telecommunications goes regional with satellites, as transport must encompass large market areas, as

clearinghouses must gain subregional and eventually regional capabilities, as capital markets must be able to organize capital for multi-state projects, African interstate solutions are imperative.

These are all challenges that we need to address together. We are confident that at this conference we can make some significant headway in all these areas. Put in the context of Toronto and Johannesburg, it is another milestone in the advancement of AISI.

The Development Information Services Division (DISD) is responsible for leading this work within ECA. DISD will give special attention to raising the level of policy-awareness by holding workshops, providing policy advice to member state, and also expanding awareness on connectivity options. With our "Partners for Information and Communication Technologies in Africa" (PICTA) as well as with others, we have advanced plans to build capacity in connectivity, human resources development, democratization of access and use of local knowledge for socio-economic development.

In collaboration with other key actors, the Commission plans to develop training centres for information and communication technologies in Africa, among them a Technology Learning Center (TLC) to be housed in this very complex. The Centre will serve as a permanent demonstration and exhibition site for new technologies, to give hands-on experience to participants at ECA and other conferences in the use of information technology. It will be the venue of technology, management and policy seminars and workshops for policymakers and other interested parties on information and communication technology and its impact on economic growth.

The connectivity fair on exhibit this week is a modest foretaste of what we plan to put in place. We believe that this will be a leading site in Africa for the showcasing of new ideas and innovations towards global connectivity. We encourage the active participation of the private sector partners as well as those interested in information technology in Africa in this endeavour.

At this juncture, I would like to thank my colleague Ms. Karima Bounemra and all the staff of the Development Information Services Division for the excellent work they are doing in leading ECA's efforts in these areas and the excellent preparatory work for this Conference.

The Economic Commission for Africa is forging ahead. But AISI does not belong to ECA, neither does it belong to the UN. It belongs to all of you seated here today. It belongs to all of Africa.

To develop beyond simply a brilliant vision statement, AISI demands the requisite infrastructure for good connectivity. It is predicated on democratization of access. It is unworkable without policy awareness towards an enabling regulatory environment. It will remain utopian if we do not invest in massive human resource development.

Dr. Pekka Tarjanne, the Secretary-General of ITU, hit the nail on the head when he stated at Telecom '98 that "communication is a basic human right". Because of our unique and particular development challenges, the agenda has a political dimension that all of us, all of you, must remain committed to.

In other words, as I said two years ago at the Conference on the Information Society and Development in South Africa, Africa must be clear on what it wants and should make its desires clear to others. If we are clear, if we have a compelling vision for ourselves, then it is likely that our choices will turn into our own reality. If we are not clear, then we will either be perpetual observers of the information highway or find ourselves on a road not fit for our needs.

Indeed, as the old African proverb goes – "he who forgets the aim of his journey is still on the road".

Honourable Ministers,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

At ECA we have done away with talking shops, and in organizing conferences we strive to produce results. It is with this action-oriented spirit in mind that the conference has been designed. We hope to come out of this gathering with a candid assessment and blueprint of: how the telecommunications sector in Africa can adapt to increasing demands; and what strategies and policy options are available to Africa to forge public-private partnerships, to foster the role of the private sector, and to facilitate the mobilization of resources for the sector. I am personally looking forward to an exciting week of interaction with all our participating partners and would like to wish you the very best in your deliberations.

Again thank you Karima. And I thank all of you for the honour of being here before you and would like to wish you well on this important Conference.

