ECA calls on African scientists to use ICT to shield continent from global crisis, initiate growth

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 29 April 2009 (ECA) - A senior official of the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) today called on African scientists to develop scientific proposals on how governments of the continent could cope with the current economic crisis and initiate growth.

Addressing over 600 scientists from Africa and various parts of the world who began meeting in Addis Ababa today at the First Session of the Committee on Development Information, Science and Technology (CODIST-1), Mr. Josué Dioné, Director, Food Security and Sustainable Development Division and Officer-in-Charge of ECA said African governments ought to take decisive action to support the development of science and technology, which, he said, is the basis for any sustainable development initiative.

Speaking on behalf of Mr. Abdoulie Janneh, the Executive Secretary of ECA, Mr Dioné said that "as a coping mechanism and a shield against the global financial crisis, many countries are responding by investing in science and technology". He cited China, India and the United States of America as examples.

"These examples should not be lost on Africa, and I hope the deliberations of the next three days will address how African countries can use STI not only to shield themselves from the current crisis but also to prepare their economies to become more competitive for growth," he said.

Mr. Dione said that the theme of the meeting, "*Scientific Development, Innovation and the Knowledge Economy*" had been chosen to underscore the key role of science, technology and innovation in helping Africa countries to cope with the global financial and economic crisis, as well as the food, energy and climate change challenges that they face.

Ms Aida Opoku-Mensah, Director of ICT, Science and Technology Division, the first CODIST was designed to examine Africa's innovation performance and lay the groundwork for the development of the ECA's two-year programme on ICT, Science & Technology for Development.

She said the meeting would examine Africa's performance against such key pillars of the knowledge economy as education and capacity building, ICT infrastructure, regulatory and economic and institutional regimes.

The keynote address was delivered by Professor Lidia Brito, former Minister of Higher Education, Science and Technology of Mozambique and deputy Vice-Chancellor of Eduardo Mondlane University.

According to Prof. Brito, Africa would need to overcome challenges that inhibit the formulation of a common vision for the role of STI for development; the prioritization and mobilization of the social energy that exists in society and spurs innovation; the integration and creation of a structural base for the other policies; long term and consistent investment in the necessary resources to initiate the building up of knowledge societies; and the adoption of a research approach that goes beyond research about Africa, to research for Africa and by Africans.

In this respect, she recommended the refocusing of higher education on post-graduate and research activities, so as to make science education useful for the people who need development. She called for the institutionalization of educational systems "that are based on knowledge management principles such as to able to transform the institutional framework to respond effectively to the development demands."

Ms Brito highlighted the fragmentation of polices in Africa, and said that for the continent to actually benefit from the scientific innovation, it would be necessary to "promote policy integration in the country, region and continent" so as to "improve and scale-up research programs in crucial areas for development."

She said that Science, Technology and Information development face three hard realities in Africa: the lack of leadership; the urge for emulation of national innovation systems from abroad; and the small amounts of financial resources that are available for STI programmes in the continent.

Ethiopia's Minister of Science and Technology, Mr Juneydi Saddo, provided participants with an analysis on how and why his government launched a massive project of $ 1.5 billion to build 21st century telecommunication and ICT for a broad-based scientific and technology assimilation, just as South East Asian countries did in the last four or five decades.

A special event on the conference agenda is the Technology in Government Award - an ECA/Canada Fund for Africa initiative, which aims at recognizing the work of African Governments in the effective use of ICTs for public services delivery.

Over 30 applications were short-listed from Angola, Botswana, Cote d'Ivoire, Egypt, Ethiopia, Ghana, Malawi, Mali, Morocco, Mozambique, Nigeria, South Africa, Sudan, The Gambia, Tunisia and Zambia. Twelve innovative projects selected from these country submissions will receive awards on the 30th of April at a Gala Dinner at the Sheraton Addis.

Several book launch ceremonies are planned for this evening. All the books strive to demonstrate innovative applications in government services.

The conference, which is organized in collaboration with L'Organisation International e de la Franccophonie, UNCTAD, OSISA, ECA and a host of other partners, has two sub-themes on "the Enabling Environment for Innovation" and "Innovation and Economic Growth."

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