

# Coordination Meeting on the African Information Society Initiative

**Welcome and Opening Remarks by  
K. Y. Amoako, Executive Secretary, ECA  
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Welcome to our guests.

Special welcome to those members of the High Level Working Group on Information and Communication Technologies in Africa who are with us today - the document that they drafted was accepted by the May ECA Conference of Ministers as the African Information Society Initiative: either here or expected shortly are Dr. Hisham el Sherif, Chairman of the Group, Ato Dawit Yohannis, Prof. Raymond Akwule, Michael Jensen, Derrick Cogburn. We had been expecting Karima Bounemra also, until an engagement at the last minute prevented her from travelling.

Special welcome also to our closest partners with whom we have been working on this area for years: the International Development Research Centre, UNESCO, and ITU, all of whom are with us today.

Why we are all here

Common commitment to using tools of information technology to stimulate African social and economic development

Belief that the Information Age is one that Africa can not afford to pass on

Belief that the partners assembled here can work with African governments to make this vision into national plans, programmes and projects.

Very exciting times- what is happening now

particularly on connectivity: only one and one half years ago (at the time of my first visit to the Commission and of the Regional Symposium on Telematics which we feel awoke a great deal of interest in the topic in Africa), only 4 African countries were directly connected to the Internet

Now, fully one half are connected, and the list expands by several countries a month. In Ethiopia, we hope to have full Internet connectivity within the month.

With this new information infrastructure, many things are becoming possible. On the other hand, some dozen countries still have no connectivity whatsoever, and African countries are far, far behind countries in Asia and Latin America in using information and information technology for

development.

The *World Times* information imperative index puts only South Africa (35<sup>th</sup>) and Egypt (51<sup>st</sup>) among African countries in the world list of countries "able to absorb new technologies in the information age." The *Economist* lists only South Africa in its indicative list of world countries effectively using information technology. Clearly, the challenge is remains ahead of us. It is one in which all of you are involved.

In the June 1996 issue of CSIS Africa notes, our good friend Ernest Wilson III writes: "In essence, the global information revolution is about delivering more information faster, cheaper, and more conveniently `anytime, anywhere, in any form.'" In this excellent article, he goes on to say: "In developing strategies to bring the information revolution to Africa by creating truly national, integrated information infrastructures, the continent's policymakers confront a difficult conundrum. They must nurture the development of highly sophisticated, world-class channels capable of carrying the digitized content that now races through the world's financial systems, educational institutions and business networks. At the same time, they must carefully address the information needs of the vast majority of the continent's population, who are poor, rural, and illiterate. In oversimplified terms, Africa must simultaneously accelerate its use of high-tech and low-tech information services."

He notes further:

"This requires that African governments embrace four major shifts that are occurring globally: (1) from public to private, (2) from monopoly to competition, (3) from a supply-driven orientation to a demand-driven one, and (4) from domestic-only to more foreign participation in ownership and management of different market segments."

"Because these changes are so fundamental, so fast, and touch on so many different market segments and major political and bureaucratic interests, managing them would be difficult under the best of circumstances, let alone in underdeveloped countries that lack strong policy institutions and experience in promoting private companies." [end of quotation]

Our task, therefore, is to build on all that is happening and meet the challenges so that Africa can compete with its compatriots in the global economy.

Objectives of the meeting; what we hope to accomplish

Overall:

To obtain a consensus of the partners in the AISI on objectives and priorities for action and to draw up an implementation plan

Within this overall concern, specific objectives of the meeting:

To secure the commitment of the partners to working together and to shared goals;

To coordinate the implementation of AISI/HITD;

To set up a regional mechanism to assist in the development, coordination and follow-up of an implementation plan;

To develop strategies for resource mobilisation.

The expected outcomes of the meeting are:

The outlines of concrete implementation plans;

Distribution of tasks and responsibilities;

Agreement on role and terms of reference of African Technical Advisory Committee;

Establishment of a coordination mechanism;

Specific steps for coordination of Internet connectivity initiatives.

Information sharing of cooperating agencies/ organizations on activities

It is important for all attending to know the present and planned activities of the cooperating agencies, in order to work towards coordination and to avoid overlap of activities in a time of resource scarcity. Participants are encouraged to present their organisation's plans, programmes and projects related to the use of information and communications technologies for development in Africa.

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