

## **REPORT OF THE EXPERT PREPARATORY GROUP MEETING ON KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT AND THE AFRICAN VIRTUAL LIBRARY AND INFORMATION NETWORK (AVLIN)**

### **Date, Opening and Attendance**

The meeting was held on Monday, 3 September 2001 . It was opened and addressed by Ms. Karima Bounemra Ben Soltane, the Director of ECA`s Development Information Services Division, who charged the body to chart a course Member States could take to fully participate in the global knowledge economy.

Forty-nine (49) experts from sixteen (16) countries and five (5) international organisations participated in the meeting.

### **Summary of Presentations**

The Secretariat presented two background papers:

- Knowledge management for decision making: tools, institutions and paradigms (E/ECA/DISD/CODI.2/10); and
- Building the African Virtual Library and Information Network: concepts, issues, challenges and opportunities (E/ECA/DISD/CODI.2/9).

The message of the paper on knowledge management may be summarized as follows:

- Knowledge has become the prime factor of production and main source of competitive advantage in the globalising knowledge-based economy, and to participate more competitively and beneficially in this world economy, African nations need to implement well-targeted knowledge management programmes at institutional and national levels.
- Knowledge management is the strategy-driven motivation, coordination and facilitation of people, institutional units or government agencies aimed at reaching organizational or national goals through system-wide generation, gathering, preservation, processing and sharing of information and knowledge.
- The tasks at regional levels would include the search, selection, adaptation and advocacy as well as the dissemination of best practices on national and regional policy development and management, and catalyzing international cooperation in specific policy issues that may benefit the countries of the region.
- States should develop national knowledge and innovation systems to harness and spur the inventive spirit of its citizens.

The message of the AVLIN paper may be summarized as follows:

- The African Virtual Library and Information Network will be a web of networked information resources and services developed by African libraries with the main goal of

bridging the digital divide between Africa and developed world by enabling wider access to information and knowledge resources in the region and elsewhere.

- It will be a service to Member States in capacity building in modern development information services.
- AVLIN will provide an enhanced information platform for African research and knowledge-based institutions and a hub for the exchange of knowledge and information among researchers and policy makers. Access to electronic books, policy documents, bibliographic databases, and institutional profiles will be provided.

### **Recommendations and Conclusions**

The experts noted with appreciation the ongoing role of the ECA in promoting effective information management policies and practices in the African region, and recommended that:

1. ECA's activities should be expanded to include awareness and capacity building in knowledge management.
2. The focus of knowledge management initiatives should be at the institutional and national levels.
3. Initiatives should be conceptually sound but practical in implementation.
4. Initiatives should focus on systematic assessment of the state of information and knowledge processes in African communities and institutions in terms of awareness, adequacy of resources, transmission culture, utilization, and infrastructure and the availability of enabling technologies.
5. Oral tradition and indigenous knowledge in African communities should be exploited in all their forms of expression, giving cognizance to the protection of intellectual property rights.
6. Libraries and related information centres; professional, scientific and trade associations, and other related "communities of practice"; government agencies; and groupings of civic society should be involved in the development national knowledge systems.

The experts fully supported the efforts being made to develop the African Virtual Library and Information Network (AVLIN), and indicated that AVLIN is long overdue. It further recommended that:

7. A steering committee be set up immediately to drive the process of its development and implementation.
8. ECA should provide the seed money for the immediate take-off of the project.

9. Lessons learnt from past successful and unsuccessful information networking projects on the continent should be taken into consideration in the development of AVLIN.
10. During the first phase of AVLIN, efforts should be made to identify and coordinate related activities being under-taken on the continent to avoid duplication of efforts and resources.
11. Information and knowledge end users should be involved in the AVLIN project right from the beginning.
12. The challenges presented by intellectual property rights should be addressed. AVLIN member institutions should be made aware of the importance of copyright management in the digital information environment.
13. 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 institutional budgets for their AVLIN related activities.
14. Charging of subscription fees for some of AVLIN services could be built into the project.
15. 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.
16. 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.

**The conclusions are that UNECA should:**

1. Continue its activities in the field of information for development.
2. Initiate knowledge management activities to enhance the benefits of ICT, especially connectivity and access to information.
3. Initiate knowledge management activities to leverage the assets of the institution and serve as a training ground for African institutions.
4. Ensure that the information and knowledge management activities are well articulated to better support economic and social development.
5. Commence with capacity building in the field of knowledge management through appropriate awareness raising, training, policy analysis and advocacy, and development of institutional projects.
6. Implement the AVLIN project as an infrastructure for enhancing access to development information and knowledge resources available on the continent and elsewhere.