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on Development Information (CODI)

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Progress Report
on the
African Virtual Library and Information Network (AVLIN)

History and Background

At the second meeting of the Committee on Development Information (CODI 2) in September 2001, the ECA convened an expert group meeting to consider the viability of establishing a virtual library network for the African region. The group of experts, having considered the concept paper “*Building the African Virtual Library and Information Network: Concepts, Issues, Challenges and Opportunities*”¹ unanimously endorsed the development of the African Virtual Library and Information Network (AVLIN) and requested the Executive Secretary of the ECA to provide seed money to start to implement the operations. Since then, preparatory activities aimed at formally launching and implementing AVLIN have been underway. The ECA was also mandated to appoint the members of the AVLIN steering committee.

This report highlights some of the key actions already taken and points to others which could be embarked on to make AVLIN an effective network in the near future. The specific recommendations made regarding AVLIN were; that

- “A Steering committee should be set up immediately to drive the process of its development and implementation;
- ECA should provide the seed money for the immediate take-off of the project;
- During the first phase of AVLIN, efforts should be made to identify and coordinate related activities being undertaken on the continent to avoid duplication of efforts and resources;
- AVLIN should be a sustainable project and therefore it should not depend entirely on donor funding. Participating libraries should, as much as possible, be supported with national and institutional budgets for their AVLIN related activities;
- Participation in AVLIN should be on a voluntary basis and institutions intending to join AVLIN will be expected to meet basic requirements that will be formulated later;
- AVLIN should lay emphasis on the development of relevant professional competencies as its success will depend on the technical and managerial capacities of information professionals in the participating institutions;
- ECA should initiate knowledge management activities to leverage the knowledge assets of the institution and serve as a training ground for African institutions;
- AVLIN project activities need to commence with capacity building in the field of knowledge management through appropriate awareness raising, training, policy analysis and advocacy, and development of institutional projects; and
- Implementation of AVLIN should be regarded as an integral part of the infrastructure for enhancing access to development information available on the continent and elsewhere².”

It will be recalled that in 1995 when the African Information Society Initiative (AISI) was adopted by the ECA Conference of Ministers in its Resolution 812 (XXXI) ³, the action framework recommended the development of information resources at the national, sub-regional and regional levels. It specifically recommended that electronic libraries should be developed as one of the value-added information services under AISI. Against this background and the specific recommendations of CODI 2, AVLIN is planned to deliver value-added impact by facilitating the development of digital libraries on the critical issues in Africa's development.

Concept and Vision

AVLIN is one of the programme instruments and advocacy tools which has been designed to sharpen ECA's input to harnessing information for development in Africa. Its core activity is knowledge and information networking, sharing and exchanges. It is designed to be:

- a network of internet-based information and knowledge resources and services;
- a web of virtual libraries and knowledge exchanges relevant to African development issues.
- A "gateway of gateways" for information sources on special development concerns for which the ECA has the regional mandate and on which it provides advocacy to its member States;
- a platform and hub for the exchange of knowledge and information among researchers and policy makers.

Objectives

AVLIN's overarching objective will be to help bridge the digital divide between Africa and the developed world as well as to bring about effective information and knowledge networking among African knowledge-based institutions, especially universities, research centres and the like.

These objectives will be achieved through some of these specific actions:

- providing access to electronic resources (in addition to traditional print materials), **policy documents, bibliographic databases, general information and expert and institutional profiles**;
- building capacity at institutional, national and regional levels on development of integrated virtual library services;
- promoting regional cooperation on standardization and virtual library system development; and
- facilitating research and developmental activities in both infrastructure and development of digital and virtual library services.

Complementarity and Institutional Coordination

Implementation efforts will seek to ensure seamless complementarity with other ongoing knowledge-based projects and initiatives aimed at supporting African research networks, policy makers and institutions, especially those sponsored by ECA for instance the Information Technology Centre for Africa (ICTA) which provides services on policy and capacity building needs related to ICT for development.

Achievements

- Last year, ECA surveyed a number of university libraries and research centres in Africa in order to determine institutional capacity and availability of requisite information and knowledge infrastructures at potential AVLIN sites. Findings of this survey will help to avoid duplication of efforts and resources of similar activities in the region.
- Since CODI.2, ECA has started putting in place a Knowledge Management strategy as part of its wider institutional strengthening programme. Early indications show that the initiative will benefit AVLIN.
- Members of the AVLIN Advisory Committee (AAC) have been appointed based on expertise; gender; linguistic and geographic representation. The draft terms of reference have been prepared and will be reviewed during the inaugural meeting of AAC.
- Guidelines for AVLIN membership have been drafted and will be endorsed by AAC during its first meeting.
- Efforts have been made to promote awareness of AVLIN among several potential stakeholders and participating institutions, for example the presentation of a paper: to the 68th IFLA Council and General Conference, Glasgow, August 2002; preparation and dissemination of *AVLIN in brief*: and the design of the AVLIN web-site.
- On the fundraising side, the ECA has provided seed money to kick-start the operations of AVLIN, and a business plan has been prepared in readiness to seek funds and support from interested donors and partners.
- The organization of a Technical workshop on digital libraries and electronic information is planned for May 2003 for some 40-50 participants from major African libraries. This will be the first in a series of workshops/seminars intended to enhance professional competencies at participating institutions.

AVLIN: THE WAY FORWARD

The future development of AVLIN will depend very much on support from development organisations and active collaboration from participating institutions. Participating institutions should have the appropriate capacities in terms of institutional commitment, human resources, equipment, and other physical resources in order to contribute and benefit from participation in the activities of AVLIN.

For the coming three years, focus of AVLIN activities will be on:

- Building up access to available information and knowledge resources;
- Capacity building activities;
- Advocacy with libraries; and
- Fundraising and sustainability.

AVLIN's success criteria will be measured by:

- Satisfaction of member States with progress made by AVLIN in meeting its objectives;
- Number of library and information network nodes established and sharing knowledge resources;
- Number of knowledge exchanges and knowledge institutions connected with web-based library networks;
- Number and quality of capacity building training, meetings and workshops held; and
- Increase in adoption and adherence to international standards on information processing, management, communication and dissemination.

Conclusion

The goal to establish AVLIN as a mechanism for connecting high value information users to electronic library and information resources on Africa and to enhanced information and knowledge exchange has begun in earnest. Heeding the call by the Executive Secretary of the ECA, that "Africa should not miss out on development opportunities presented by the information revolution"⁵ AVLIN is poised to help Africa fully participate in this revolution.

- 1 UNECA. Building the African Virtual Library and Information Network: Concepts, Issues, Challenges and Opportunities, Addis Ababa, 2001. (E/ECA/DISD/CODI.2/9)
- 2 UNECA. Report of the Second Meeting of CODI, Addis Ababa, 2001 (E/ECA/DISD/CODI.2/31).
- 3 UNECA. The African Information Society Initiative (AIS): an action framework to build Africa's information and communication infrastructure, Addis Ababa, May 1996.
- 4 UNECA. AVLIN: a regional knowledge exchange initiative, Addis Ababa, Aug. 2002.
- 5 Amoako, K.Y. Foreword – AISI promotional brochure, 1996.