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**Common Position for Africa's Digital Inclusion: Recommendations of the
Meeting on Africa's Contribution to the the G8 DOT Force and
The UN ECOSOC Panel on Digital Divide
10-12 May 2001
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia**

COMMON POSITION FOR AFRICA'S DIGITAL INCLUSION

The African Information Society Initiative (AISI) is a mission statement for Africa's quest to bridge the digital divide between Africa and the rest of the world, and to speed the continent's entry into the information age. AISI is regarded as a guiding framework on which to base information and communication activities in Africa. AISI was adopted by the twenty-second meeting of ECA Conference of Ministers in May 1996 and OAU Council of Ministers meeting in its Sixty-Fourth Ordinary Session held in Yaounde, Cameroon, from 1 to 5 July 1996. Furthermore, the AISI was endorsed by and the African Regional Telecommunication Development Conference, organised by the ITU and held in Abidjan in May 1996.

Even though Africa had put in place its vision through AISI since 1996, there is still lack of adequate support to speed up the process of Africa's digital inclusion. Africa needs all forms of support in implementing the action framework as envisioned in AISI. Existing and new initiatives such as the G8 DOT Force and UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) Information and Communication Technologies Taskforce should consider the implementation of AISI in the context of a knowledge-based global economy.

As a response to the globalisation process and the challenges of the Information Age, and in order to evaluate the progress made in the implementation of the AISI initiatives, the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) conducted the first edition of the African Development Forum (ADF '99) under the theme: "the Challenge to Africa of Globalisation and the Information Age", held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia from 24 -28 October 1999. Since the launching AISI, a series of project ideas have emerged for implementation by African countries in co-operation with international development partners and the private sector, such as the African Connection project, the UNDP African Internet Initiative and the Continental Integrated Information Network, and UNESCO's Regional Informatics Network for Africa, and IDRC's Acacia programme.

The meeting on Africa's contribution to the DOT Force, which was held on 10-12 May 2001 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, made the following recommendations, which reflect Africa's position to global fora on ICTs including the G8 DOT Force, ECOSOC, United Nations Task Force, World Economic Forum, etc.

A. Information and Communication Technology Policies, Strategies and Regulation

In order to create the much needed enabling environment for the development of the African Information Society, there is the need for each African country to develop its own National Information and Communication Infrastructure (NICI) plans and strategies, while co-ordinating its efforts with other African countries. Countries that have done so need to be encouraged to implement concrete programmes.

Utmost support is required for African countries in their efforts to establish plans for the development of national information infrastructure. It is stressed that Africa's Information Society must be seen as integral with the Global Information Society. Specific recommendations include:

- Organising national and sub-regional workshops to bring together all the stakeholders (government, development agencies, regional and international organisations, the private sector, NGOs, etc) and facilitate dialog and debates on issues related to the African Information Society;
- Establishing ICT bodies at the very high level of political leadership;

- Setting up liberalisation and privatisation strategies;
- Providing expertise and training to national regulators;
- Creating a network of African regulators;
- Developing a set of indicators to evaluate the progress of the regulatory institutions in meeting national priorities;
- Conducting advisory missions in countries which are ready to embark on development of National Information and Communication Infrastructure (NICI) policies and strategies;
- Promoting private sector leadership in implementing national projects and partnerships;
- Strengthening the operations of African networking groups such as AFNOG (African Network Operator Group), AfriNic (African Network Information Centre), etc.; and
- Establishing sub-regional ICT centres of excellence.

B. Improving Connectivity and Access to Information in Africa

It is necessary to upgrade and develop telecommunication infrastructure and information networks at the national level as well as to improve regional inter-connectivity and to provide gateways to international telecommunications and information networks. Equitable access must be ensured to all sectors of the society -rural or urban, poor or rich, educated or illiterate, etc. The role of the private sector in harnessing connectivity should be emphasised.

The telecommunication sector in Africa, which is characterised by low bandwidth, state monopoly and hence high subscription rates for connectivity, can be improved by bringing in the local and international private sector to team up with government and all the stakeholders in promoting cost-sharing mechanisms. In this regard, establishment of a strong independent regulatory body in each country is required. Capacity building in regulatory issues is much needed from international partners. Specific recommendations include:

- Supporting connectivity projects (e.g., community information centres) to facilitate access to Internet (urban and rural);
- Supporting Research and Development activities for developing low cost access in African countries;
- Facilitating communications within government and between government and the citizens, to improve government efficiency and transparency;
- Supporting the development of sub-regional and regional telecommunication backbones and information networks;
- Supporting projects to assess and monitor the development of Africa's Information Society (e.g., e-readiness projects, Scan-ICT project, etc.);
- Empowering production and dissemination of local content, with special emphasis on indigenous knowledge; and
- Supporting Internet access for community radios to improve reach out (including Internet training for journalists).

