Africa and the Knowledge Society

Address By
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Honourable Ministers, Executive Secretaries of UN Regional Commissions, Chief Executive Officers,
Colleagues,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to participate in this High Level Panel on ICT and the knowledge-based economy, organized on the occasion of the 60th Session of the Economic & Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP).

This event could not have taken place at a better time given the rapid pace in technological innovations through information and communication technology (ICTs) and its profound impacts on society as a whole, and industry and economic sectors in particular. This phenomenon now ensures that knowledge is recognized as the basis for competitive advantage backed by information and intellectual products as raw materials. As we are all aware, knowledge-based economy (K-Economy) is one in which the creation, distribution and utilization of knowledge perform a predominant role in the generation of wealth. It is this phenomenon and the need to deliberate on its impact that spurred the mobilization of the whole world to the Geneva phase of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS).

Furthermore, the setting for this event is very appropriate, as Shanghai is increasingly known for being a center of technological innovation in China and Asia. Among other similar centres in the region, the Scientific & Technology Museum and the Shanghai Technology Stock Exchange come to mind. Indeed, Asia is becoming a powerhouse of the knowledge economy and we are all aware of the many significant strides made which other parts of the world can emulate.

Now let me focus on my region, Africa.

Given time constraints, I shall just highlight the major ideas. A more detailed version of my intervention is available.

Africa's current economic performance is raising hopes for a possible turnaround, compared to the stagnation of previous decades. The new trend is largely credited to policy reforms and better governance taking place in many countries. Nevertheless, this progress is still fragile and may not
be sustained if the gap between the information-rich and the information-poor nations is not attended to, and if the foundation of a sustainable Information Society is not consolidated.

A few years ago, Africa embarked on a series of changes long overdue in the telecommunication sector through deregulation and privatization. Such measures were key to expanding the continent's limited and generally poor telecommunication infrastructure. However, the reforms have already yielded significant improvements in access to information and communication. Competition and the introduction of prepaid services have seen the exponential growth of mobile cellular and other wireless technologies in the past few years.

This was the first step towards Africa's entry into the Information Age. Another step was to put in place national IT policies to advance the Information Society. These efforts have been made possible through the implementation of the African Information Society Initiative (AISI), a work programme of ECA. AISI is a regional framework for Africa's quest to bridge the digital divide that originated from a resolution of ECA's Conference of Ministers in 1996.

Africa's commitment to ICT for development has also been demonstrated through the NEPAD Action Plan, where ICTs projects and initiatives have been initiated to speed up sub-regional/regional connectivity and inter-connectivity. In this context, AISI was selected as the guiding framework for coordinating the support of United Nations agencies to NEPAD.

Activities launched to promote the knowledge economy under AISI include the development of national e-strategies/policies to deploy, harness and exploit ICTs for socioeconomic development at the local, national and sub-regional levels, including national spatial data. To date, more than 30 countries (out of 53 States) have embarked on such policies known as National Information and Communication Infrastructure - NICI plans, through the support of ECA.

The NICI development process takes place through a cycle of planning, implementation and regular evaluation of programmes and projects developed according to the needs and priorities of each country. My document gives examples of recent NICI developments

Ladies and Gentlemen:

It would be inadequate for me to offer examples of the work going on in the Continent, without addressing the importance of benchmarking and assessing e-readiness and the impact of the Information Society.

Since 2001, through the IDRC/ECA SCAN-ICT project, six countries have been measuring progress in several key sectors of the economy, as well as the possibilities of employment creation in a constantly changing world.

To-date, baseline studies have been undertaken in Ethiopia, Ghana, Morocco, Mozambique, Senegal and Uganda and more countries have been identified for similar activities. Indicators are also being developed in line with major development initiatives and priorities, such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Poverty Reduction Strategies Programmes (PRSP).

Given the importance of such an initiative it is also reassuring to see that benchmarking and assessing progress and impact are now being considered by the international community through the United Nations ICT Task Force (UN ICT TF) and strongly recommended in the WSIS Action Plan.

Ladies and Gentlemen:
Let me now dwell on some important lessons learnt after 8 years of implementing the AISI.

