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**ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR AFRICA**

Third Meeting of the Committee  
on Development Information (CODI)

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia  
10 – 17 May 2003

**Third meeting of the Committee on Development  
Information (CODI-III)**

**Address by**

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Executive Secretary  
Economic Commission for Africa**

**12 May 2003**

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen,

It is with pleasure that I welcome you to the third meeting of the Committee on Development Information (CODI). First of all, on behalf of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, I want to thank our numerous development partners for their invaluable and timely assistance in organising many important aspects of this third meeting of CODI.

Let me briefly explain the place of CODI in the work of ECA and in Africa's development agenda. During the reform process of 1997, the Conference of Ministers of ECA member States established seven technical committees to provide guidance to the Commission on various programmes. CODI is one of these committees charged with harnessing information for development. The committee meets every two years, bringing together practitioners in the fields of information and communications technology (ICT), libraries, geoinformation and statistics to review our activities, and those of our member States, and to develop action plans for us as well as our member States.

This is the third meeting under the theme of "Information for Governance". This theme was chosen because the prevailing discourse in Africa is on Governance. What are the elements of good governance and how do we ensure that they are practiced in Africa? What are the challenges and obstacles to good governance in Africa? Our Commission has specialists on governance dealing with these and other important questions. But how do you, the development information professionals, fit into the equation? What can you contribute to improve governance in Africa? What have you been doing and what more can you do? We want the professional communities represented in CODI to join this discussion. We want you to listen to the visions and challenges and relate them to your respective areas of expertise. How can we use statistics, ICT, libraries and geoinformation to achieve the visions and deal with the challenges that governance specialists will raise?

Some of the issues being addressed in the governance discourse deal with decentralization of administrative systems, transparent public financial management, the role of the private sector and other non-governmental groups. How can knowledge and information services, systems and policies contribute to these governance issues? We have heard about e-commerce, e-administration, e-governance, e-democracy, etc. These and many other related e-concepts are transforming commercial, administrative and political systems in other parts of the world. But are these concepts relevant to Africa? What is the state of their development in Africa? Are we doing what we should be doing with them? Should we be doing more? What do we want our member States and partners to do to bring Africa at the level we should be?

Related to these e-concepts is the idea of virtual communities. People no longer have to live together in a particular locality, at the same time, to form a community. People who have access to the right tools can now participate in most of the activities of communities, except of course those that require direct physical contact. This development has allowed people separated by space and time to communicate with each other, form friendships, conduct business and plan and strategize on issues of common interest. For these virtual

communities, it is the act of participation that determines membership, rather than some quality or thought. Such virtual communities are playing important roles in sustaining commerce and democracy in places where they exist. Some people in Africa belong to these virtual communities and participate actively in their running. But how widespread is the practice and how much grassroots support and participation are there in Africa? What aspects of the concept of virtual communities should we encourage and nurture in the African setting, and how do we do that?

All these concepts depend on the availability of adequate knowledge and information resources. Decision makers need them to make good decisions. The general public needs them to participate in the decision making process and follow the implementation of agreed decisions. So the information must be readily accessible in a form that the recipients can use. It must be available to everybody – not just decision makers, but to everybody – when they need it, where they need it, and in the form they can understand and use to make decisions or participate in decisions. The Internet has revolutionized the way information is disseminated. In some parts of the world, most people have access to all those e-services from their homes. But this is not yet the case in Africa, partly because of relative high cost of computers, telecommunications problems, and government policy.

On policy, we are working with governments to develop appropriate policies and National Information and Communication Infrastructure plans (NICI). Apart from national policies, ECA is also working with Member States in developing sectoral plans, in particular e-government. Government information can be made available to the public more readily through ICT. In the same way, governments can use ICTs for efficiency, transparency and accountability. The use of ICTs by governments can bring both internal and external benefits. Internally, it provides benefits such as staff motivation, greater political control and an improved public image. Externally, it delivers cheaper, better services to those who depend on government. But introducing ICT in the governance process raises a number of critical questions. For instance, are countries ready for e-governance and e-government activities? Are the infrastructure for the data systems ready? What about the legal and institutional frameworks? Can the human and technological capacity support e-governance initiatives in each and every country? And above all, is there strategic thinking and leadership?

