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THE AFRICAN REGIONAL CONFERENCE ON SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY: ITS ORIGIN, SCOPE AND MODALITIES OF WORK

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INTRODUCTION

1. The African Regional Conference on Science and Technology (ARCST) was created by resolution 757(XXVIII): Restructuring of the intergovernmental machinery of the Commission which was adopted by Conference of Ministers of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa at its twenty eighth meeting at Addis Ababa in May 1993. The Regional Conference is one of the three technical subsidiary bodies created by this resolution and it replaced two former committees: the Intergovernmental Committee of Experts for Science and Technology Development (IGCESTD) and the Technical Advisory Committee on Nuclear Science and Technology in Africa (TACNUSTA).

ECA's INTERGOVERNMENTAL MACHINERY IN S&T PRIOR TO 1993

2. Before considering the provisions on the mandate and operation of the Regional Conference it is appropriate for the meeting to have a brief overview of the former Intergovernmental Committee of Experts for Science and Technology Development (IGCESTD) which spearheaded the science and technology activities of the Commission since 1973, and led to the establishment of the African Regional Conference. It is expected that this would provide a good background for the consideration of the operation modalities of African Regional Conference being undertaken by the first meeting.

3. The late sixties and the early seventies witnessed the strengthening of the Commission's role in science and technology. During its second meeting in February 1973, the ECA Conference of Ministers adopted the science and technology component of the African Strategy for Development in the seventies. In resolution 248(XI) of 22 February 1973, the Conference approved the African Regional Plan for the Application of Science and Technology to Development (ARP), and established the Intergovernmental Committee of Experts for Science and Technology Development (IGCESTD) to follow-up on its implementation. The Intergovernmental Committee held its first meeting in Addis Ababa in November 1973.

4. Since then the IGCESTD played an important role as a regional forum for realizing a collective approach in science and technology on various problems faced by the member States, and by defining regional policies and strategies. It regularly advised the ECA secretariat on the needs and priorities of member States. In the wake of the Vienna Conference on Science and Technology[1], the IGCESTD met in Addis Ababa and formulated an important regional policy framework and programme of action in science and technology which later became the science and technology chapter of the Lagos Plan of Action for the Economic Development of Africa in the 1980s adopted by the Second Extraordinary Session

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[1]United Nations Conference on Science and Technology for Development, August 1979

of the Assembly of Heads of State and Government in 1980. At the same time the IGCESTD sought and obtained new Terms of Reference[2] and the expansion of its membership to include all ECA member States in order to reflect, on the one hand, the desire to respond to rapidly growing number and importance of the subjects of science and technology, and on the other hand to exert a concerted effort in response to the new aspirations of member States.

5. During its seventh meeting in November 1991 the IGCESTD considered many aspects of strengthening the technological capacity of the African region. It endorsed a draft resolution calling for the establishment of a Conference of African Ministers responsible for science and technology to ensure political and financial support to the work of the IGCESTD. The draft resolution was considered by eighteenth meeting of the ECA Conference of Ministers in May 1992 at which several member States' delegations supported the idea. However, the Conference of Ministers in Resolution 738(XXVII), requested the Executive Secretary to present proposals in that regard to the nineteenth meeting. In 1993 the matter was considered as part of the overall review of the intergovernmental machinery of the Commission during the nineteenth meeting of the ECA Conference of Ministers which decided, by Resolution 757(XXVIII), to upgrade the IGCESTD to an **African Regional Conference on Science and Technology**. By the same resolution the former Technical Advisory Committee on Nuclear Science and Technology in Africa (TACNUSTA) was abolished and its functions integrated into the Regional Conference.

TERMS OF REFERENCE OF THE AFRICAN REGIONAL CONFERENCE

6. The African Regional Conference on Science and Technology was assigned the following Terms of Reference:[3]

(a) To assist the Commission in the definition and periodic review of strategies and programmes for the development and application of science and technology, including nuclear science and technology, in the African region;

(b) To examine and advise the Executive Secretary on specific issues bearing on the implementation of such strategies;

(c) In general, to actively pursue the promotion of science and technology and the formulation of measures to ensure their application to national, subregional and regional development;

(d) To give special consideration in its activities to the needs of the least developed member States, and to the application and impact of new and

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[2] see Commission Resolution 385(XV) adopted by the ECA Conference of Ministers on 12 April 1980.

[3] See Section XI of the Annex to Resolution 757(XXVIII): Restructuring of the intergovernmental machinery of the Commission

emerging technologies;

(e) To advise the Executive Secretary on ways and means of mobilizing resources of all kinds for the implementation of strategies, programmes and projects for the development and application of science and technology within the region.