- **Political will**

  Progressive ICT policies and strategies at national levels demonstrate that political will and leadership are fundamental. They are pre-requisites to the launch of the process and critical for the translation of the approved policies into relevant and feasible actions. A number of other examples show that the ICT policy process can succeed only through strong political leadership as well as institutional support.

- **Education and capacity building**

  We are convinced that education and capacity building are a prerequisite to creating an Information Society and ultimately a Knowledge Economy. The continent needs to strive to acquire an adequate skilled workforce by guaranteeing the literacy and e-literacy of its population. A knowledge economy requires knowledge workers. To this end, several initiatives, such as Schoolnet and OOSYNET emerging from the first African Development Forum (ADF 1) held in 1999, are pursuing various projects to improve youth access to ICTs. At the higher education level, VarsityNet intends to facilitate networking, content creation and collaborative research among African universities and research institutes.

  \* The need for awareness-raising

  As the issue of ICTs for Development is relatively new in Africa, it requires outreach and dissemination of information to publicise achievements, best practices and experiences. In awareness-raising ECA targets a broad spectrum of potential actors of the Information Society and offers various training workshops for parliamentarians, academia, media, women and other relevant stakeholders.

  At the same time, the Commission maintains a series of regular on-line discussions with key stakeholders on their perspectives and views on trends and issues affecting the continent in this area. Other sensitisation activities include publications, a radio series web and multi-media.

- **The importance of a participatory process**

  The Information and Knowledge Society and Economy require the involvement of all stakeholders in the formulation and implementation of policies and strategies. For many of our countries this entails a balanced composition of government, private sector (both local and international), academia, civil society, as well as international development agencies. This has been maintained through the African Technical Advisory Committee (ATAC), which advises on AISI implementation process and progress. The participatory process was also the basis for the African Regional Preparatory Conference to the WSIS in Bamako, 2002. The Bamako 2002 Declaration guided Africa's participation in the first phase of the WSIS Summit, and was used as part of Africa's contribution to the Geneva Declaration and Action Plan.

- **Partnership mechanisms**

  ECA realizes the importance of partnerships in advancing Africa's Information Society and the knowledge economy. Several collaborative strategies include: The Partnership for Information and Communications Technologies in Africa (PICTA), The African Stakeholders Network of the UN ICT - Task Force and The Global Knowledge Partnership (GKP).

  Whilst existing partnership mechanisms can be strengthened, new and alternative forms of
investments must be sought and encouraged, particularly in Africa. Indeed this has been identified as a critical issue by WSIS and is supposed to be addressed in the lead up to the Tunis phase of WSIS.

Regional cooperation

Through ICTs economic integration can occur at an accelerated pace, as well as support the harmonization of policies for investment in the ICT sectors of African states. Such measures can make Africa a much more attractive market. Therefore, innovative mechanisms are needed to address the challenges of building the information society at the regional level.

Way Forward

Social and economic development challenges and resource limitations have increased the need for prioritisation of ICT intervention in key sectors in Africa. We see the need to prioritise a number of sectors, such as governance and public sector effectiveness, health, small and medium enterprises, education, learning and research, agriculture, food security and environment.

Further, given the chronic problem of human and institutional capacity development, a focus is needed on policy analysis, information management, harmonization of ICT-programmes and policies, and enforcement of regulations.

Additionally, technical and financial assistance are needed at various levels. These include overall ICT policy formulation and e-strategy development particularly in translation of policies to actions; supporting countries to mobilize internal and external resources; and monitoring and evaluation of progress.

Conclusion

As we promote knowledge-based initiatives in our respective regions of the world, ECA would like to urge for greater collaboration and cooperation among the UN Regional Commissions and other sister agencies. This will foster a spirit of sharing knowledge, promote best practices and identify common areas of interest that can assist us to work together and inter-regionally. Since the first phase of WSIS, the UN Regional Commissions have identified areas of collaboration, which offer exciting new opportunities for us all in the build up to the second phase of the WSIS in Tunis 2005.

ECA is willing and ready to work with its sister commissions to promote comparative learning in this area and would welcome suggestions as to the best way forward.

We extend our most heartfelt congratulations to ESCAP on this occasion of its 60th Session. ECA has a great deal to learn from your experience and looks forward to increased sharing of information and knowledge, especially in the area of assessing and measuring the impact of the K-Economy.