

ECOWAS-UEMOA-WATRA-ITU WORKSHOP
ON REGULATORY REFORM IN WESTERN AFRICA

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NEW TECHNOLOGIES SECTOR IN THE EUROPEAN DEVELOPMENT FUND
EUROPEAN COMMISSION BRUSSELS**

On 24 May 2005, the Council of the European Union took an ambitious decision on more development aid and better and faster delivery of assistance. With this decision, the European Union is once more in the political lead for development policy.

The EU is today the largest provider of Official Development Aid (ODA) with over half of aid worldwide. But the EU will do even more: we will unlock additional funds, we will deliver aid more efficiently, we will address policy contradictions and exploit synergies, and we will deliver in time.

Our aim is to honour the Millennium Declaration adopted by all Members of the United Nations in 2000 and strive towards the achievement by 2015 of the Millennium Development Goals. This is why the EU will make an additional 20 billion Euro annually available for development from 2010.

The EU suggests making Africa a special focus of our policy: Sub-Saharan Africa is lagging behind in such a way that without decisive policy action, locally and internationally, the Millennium Development Goals cannot be reached anytime near 2015. The EU clearly recognises the role that transport, water and sanitation, energy and ICT can play in helping Africa fulfil its impressive NEPAD Infrastructure Plan.

The EU is responding to these challenges by moving ahead with an ambitious Europe-Africa Partnership on Infrastructure that will cater among others for Trans-African Networks for Telecommunications.

But the provision of broadband networks is only part of the picture. A balance needs to be struck between the offer and the demand, respectively, the available networks and the requested bandwidth. There is no wisdom in making available broadband networks throughout the African continent if there is hardly any usage of it.

Therefore, Information Society applications, such as e-government, telemedicine, distance learning will form an increasing share of our development policy. Indeed, the European Commission is conscious about the fact that the existing economic and social divide between the North-South will even get wider if developing countries are not helped to take advantage of ICTs in tackling economic and social problems and if they are denied access to markets that are becoming increasingly ICT dependent as part of globalisation.

Nevertheless the approach should not be “art for art’s sake”: ICTs can only become an effective tool for development and poverty reduction if they are an integral part of a

broader, more comprehensive national development strategy. ICTs should not be an objective on their own. ICTs remain a tool in support of the other development priorities and ought to be mainstreamed in the traditional development sectors.

Nevertheless, ICTs have also a great potential as a generator of wealth, as has been proven by the Indian software paradigm of Bangalore, Hyderabad and many others.

The EC is committed, together with our partner countries, to enhance the role that ICTs can play to further facilitate the integration of developing countries into the world economy and to reduce poverty by stimulating economic activity. ICTs are a critical component in this globalisation because they abolish frontiers and reduce distances to milliseconds.

In order for the developing countries, and more specifically for the African continent to integrate into the world economy, a number of urgent actions are necessary for the ICT sector:

1. Establishment of a legal and regulatory framework that facilitates private entrepreneurs' market entry;
2. Capacity building in order to overcome the lack of ICT knowledge;
3. Establishment of Pan-African broadband networks.

The ACP countries can count on the European Development Fund to accomplish these critical activities. However, we also have to respect the principle of country ownership which implies that the governments of the nation ultimately decide where the EU development aid ends up.

This workshop will play a key role in implementing the necessary regulatory reform in Western Africa conducive to the ICT sector at large. It will contribute to taking forward the World Summit for Information Society's Plan of Action. By bringing together key persons from the government, from the legislators and from international organisations, this workshop provides a unique opportunity towards closing the "digital divide" between the rich and poor countries.

The 1979 Nobel prize winner in economics, Sir William Arthur Lewis, once said: "***The fundamental cure for poverty is not money but knowledge!***" If there is one thing in life that ICTs contribute to than it is creation and dissemination of knowledge.

I would like to wish you great success with the proceedings of this workshop and I will actively follow its outcome and any follow-up action being given.

Harry De Backer