Subregional Seminar on Internet for East African Countries

Opening Statement by Dr. K.Y. Amoako
Under United Nations Secretary-General and Executive Secretary, ECA

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
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Excellencies

Honorable Guests,

Dear Colleagues,

Ladies and Gentlemen

It gives me great honor and pleasure to extend my greetings to all of you who are attending this Subregional Seminar on Internet for East African countries jointly organized jointly by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA). ECA is most honored by the presence among us today of several ministers in-charge of Internet issues in their respective countries. Their presence and the participation of high level delegates from the private sector, academia and NGO community shows that Internet development is of paramount importance in your countries and that its growth should be the concern of everybody, be they regulators, users or business companies. Today's important gathering shows your "determination" to make full use of the Internet as an essential tool to leverage the development process

Today - 2 years before the beginning of a new millenium - Africa has 45 countries connected to the Internet. Of course the number of users is still low compared to other continents, but we should acknowledge progress made in connectivity during the last 2 years. Indeed, in 1995, during the African Telematics for Development Conference hosted by ECA, only 6 African countries had full Internet connections with other countries from Sub-Saharan Africa. The recommendations from the Telematics Conference made it possible to set up the High Level Working Group on Information and Communications Technologies in Africa, which developed the "African Information Society Initiative" (AISI) that is becoming known throughout Africa and even around the world.

Adopted for implementation in 1996 by the twenty-second meeting of ECA Conference of Ministers under resolution 812 entitled "Implementation of the African Information Society Initiative", AISI, through its partners in implementation, provides the framework for nearly all Information and Communication Technology (ICT) programmes or projects being developed for or by African countries. It is the cornerstone of the "Partners on ICT in Africa" (PICTA) network which gathers UN, international organizations and bilateral donors, and implementing agencies interested in the development of ITC in Africa.

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The African Information Society Initiative has been referred to in various national development plans in African countries, and its main principles are guiding development partners in their operations in the continent. AISI has been also adopted in various subregional and regional fora, including the OAU Summit in Yaounde (1996), the African Regional Telecommunication Development Conference held in Abidjan (May 1996), the UNDP ministerial subregional seminars for Central African countries in Libreville (March 1997), and for West African Anglophone countries, in Abuja (April 1997). Last but not least, the objectives of AISI have been endorsed by the G7 Summit in Denver in May 1997.

In implementing AISI, ECA collaborates with various partners including UNDP, UNESCO, World Bank, IDRC, ITU, USAID, UNITAR, UNIDO, and FAO who are also coordinating their activities in the following areas: policy awareness, Internet connectivity, training of ICT professionals, development of national information and communication infrastructure plans, sector applications and content creation, democratizing information access, etc.

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I understand that this seminar is the fifth of its kind (after Abidjan, Bissau, Libreville, and Abuja) to be organized by UNDP to discuss Internet issues in Africa. I congratulate UNDP for this type of initiative and hope that the follow up activities which were discussed with ECA will materialize by the end of the year, so as to connect all African countries by 1998, not only in the capital cities but also at the community level and in the rural areas. Indeed the African Internet Initiative project, which was jointly developed by UNDP and ECA, sets the path for a long term and fruitful cooperation between the two organizations and African countries.

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Africa should not be left out from the information revolution; the world is changing because of ICT development, and information has become another factor of production just as land, labour and capital. The role of information in the development process cannot be over emphasized, and it becomes more crucial when it comes to economic integration and networking, where decision makers need to have access to accurate and timely information to enable them to make wise and appropriate decisions. Hence electronic networks are needed not only to assist decision making at the national level but also to boost African regional cooperation and integration.

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Among the different issues you may wish to consider :

- how can African telecommunications adapt at the technical level - especially in view of the rapidly changing technologies for Internet - as well as at the organizational and regulatory levels, in order to be able to face the challenges of the new information era.

- how can all the parties involved - public sector, private sector, NGOs, users - work together in order to guarantee that access to information becomes as wide as possible.

- how can the African private sector contribute efficiently to accelerating the development of basic communication facilities and multiplying powerful value added services, in line with the expectations and needs of the African user.

- how can regional cooperation among telecommunication service providers be strengthened in order to improve develop quality communications services and minimize their cost.

I am sure that all these points will be extensively discussed during this high level gathering. I am therefore looking forward to the outcome of your deliberations and I wish you a successful Seminar.

Thank you.

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