7. It is clear that each of the five elements in the Terms of Reference assigns special responsibilities to the Regional Conference. The meeting should examine them with a view to establish a common interpretation and understanding of their provisions, and their implications for the mode of operation and future activities of the Regional Conference and the ECA Secretariat which will service its meetings. In this regard, therefore, the delegations of the member States, the organizations and agencies represented at the first meeting have a unique opportunity and responsibility of launching the operation of the Regional Conference on its correct path and pitch.

8. As pointed in paragraphs 2-5 above, the developments leading to the establishment of the Regional Conference and its Terms of Reference confer upon it a singular status among the subsidiary bodies of the Commission in the field of science and technology. It should serve as an important forum for developing regional policies and strategies in science and technology and measures for ensuring that they are appropriately linked to national, subregional and regional the socio-economic development endeavors. In the same vein, the Regional Conference is expected to give orientation to the science and technology programmes and activities of the Secretariat by providing inputs ahead of the programming exercise. It is also expected to assist the Secretariat in mobilizing resources for the implementation of the approved strategies.

OPERATION OF THE REGIONAL CONFERENCE

9. Commission Resolution 757(XXVIII) makes the following provisions regarding the operation of the Regional Conference:

(a) Full membership in the Conference is open to all African States.

(b) It will normally meet once every two years and submit its reports and recommendations to the ECA Conference of Ministers through the Technical Preparatory Committee of the Whole (TEPCOW)

(c) The Conference will have Working Groups to examine specific issues for its consideration.

(d) Each member State should

(i) designate one institution responsible for science and technology matters to serve as a focal point for the work of the Regional Conference, and

(ii) nominate representatives to meetings of the Regional Conference taking

into account the need to maintain a high degree of effectiveness and follow-up through continuity.

MEMBERSHIP

10. All ECA member States are full members of the African Regional Conference. In line with the practice for the ECA Conference of Ministers, other member states of the United Nations, the United Nations bodies and agencies, the Holy See and Palestine, African intergovernmental organizations and non-governmental organizations will participate in the observer capacity in meetings of the African Regional Conference.

11. The Conference is invited to provide further guidance on categories and names of organizations and institutions whose participation, as observers, could enhance the work of the African Regional Conference. A list of organizations invited to the first meeting will be provide a basis for consideration of this issue.

PERIODICITY OF MEETINGS AND VENUE

12. As stated above, the African Regional Conference will meet once every two years. The venue will be at the headquarters of the ECA, Addis Ababa, unless member States offer to host future meetings in their respective countries.

COMPOSITION OF DELEGATIONS AND LEVEL OF PARTICIPATION

13. Since the African Regional Conference represents an upgrading of the former IGCESTD, delegates to its meetings should be at **the highest levels of management and policy-making in science and technology to reflect its status**. Indeed, the ECA Conference of Ministers was even more explicit regarding member States' participation, and in operative paragraph 3 of Commission resolution 787(XXIX) adopted on 4 May 1994 it "Urges that Ministers responsible for science and technology should show their commitment by actively participating in the African Regional Conference on science and technology"

14. In view of the large number of issues under the purview of the African Regional Conference, the composition of delegations should adequately cover the agenda items for any particular meeting.

NATIONAL FOCAL POINTS

15. In a related issue, the ECA Conference of Ministers also urged member States to designate one institution to serve as the focal point for all matters concerning the Regional Conference. This is important not only for purposes of communication between ECA secretariat and individual member States, but it will facilitate contacts amongst countries especially in connection with subregional working group activities dealt with in Agenda item

5g. Delegates are invited to assist the Secretariat in updating information in respect of their countries appearing in the list of ECA Science and Technology Focal Points to be circulated during the first meeting of the African Regional Conference.

WORKING GROUPS

16. As indicated in the terms of reference the Conference will have Working Groups to examine subregional and sectoral issues. Proposals regarding the Subregion Working Groups will be specifically considered at item 5g of the Agenda and in document ARCST/1/5g.

17. The terms of reference of the ARCST mention the following themes:

a) nuclear science and technology

b) the impact and application of new and emerging technologies, and

c) the needs of the least developed member States[4]

18. Other important themes could include technology and investment (financing), the science and technology Protocol of the AEC, regional and international networking in science and technology, technology and training, science and technology indicators, technology and immigration (brain-drain, expatriates), technology popularization, etc. During the last meeting of the IGCESTD there was an interest in technological parks and also in the promotion of indigenous (rural) technologies.

19. In view of the urgent need to rapidly upgrade Africa's capacity in science and technology and its application in key areas of socio-economic development, the Secretariat is proposed that this Conference and its Subregional Working Groups give special consideration to the above themes.

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[4] ECA Survey of Economic and Social Conditions in Africa Least Developed Countries 1992 - 1993 the following African countries were classified as LDCs by the United Nations: Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cape Verde, Central African Republic, Chad, Comoros, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Equatorial Guinea, Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Lesotho, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Mozambique, Niger, Rwanda, Soa Tome and Principe, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Togo, Uganda, United Republic of Tanzania, Zaire and Zambia.