ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR AFRICA

First Meeting of the Committee on
Development Information (CODI)

28 June - 2 July 1999
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
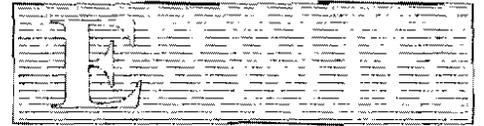
WHITHER PADIS

Whither PADIS?

1. A number of persons have raised the question: what happened to PADIS? This small paper is issued as a response to that question.

2. PADIS- the Pan African Development Information System[1] was a project established at ECA in 1980, with the support of UNESCO, UNDP and the Canadian International Development Research Centre. Its aim was to establish a centralized development information database at ECA and train information specialists in member States to develop similar databases in their countries. The databases would issue printed bulletins of new additions periodically and they would also send their input to the central system, where it would be incorporated and available for all users. The system was modeled on the IDRC DEVSIS model. The national partners in the system were known as "PADIS national participating centres," which numbered 40 at their peak in 1994. The aim of the system and network was to provide organized and accessible information for development planning.

3. The achievements of the system were the establishment of a bibliographic database of development information at ECA- which is still maintained, linked to the ECA statistical database; the establishment and maintenance of bibliographic databases in the development planning support structures of a number of African States (about 23), the training of several hundred information specialists in the use of MINISIS (and subsequently) CDS-ISIS development information management software and the raising of awareness, through conferences, meetings, seminars and publications (notably a newsletter) of the importance of an accessible information base for development planning in Africa.

4. The major weakness of the system was the inability to assure access to the information to the users who needed it when they needed it. As conceptualized in the early nineteen eighties, the system was to rely on satellite connections to transmit information between centres and the central point in Addis Ababa. The obvious difficulty was that the concept was 15-20 years ahead of technological realities on the African continent. Neither the producers of information nor its seekers had access to such connections during the major years of operation of the system. Without the possibility of electronic information transfer, the exchange of information fell back to a reliance on postal services. The user had to relay a request for information: the response then came in the form of a bibliography. Having received the bibliography, the user had to return to PADIS with a further request for delivery of the desired documents, which was limited to the documents available in the central system at ECA. As the services worked using traditional means of information delivery, once the requested information reached its source, the requestor had usually long since forgotten the need for which it had been requested.[2]

At ECA level

5. In 1997 ECA restructured its Divisions to correspond to a new orientation of "Serving Africa Better." PADIS activities (no longer funded by extra-budgetary sources) were incorporated into the Development Information Services Division, which was mandated to implement the ECA subprogramme on "harnessing information for development." The theme of the Division's work programme embodies the basic aim that PADIS was designed to meet: promoting the collection, management and dissemination of information in order to improve the planning and

---

[1] It took on this name in 1987 to indicate that it was concerned with more than documentation or bibliographic databases, but with any information that would support development; previously it had been the Pan African Documentation and Information System.

[2] Stories of postal delays in the African region are legion, but we recently received a return of a PADIS newsletter that we sent to Niamey, Niger in 1991. Round-trip exchanges of letters between Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Morocco and South Africa routinely take 3 years!

implementation of development in member States. The work of the Division is not limited to encouraging the development and dissemination of bibliographic information, but encompasses the realms of statistics and geo-information, database development, the use of information and communication technologies as well as the ECA library.

At the level of technological change

6. The model of a centralized information system to which users would bring their needs has been replaced by decentralized, distributed information systems. With the advent of distributed information systems, the Internet (or rather TCP/IP protocol) with its various components (the World Wide Web, e-mail and e-mail based discussion lists, for example) and offshoots (Intranet, Extranet) has emerged as the tool of choice for the new model of information exchange. The advantages over a centralized information system are myriad: the costs of information dissemination are minimal, the problem of targeting users is eliminated as users come to the sources they need; the system is available to users 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year; and users can access a multiplicity (frequently, too many) sources at once, while themselves remaining stationery.

At the level of member States

7. The emphasis on the importance of information management remains, even more urgently than in previous decades. In order for information to be used and transformed into knowledge, it must be accessible. In order for information to be easily accessible, it must be organized and managed, preferably through databases, in universally available information depositories. In the parlance of the World Wide Web, this places the obligation of content creation on the institution at national and local level. As the users of development information have the world of information available to them, it is incumbent on African institutions to use these new dissemination tools so that users from Africa can access information from Africa in the same way that they are becoming accustomed to access global information sources.

8. ECA presented the message of content creation to this Committee in the document on content creations (document E/ECA/DISD/CODI.1.6). However, because of its relevance to the topic of the DISD work programme and this paper, several paragraphs of this document bear repeating at this point:

> Information management is the key ingredient for improving African content growth on the Web. Information should continuously be gathered and produced in digital multimedia formats (text, graphics, audio and video). Recent trends that present information and communication technology as "cure all" tools and pressure from various vendors have led to overemphasis on acquiring the technology with little or no attention to information content and management in Africa. Africa has seen hundreds of information technology projects that are synonymous to pipes without water. The focus on technology, not information, and emphasis on tools, not people, will continue to have drastic consequences for organizational development. The future success factor of organizations, nations and individuals is not high-level technology but rather innovative and well managed content. Thus it is important to continue to focus on information management, its collection in digital format and qualitative processing and dissemination.

> The World Wide Web is an ideal tool for making well-organized information available to users. The Web is an effective distribution tool- a document or data available on the Web can reach millions instantaneously. However, the Web's manor benefit is not limited to bringing access to content. Web is the best tool for getting feedback on the quality and utility of information. It is "a best" marketing tool which opens up opportunities that are beyond imagination. Embarking on local and as well as global web presence through Intranet and Internet is a key to institutional survival in the information age.

> Web presence is not a "one time" job but requires adding value to what exists in an affordable way as well as continuous efforts to update and build new sites.

9. ECA has been working to promote this new approach which the ECA Conference of Ministers adopted in 1996 as the *African Information Society Initiative: an action framework to build African's information and communication infrastructure*. One of the major tasks of this Division has been to promote awareness in member States of the tremendous changes in information management and exchange that new information and communication technologies have brought about. It has encouraged member States to elaborate policies, plans, and strategies for the development of national information and communication infrastructure and has worked with them in their preparation. Through the Standing Committee on the Standardization and Harmonization of Information Systems, it has trained databases producers in the new techniques of Web dissemination. It has worked to deliver the message of the obligation of content creation and dissemination. It has organized major regional and subregional meetings to inform member States of the possibilities offered by new technologies. It uses Web tools for the dissemination of the information it produces.

10. It is now incumbent upon each institution involved in the collection, management and dissemination of development information to consider how the new information and communication technologies affect the way in which they handle information. The starting point remains the same: What information should be publicly disseminated? From there the question becomes what tools should be used for its dissemination? Should the institution have a Web site? Should it have an Intranet for internal use? What are the training and equipment needs to make the new strategy possible? How can the resources be secured to put a new strategy into place? Following the pattern of technological change, responsibility is distributed as well. African development information institutions must develop strategies that confront the information revolution that has swept the world.