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Statement of the Executive Secretary of ECA

Mr. Layashi Yaker on the occasion of

African Statistics Day, 18 November and

African Development Information Day, 19 November 1994

Addis Ababa, 18 November 1994

Ladies and Gentlemen

Invited Guests

Dear Colleagues

It is with great pleasure that I welcome you to Africa Hall, Headquarters of the Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), to commemorate two special events: African Statistics Day which is being celebrated to-day; and African Development Information Day which will be celebrated tomorrow. The commemoration of these events is intended to highlight the critical role of statistical and information systems in achieving sustainable development in Africa.

To-day is the fifth anniversary of African Statistics Day following the adoption in May 1990 of the Addis Ababa Plan of Action for Statistical Development in Africa in the 1990, by the Sixteenth meeting of African Ministers responsible for Economic Planning and Development, while the next day will be the third anniversary of African Development Information Day.

The important role played by statistics and development information in all walks of life particularly in economic and social sectors cannot be over emphasized. This role is vital not only at national level but also in strengthening inter-country cooperation in trade, investment, joint ventures, etc. It is in this context that this year's celebrations are dedicated to regional integration with the theme of:

"BUILDING STATISTICAL CAPACITY IN SUPPORT OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND REGIONAL INTEGRATION".

Indeed, building statistical capacity should be simultaneously pursued in all various sub-sectors including:

- . International Trade;
- . Banking and Finance;
- . National Accounts;
- . Population and Housing;
- . Civil Registration;
- . Health and Education;
- . Immigration and Tourism;
- . Climate and Environment;
- . Energy and Natural Resources etc.

All these sub-sectoral statistics, when compiled in an integrated manner, would form the basis of a national statistical information system (SIS). However, from a practical point of view and taking into account resource constraints and the advances in the information technology, it is advisable to develop such a system on a modular path, based on priorities.

While on the subject of national statistical information systems, it is important to recall recent developments in the United Nations. Specifically, the United Nations Department for Economic and Social Information and Policy Analysis (DESIPA), in collaboration with the regional commissions, has initiated a project entitled United Nations Economic and Social Information System (UNESIS), with a view to harmonizing and establishing linkages, within the Organization, among statistical and related data series in the economic and social applications. UNESIS will be developed over the

next few years. All member States of the Organization, including developing countries, especially in Africa, should benefit from the system through timely and effective collection, processing and dissemination of harmonized multi-sectoral data series necessary for national as well as regional development.

A related issue is that of coordination among the member states. In Africa, as you may be aware, and following the adoption of the Addis Ababa Plan of Action for Statistical Development in Africa in the 1990s, an implementation strategy was adopted in 1992. Since then, a Coordinating Committee on African Statistical Development (CASD), composed of various international agencies, regional institutions and some member States, and four sub-committees have been set up for the purpose of coordination of various statistical development activities. The Committee held its fourth meeting earlier this year along with meetings of sub-committees. Work programmes for all sub-committees were finalized and priority areas needing urgent attention were identified.

An important step in the work of the Coordinating Committee on African Statistical Development (CASD) is the preparation of guidelines for Needs Assessment and Strategy Development (NASD), to assist countries in assessing their current and future data needs as well as requirements of their statistical systems. These NASD exercises would enable countries to formulate plans and programmes for the development and strengthening of their statistics. It should be stated that, through the NASD reviews, issues of statistical priorities, user/producer committees, work programmes and

organization of the national statistical system could be carefully considered for implementation.

As pointed out earlier, statistical data should play a major role in the monitoring and evaluation of regional economic cooperation and integration schemes. Indeed the coming into force of the Abuja Treaty establishing the African Economic Community presents great challenges to African countries in the concretization of their efforts. Among such challenges is the need to ensure that concepts and methodology in the collection and compilation of statistics are standardized across countries, to facilitate comparability and interpretation of statistics required for policy formulation and planning.

Another important aspect of capacity building is training. In this regard, it is heartening to observe that despite financial constraints, member States have actively participated in the just concluded Workshop on Statistical Computing. It is hoped that forthcoming Workshops on Strategies for Accelerating the Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems, and on Environment Statistics Indicators and Accounting, will also receive the same attention. Not only do these fora provide the required training in various fields, they also promote exchange of experiences among various countries in the region.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As already mentioned, the other important event is the African Development Information Day on 19 November 1994, which is being celebrated concurrently to-day, with the theme of:

"STRENGTHENING INFORMATION SYSTEMS FOR INFORMATION EXCHANGE IN AFRICA"

It may be recalled that the celebration of African Development Information Day was decided by the eighteenth meeting of African ministers responsible for economic planning and development in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in 1992. Its main objective is to increase awareness of decision-makers of the role of information in support of planning and management of national economic development, and in fostering economic integration by enhancing exchange of experience, ideas and programmes among decision-makers, planners and economic operators throughout the continent.

An important aspect which should be stressed on this occasion is for the African region to strengthen the existing development information services and institutions by ensuring the availability on a continuous basis of data and information, that are required for planning and management. In this regard, greater emphasis must be placed on the use of appropriate information technology, and on timely and well processed information. Unfortunately, a review of the information infrastructure in Africa, and an appraisal of the application of information technology by libraries, information, documentation and data centres in various African countries, have

brought out a number of inadequacies, resulting mainly from the lack of appreciation of the role of information in development by policy makers.

It is important, in formulating development policies and programmes, to place adequate emphasis on the acquisition and use of modern information technologies in view of the important role which they play in the generation and dissemination of information for development planning and management. Therefore, on the occasion of the celebration of the African Development Information Day, African countries are being urged to promote national information policies which will ensure harmonious development of information resources in member states and regional institutions.

Such policies should focus on the following main areas:

- (1) development of national information sources and services as integral part of the national development plans;
- (2) strengthening the generation of information at the national level;
- (3) modernization of information handling technologies;
- (4) establishment of a national coordinating mechanism;
- (5) establishment of appropriate legislations and their enforcement to facilitate access to information;
- (6) training and retraining of personnel for the efficient management of information resources;
- (7) promotion of effective use of information resources and services by the general public, policy makers, technology users and information professionals; and

(8) participation in relevant regional and international information systems.

It should be stressed that national information policies should be reviewed, evaluated and readjusted from time to time to ascertain their relevance in the evolving information environment. If need be, changes may be introduced to take into account the evolving information technology.

As already mentioned, national information policies can operate successfully only if policy makers at both the national and organizational levels are aware of the need for technological innovations. Therefore, they should be provided with sound technical acquaintance and understanding of information technology, and of its impact on society. Updating, broadening and deepening the knowledge of policy makers in this area could be achieved through workshops on case studies, and through seminars.

It is also important, on this occasion, to highlight the increasing use of E-mail, on-line information exchange and data base searching by decision makers, planners, researchers and the general public. In this regard, government officials should be provided with the opportunity to acquaint themselves with these developments. Also, it should be recalled that an on-line information network initiated by UNECA and known as PADISNET, links several national and regional institutions in different African regions. It is being extended to all member States in order to facilitate communications between government offices in a given country, and between UNECA and

its member States. It is hoped that the network will also stimulate efficiency and increase productivity.

In conclusion, it must be emphasized that Africa's economic recovery and development greatly depends on sound and effective statistical data and information systems. It is in this spirit that I wish all the African countries successful celebrations of the African Statistics Day and African Development Information Day.