

Press Releases

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KNOWLEDGE IS THE NEW GLOBAL ASSET, THE VERY PREMISE OF PROGRESS

But in harnessing ICTs for development we must beware of creating digital divide between the information-rich and the information-poor, says UN Deputy Secretary-General

Addis Ababa, 25 October 1999 (ECA) – Information and communication technologies are not a luxury, but rather a tool for economic and social development, the Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations, Ms. Louise Frechette told participants at the African Development Forum (ADF) this morning.

Ms. Frechette was speaking to an audience of more than 600 experts from governments, the private sector, civil society, bilateral and multilateral organizations from both within and outside the continent, who are meeting here from 24 – 28 October under the theme "The Challenge to Africa of Globalization and the Information Age".

In a keynote address on the theme of the conference at the opening plenary of the Forum, Ms. Frechette noted that despite the opportunities offered by globalization, hundreds of millions of people were living in desperate poverty, while countries most in need of trade and investment were being bypassed. "Many people experience globalization not as agent of progress, but as a disruptive force capable of destroying jobs and traditions in the blink of an eye," she warned. "So even as we welcome the good that globalization has brought and can bring in the future, we must also lament the ills that too often come with it. Our challenge is, therefore, to make globalization work better in producing equitable growth."

The DSG identified the spread of information and communications technologies (ICTs) as "perhaps the most important force spurring globalization along". These ICTs were "a tremendous force for integrating people and nations into the global economy. They can promote openness and transparency, leaving polluters and dictators fewer places to hide."

Ms. Frechette spelled out the tremendous power of information as "the new global asset, the new business capital, the very premise of progress". She envisioned the promise of the technologies for closing the rural-urban gap, alleviating natural disasters, promoting open societies and good governance, telemedicine, distance learning, and the integration of women into the work-force. Yet, she warned, access was crucial.

"The world's population has just passed the six billion mark. Five out of those six billion live in developing countries. For many of them, the great scientific and technical achievements of our era might as well be taking place on another planet. Half the world's people have never made or received a telephone call. We may well be adding a new divide to the already well-entrenched one between rich and poor: a digital divide between the information-rich and the information-poor."

That said, Ms. Frechette said she remained optimistic because "Africa is

receiving huge benefits even though the information age is so very young". Yet it was moving in the right direction for Africa – with sharply escalating applications coming at sharply reduced cost. She promised that the UN would play its part in promoting ICTs for development. "The mission of the UN is to ensure that any era is one in which the social and humanitarian goals of the world's people are met. The good news is that the power of information has already shown what it can do for human well-being: for human rights, for human development, for human freedom and security. But we have a long way to go before we can pronounce ourselves satisfied."

Noah Samara, CEO of WorldSpace Corporation, told participants that information affluence was "the need for every need... the sine qua non to development, adding: "Information is the predicate to everything we know. It is ubiquitous. It is the building block behind the human DNA, the chair you are sitting on, the building you are in, the car you drive".

Asserting that information was behind wealth was ignorance behind poverty, Mr. Samara lamented the gap between rich and poor, asserting that it had been made starker by the power of ICTs. While these technologies had liberated lives, created stock markets and improved economies, they had only touched a fraction of the world's population.

"Nearly 2.5 billion people have never made a phone call," he said. "Yet Manhattan alone has more phones than all those combined in sub-Saharan Africa." And while there was a radio station for every thirty thousand people in most OECD countries, the average for the developing world was one radio station for every two million people. In addition, there were more Internet service providers in Estonia than in the whole of sub-Saharan Africa.

Worse than the hardware, said Mr. Samara, was the scarcity of information, which "directly undermines the ability of a nation to not only keep its citizens informed and educated, but to simply keep them alive. Eleven million people will die of AIDS this year in sub-Saharan Africa. Forty million children will be orphaned. Either one of those numbers, by any definition, represents the population of an entire country. This is the horror we do not really comprehend."

Mr. Samara explained that it was the desire to stem HIV/AIDS that partly motivated him to start WorldSpace Corporation, which is promoting digital radio as a powerful tool for development. Last year, WorldSpace launched the first ever satellite specifically to cover Africa. The company plans to launch similar satellites over Asia and Latin America shortly.

The ADF marks the beginning of a process-oriented initiative led by the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) to position an African-driven development agenda that reflects a consensus among major partners and that leads to specific programmes for implementation at the country level. ADF is born out of the conviction that Africa cannot achieve sustainable development unless the policies, strategies and actions are designed, managed and owned by Africans themselves.

K.Y. Amoako, UN Under-Secretary-General and ECA Executive Secretary, spelt out the vision of an African renaissance, of an Africa that would be far more dynamic, and characterized by marked, if uneven, progress. "We will be more like Asia than we have admitted: We will have our tigers and we will have our disappointments," he said. "Overall, in the decades ahead we will live in a predominantly urban Africa, an Africa of business, media and science. An Africa in which governance is more localized and more shared with civil society. This will be an Africa of significant gains in social well being, particularly as science comes to our rescue to cope with health and

environmental crises. In sum, we can vision an Africa in which the great majority of people are better off and in which Africa as whole is far more significant to the rest of the world."

The new possibilities for leapfrogging afforded by science and technology offered a sound basis for this optimistic vision, added Mr. Amoako. "In the 20th century we were intelligent observers of nature. In the 21st century we will be changers of nature. In the 20th century nations depended upon natural resources for wealth. In the 21st century and probably well beyond, wealth will depend upon the ability to master the three revolutions of physics, information intelligence, biomolecular science, and the ways they converge".

Mr. Amoako predicted that in the years ahead, vast improvements in artificial intelligence would be accompanied by far greater use of human intelligence. There would be a shift in education from rote learning, to development of real understanding. Education would be a lifelong affair, starting in the first year and lasting through old age. Far more human brain capacity would be cultivated and used than in the past.

Intelligent public policies, stressed Mr. Amoako, were critical to effecting the shift from simple agriculture and simple manufacturing to information-based economies that employ innovation and technologically advanced applications. Such policies should be goal focused, carefully monitored, long-term and intelligently led. They should address education -- where the focus should be on qualitative gain -- and in particular science and technology

As well as being critically important to science-based development, Mr. Amoako said it was essential to developing Africa's economic community. Referring to the deceased former Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere, who was buried last week, Mr. Amoako said: "To all of us in Mwalimu's heritage, linkage and solidarity within the continent is at least as important as linkage with the global economy. Satellite broadcasting and filling in the information grid across our continent, will enormously further regional and sub-regional unity."

Another speaker was Leonard Robinson, President and CEO of the National Summit on Africa, a U.S.-based NGO initiative aimed at advancing the relationship between the U.S. and Africa. Mr. Robinson explained that the role of NSA was to make the many Americans who had a link with Africa "new and active advocates for the continent... a power block of voters and activists".

The issue of globalization and the information age has been chosen for the inaugural ADF because of the importance of defining African-owned and African-led strategies to engage with the global information economy. ECA has long advocated a development-serving information superhighway in the context of the African Information Society Initiative (AISII), which it is implementing along with a wide range of partners.

The Forum continues today and tomorrow with plenaries around the four substantive themes of the Forum:

- Strengthening Africa's information infrastructure - Africa and the information economy - Information and communication technologies for improved governance - Democratizing access to the information society

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The full text of all speeches and statements are available on the ADF Home Page at: <http://www.un.org/depts/eca> They will be supported by video and

audio clips of keynote addresses and other major moments. This site also includes the programme, list of participants, theme papers and other relevant background documents. For more information on the Forum or to interview participants, please contact:

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