C. Building Human and Institutional Capacity

Learning and teaching systems need to be put in place to allow aggressive responses to the challenges of globalisation, including trade and commerce. A pragmatic, practical, innovative youth and education programme is needed. The use of ICTs promises the potential to dramatically cut costs and improve the quality of both formal and informal training and education. Education and training should be considered as a vital priority to promote equal opportunity for people in all countries to participate in and benefit from Africa's Information Society. Integration of ICTs in the curriculum and teacher education and training have to be strengthened as teachers are multipliers for knowledge in the use of ICTs.

There is a strong need to strengthen E-education initiatives in Africa, which includes the proposed African Learning Network. Attracting the African Diaspora to transfer knowledge to young Africans must be encouraged. Furthermore, the Diaspora must be given the chance to establish value added information services that promise jobs and economic growth. Recommendations include:

- Strengthening distance learning initiatives in Africa by:
- Establishing and maintaining interactive and distance learning systems between educational establishments at the local, national, regional and global levels;
- Supporting school networks (e.g. SchoolNet), university networks (e.g., VarsityNet) and networks of research institutes (e.g., African Knowledge Network Forum -AKNF); and
- Supporting networks for marginalised people (e.g., Out of School Youth Network-OosyNet).
- Developing capacities for participation in WTO negotiations and other fora;
- Establishing mechanisms/tools (networks, databases, etc.) to harness the contribution of African Diaspora in education; and
- Building local capacities and creating ICT jobs at the local level in order to retain skills and empower local communities.

D. Implementing Sectoral Information Society Initiatives in Africa

Opportunities for business and trade

With access to the global information infrastructure Africa can be a full partner in the global economy. Africa could become highly competitive in e-business, especially in services, creating thousands of new enterprises and millions of jobs in Africa. Therefore, initiatives that will promote e-business in Africa have to be supported and encouraged. Recommendations include:

- Establishing, co-ordinating and monitoring frameworks for e-business in Africa (regulatory and legal frameworks, cyberlaws, etc.);
- Supporting the establishment of training institutions focused on producing the management and workforce required for building the knowledge economy and undertaking e-business activities;
- Supporting projects aimed at encouraging the organisation and promotion of Small and Medium Size Enterprises (SMEs) in Africa with e-business orientation;
- Encouraging e-business applications at local level, e.g., by setting up telecentres and community information centres;
- Creating the enabling environment for e-business including financial, banking, insurance and logistics systems;
- Strongly encouraging government as an early adopter and model user of e-business (e-government). Government should sub-contract the local private sector.

Opportunities for Health Care

Information and communication technologies can play a substantial role in mitigating some of Africa's problems in the health sector. It can do this by improving access to health services in rural areas, underpinning public education campaigns to promote healthy behaviour, transferring diagnostic information to specialised centres, strengthening the basis for decision making, promoting information exchange among researchers and students, and enhancing the effectiveness of health institutions. Specific recommendations include:

- Establishing a network of health professionals;
- Developing multimedia health information systems, databases and websites;
- Using ICTs to facilitate delivery of health care services;
- Creating and strengthening telemedicine projects to leverage local resources;
- Instituting specialised training for health professionals especially in continuing medical education;
- Specially emphasising the use of ICTs in the fight against HIV/AIDS in Africa; and
- Supporting the establishment of African centres of medical excellence and promoting co-operation and exchange of expertise.

Conclusion: Forging Partnership and Commitment

There is a need to strengthen national capacities to address information policy issues and initiatives in the areas of policy and strategy, connectivity, capacity building, and sectoral opportunities especially in business and trade and the health sector. All concerned stakeholders have to commit themselves to specific actions and support all efforts associated with the development of the African Information Society. Particularly, the development community and the private sector should support the implementation of specific programmes at country and regional levels in order to ensure Africa's digital inclusion. The UN country teams are requested to reflect a strong role of ICT for development as part of the UNDAF (Development Assessment Framework) process.

Participants of the meeting, as ATAC members and African representatives to the DOT Force, call upon regional, international, bilateral and non governmental organisations including the G8 member countries, United Nations Secretariat, UNDP, UNESCO, ITU, WHO, the World Economic Forum, the World Bank, the European Union, the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), and Agence de la Francophonie, to support the implementation of the recommendations set out herein and consider this communiqué as a Common Position on Africa's digital inclusion.