**Video-taped Speech**

**by**

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**to**

# GIIC 1997 Annual Meeting

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Distinguished GIIC Commissioners,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is indeed a pleasure and a privilege to address this annual meeting of the Global Information Infrastructure Commission (GIIC). We are happy to have worked with the GIIC almost since its inception, with its Africa Region programme and Commissioners. Your Africa Commissioner Dr. Hisham el Sherif brilliantly chaired our High Level Working Group which produced the African Information Society Initiative (AISI). Three of your staff as well as Commissioners were also members of the Group. Commissioner Souleymane Sall is a member of the African Technical Advisory Committee for the AISI.

This year we had a tremendous response from ECA Member States to the special day co-organized by the GIIC and ECA on "Building African Information Infrastructure" at our meeting of the Conference of African Ministers of Economic and Social Planning for Development. This is a clear indicator of the fact that cooperation between ECA and GIIC is on the right track. This is the first time, however, that we have had the honor of addressing the GIIC Board as a whole. I am only sorry that long-time commitments prevent me from being with you in Cologne today in person.

In this brief address, I will focus on the vision I have for partnerships for the development of an African Information Society. I will also propose possible ways in which the GIIC can enhance its partnership in the ECA-led African Information Society Initiative.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Among all the changes that Africa is facing, one of the most important is the challenge of the information revolution. As a result, and in the context of

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ECA's reforms, Harnessing Information Technology for Development is now one of the Commission's most important programme areas. We created a new hub, the Development Information Services Division, to manage this programme.

Why are we convinced that Information and Communications technologies (ICTs) have a future in Africa and a role to play in its socio-economic development? Today - two years before the beginning of a new millenium - 45 countries are connected to the Internet. Even if the number of users is still very low compared to other parts of the world, we should acknowledge progress made in connectivity during the last 2 years. Indeed, at the time of the Africa Regional Symposium on Telematics for Development hosted by ECA in April 1995, only 6 African countries had full Internet connectivity, and only one of those was in sub-Saharan Africa. The advance in connectivity has been dramatic. All but six countries will probably be connected by the end of this year. In addition, numerous countries are encouraging a rapid growth of satellite television, cellular phones and other emerging new ICTs.

What is more, a number of countries, among them South Africa, Ghana, Senegal, and Côte d'Ivoire, have relaxed their monopolistic grip on the telecommunications sector, opening up to private sector investment. Others are re-thinking their telecommunication regulatory frameworks in order to separate the regulatory and operational activities, to further develop basic telecommunication infrastructure and to stimulate the development of value added services in their countries.

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 AISI. ECA's leadership in AISI is increasingly being recognized, and all the major partners have rallied round the common objective of promoting the use of ICTs for development in Africa. The Initiative has been endorsed in various subregional and regional fora, and most recently by the G7 Plus Russia at the Denver Summit of the Eight.

Only last week, the AISI advisory committee of experts met in Addis Ababa to review implementation of the Initiative to date. The experts meeting was followed by a two-day meeting of AISI partners, to discuss how ECA can build and strengthen partnerships to further the aims and objectives of AISI. Among participating partner organizations were: The African Development Bank, British Council, Carnegie Corporation of New York, UNDP, USAID, International Telecommunication Union, World Bank, UNESCO, World Trade Organisation and of course your very own Commission.

ECA's role centres on coordination, advisory services, support to countries in establishing their national information and communication infrastructure policy and plans, capacity building and selection of relevant pilot projects. In this context, and in the light of concerns expressed about the developmental utility of the ICTs, ECA began by raising awareness among African Member States, promoting the importance of the role of ICTs in the economic and social development of the continent.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

How can your Commission, which has already achieved a lot in this domain, help promote and develop an African Information Society that in line with Africa's situation and its developmental needs? Among the key foci of such a paradigm are that:

the ICTs are affordable as well as participatory, so as to promote inclusion rather than further marginalization;

the ICTs enable Africa's integration in the global economy and full participation in the third millenium

Today, Africa is becoming more open to private investments and attractive to investors. This is particularly true in the ICT domain, where joint ventures have already been or are about to be established in Morocco, South Africa, Tunisia and Senegal, among others. Today, I see the much-vaunted African renaissance as a reality. I see an emerging and more dynamic Africa. An Africa where positive growth rates are beginning to register in countries applying economic and political reforms with stamina and determination.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In this encouraging evolution of the Continent, I am convinced that your involvement, in a win-win cooperation and partnership, will contribute in accelerating Africa's entry into the Global Information Society. GIIC members could support National Information Infrastructure (NII) policy formation and the implementation of pilot projects in a number of sectoral applications, among them:

Distance education, which takes on pivotal importance in a situation where illiteracy rates are among the highest in the world;

Electronic commerce, which would allow the continent to integrate ICT use in the development process of its trade exchanges within the continent and beyond;

Multi-media communication, these centres have been recognized as an important figures for building information infrastructure in developing countries that also have a variety of providing help including health care, and government information.

This is to mention just a few of the main areas where external support and partnership are essential. I would ask that you work closely with Mr. Sall, who is also a member of our African Technical Advisory Committee (ATAC), and the Africa Region Director to develop a coordinated GIIC support for AISI.

ECA is also planning to turn the modern state-of-the-art UNCC, here at Addis Ababa, into a permanent showcase, a permanent exhibition place where all the visitors could see "what IC technology is about". Each month our

Conference centre hosts numerous international meetings of experts, planners, decision makers from all over Africa. Once they see information and communication technology working in an African setting in our Conference Centre, they go home with the will and the desire to put it in place in their country. In addition, a permanent training centre will be installed, which would allow 'not only to see, but also to use and to try out' these new technologies, in order for the decision makers, the technicians, and academics who visit UN-CC premises to become more familiar with them. Again, if you are interested in joining with us in partnerships for an African renaissance, your African Regional Director is working on an Africa programme.

I thank you for the opportunity to speak to you via this technology. It is clear to me that an organization with the Stature and mission of the Global Information Infrastructure Commission can play a very important role in this African renaissance. We welcome a continued partnership between the GIIC and ECA to build the African Information Society.

I thank you.

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