

SEMINAR ON INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY POLICY FOR THE GOVERNMENT OF RWANDA

30th Nov. – 3rd Dec. 1998 Kigali

Opening Statement by His Excellency Major General Paul Kagame, Vice President and Minister of Defence Republic of Rwanda

Honourable Ministers,

Honourable Members of the National Assembly,

Your Excellencies,

Participants,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to welcome you all to this seminar and in particular I extend a warm welcome to our experts from the region and beyond who have traveled long distances and sacrificed their valuable time to be with us today. Your participation will certainly bring broader perspectives and greater awareness to these issues that we will be discussing over the next three days. To the Rwandese participants, this is your seminar. Take the maximum benefit out of it. Your participation is welcomed and I am sure that, while considering options and debating issues, national interest will be foremost in your minds. This seminar gives us the opportunity to share the experience of others, to note the pitfalls, and to devise ways and means of finding the best options for Rwanda without having to re-invent the wheel.

Allow me, Ladies and Gentlemen, before getting down to business, to also thank all the sponsors, in particular ECA, USAID, UNESCO and UNDP, who, through their generous contributions, enabled the Ministry of Transport and Communication to organize and host this very important seminar. I hope that at the end of this seminar resolutions and concrete action plans will be formulated to enable Rwanda to enter into the new millenium with the necessary confidence in pursuance of the challenges and opportunities of the Year 2000 and beyond.

In today's world, information and communication have become increasingly important. Knowledge is or should no longer be the domain of a few. Success in promoting democracy, human resource development, socio-economic development, international cooperation, trade and commerce, require access to information and our ability to use it effectively. The ongoing information and communication revolution is leading to accelerated globalization in economic and social activities. This presents tremendous challenges as well as opportunities for industrialized and developing countries alike.

Political and business leaders have come to realize that the ability to utilize knowledge effectively will eventually determine the ability of individuals, companies, regions and nations to succeed in this world of global competition. As a result countries and regions around the world are formulating and implementing

strategies to develop the technical and human resource capacities necessary for the effective participation in the global information society.

In this newly emerging technological environment, the need for empowering Africa has never been greater and the challenges never more daunting. We need therefore, to respond to the new global and regional socio-economic realities. In Africa, and in most developing countries, information generation and dissemination have been at a rather low level for a number of reasons, for instance lack of a necessary communication infrastructure and high illiteracy levels among the majority of the populations which is a legacy of our colonial history.

As we enter the new millenium old norms will necessarily no longer apply. It is already an established fact that a nation's economic prosperity is linked to knowledge, information and access to information. The information super-highways are already established in many parts of the world. If Rwanda, and Africa as a whole, does not take steps to embrace the new technological developments promptly, the technology and information gap, and the gap in access to information will increase disparities between developing and industrialized nations. We cannot afford this.

The Economic Commission for Africa took the initiative by adopting the resolution entitled 'Building Africa's Information Highway' in May 1995 to help Africa prepare to meet the new technological challenges. As a result of this initiative, it appointed a high-level working group whose research culminated in the adoption of the implementation of the African Information Society Initiative (AISII) at the 22nd meeting of the ECA Conference of Ministers in May 1996.

The implementation of the African Information Society Initiative is meant to take place at individual country level and our gathering here today is in pursuit of the above ECA resolution. It is hoped that at the end of this seminar we will compile a report containing recommendations on the process required to establish a national strategic framework and an implementation plan for the development of a **National Information and Communication Policy** strategy in Rwanda.

The benefits to be derived from embracing the new technologies are enormous. For example, the process of making connectivity available to everyone on the planet opens up a multitude of possibilities such as in education where the teacher no longer needs to put learners under one roof in order for them to listen to his lecture and respond to questions. A teacher could be based at the National University in Butare, but be able to simultaneously communicate to thousands of students in other towns throughout Rwanda. Through **tele-teaching**, students would be able to ask questions and receive answers.

A similar process could be cited in health where a patient in one country can have medical consultations with a doctor in another country, or a patient in our rural clinic can consult a specialist in the capital. **Tele-medicine** enables medical practitioners to make diagnosis and give prescriptions worldwide. In the field of agriculture, decision support systems available through cyberspace will help to lessen the effects of drought, famine, man-made and natural disasters. Similar examples can be mentioned regarding trade and commerce where transactions can be concluded worldwide through the use of the Internet.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are on the threshold of the 21st century. In 13 months we will be entering the year 2000. The new millenium poses its own problems that require our urgent and immediate attention. The Year 2000 computer problem is the single biggest challenge facing the Information Technology industry since the first computer became operational some 50 years ago. The problem seems to be deceptively simple because it all revolves around computers not being able to distinguish between the year 1900 and 2000. If the necessary adjustments are not made before the year 2000, we face the possibility of computers producing incorrect results or a complete shutdown of computer systems. The consequences will be disastrous.

Realizing the urgency of the matter and in an attempt to raise national awareness concerning this challenge, the Government of Rwanda has recently created a Year 2000 National Steering Committee to coordinate all Y2K activities. I am happy to note that this burning issue will also be addressed in this seminar and trust that all of us will join hands to come up with recommendations on how to solve this problem.

The consideration of a task force, best coordinated by government, will ensure that Rwanda remains united in tackling these challenges and to minimize the risk of becoming the dumping ground for incompatible technologies.

The work we embark upon today is formidable. Experts predict that the consequences of the information revolution will surpass the effects of the industrial revolution of the nineteenth century. We cannot afford to be left out of the information revolution. We have no choice but to position ourselves well and to actively participate in it and take our rightful place amongst the community of nations.

I now have the honour to declare this seminar officially open.

I thank you.