During this meeting, you will receive reports from countries at different stages of the NICI process. You will also receive reports on our activities in this area. I urge you to listen to these reports carefully and tell us if we have been doing the right things, and in the right order. What can we do better — there is always room for improvement? What should member States and partners be doing to develop sound information policies that will transform our societies into information societies?

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Advances in information technology have also led to the evolution of digital and virtual libraries. In a region like ours, where computers and other knowledge technologies are beyond the reach of most people, libraries, especially the virtual networks that ICTs have made possible, are considered important to deliver knowledge and information to the masses.

In recognition of the role of virtual libraries in development, we launched the African Virtual Library Network (AVLIN) during the second meeting of CODI.

AVLIN is designed to be a hub for the exchange of knowledge and information among African researchers and policy makers. One of the recommendations of the second meeting of CODI was that an advisory committee be set up. We have set up this advisory committee and it met during this past weekend. The other members of CODI await the report of that meeting to know how AVLIN has performed as a hub for the exchange of knowledge and information. But most importantly, we want to know from our library specialists, how we can move the concept downstream from the institutions to the grassroots, thereby empowering the grassroots in the context of community involvement in the decision process.

Geoinformation systems have been evolving towards this grassroots-community involvement direction. Even as we move towards virtual communities that have made national borders almost irrelevant, the role of geography is becoming more important. There is now greater understanding that all economic, development and administrative processes eventually ask a “where” question. Where are the resources and markets? Where are the electorates? Whatever our biggest challenge may be, where is it most prevalent? Where should we be focussing our attention - in eradicating poverty, or in dealing with HIV/AIDS? We need to know “where” before we complete any analyses on how to tackle these and other problems. IT has made it possible for us to incorporate the “where” elements in analysis, in a way that was not possible before. The institutions, resources and environments that enable us to answer these “where” questions are now being developed in a manner comparable to roads, bridges, cables, and other infrastructures in societies. These *spatial data infrastructures (SDI)*, as they are called, are developed through partnerships between various stakeholders, including producers, value-adders and users. That way contents are made accessible to all members of the society. On the recommendation of the second meeting of CODI, our geoinformation advisory services to member states emphasized the development of national SDIs. As you evaluate reports on progress made by member states in this area, we want to know whether these developments have been linked to NICI plans. Geoinformation is, first and foremost, information. It should, therefore, be linked to the overall information policy and concepts, such as e-government and virtual communities. Also tell us how you can bring value to NEPAD and its governance dimensions.

The Statistics sub-committee already tried to link its work to governance when, two years ago, it held a working group session on “statistics and governance”. On the same theme, I am pleased to note that this sub-committee held yesterday another working group during which it dealt with critical issues such as identifying appropriate statistical indicators for assessing good governance and for decision making in the public as well as private sectors. Statistics as a management tool, if timely and accurately produced should contribute to the African development agenda with particular reference to designing poverty monitoring and reduction strategies as well as achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which are the backbone of the NEPAD.

The assessment of socio-economic development is obviously made against quantitative indicators. Therefore statistics are instrumental to the peer review mechanism. Statistics itself needs governance and for that I appreciate the new regional and subregional

initiatives launched to build or develop statistical capacities. The development of those statistical capacities can be reliable and viable only if it allows comparability. That's why at our level we are developing a compliance system to internationally accepted standards like the 1993 System of National Accounts and the International Comparison Programme (ICP) with other partners such as the World Bank and the African Development Bank (ADB).

We have initiated and will expand the work on the statistical data and information systems needed for decision-making in Africa. To that end, CODI will examine partnerships with the World Bank for the Live Databases and Household Surveys Data Repository in ECA. We need a repository of authoritative data on Africa, aggregated at the regional, sub-regional and national levels. We need to know what databases are available to us and how to derive information from them for good governance.

Which brings me back to the theme of "Information and Governance".

How can we ensure that the production, management and use of information are aligned to the needs of good governance systems in Africa? By the time you leave on Thursday, I urge you to propose a plan of action that will answer that critical question. Propose specific actions for us at ECA, for member States, for our partners, and for the private sector and civil society. You can be sure that we shall find ways to incorporate your recommendations into our programmes and activities just as we incorporated the recommendations of the second meeting into our work programmes.

And when you get back home to your various constituencies, I encourage you to assist in the implementation of the action plans that will emerge out of this meeting. The future of Africa may depend on them.

I thank you again for coming and wish you a fruitful meeting.