ECOWAS/UEMOA moves forward towards ICT market harmonization

The ICT environment is changing rapidly and keeping the policy and regulatory frameworks in line with the constant evolution of technologies, applications and services is a challenge for governments and regulators around the World. The harmonized ICT regulatory decisions recently adopted by the 6th Meeting of the ECOWAS Ministers in charge of Telecommunications and ICT, held in Abuja Nigeria on 11th May 2006, were developed within the spirit of addressing this challenge and providing for an ICT enabling environment for the Region.

The Ministerial meeting, which was preceded by a three day preparatory meeting of national experts, marked the entrance of this regional project into the adoption and implementation phase and is expected to culminate in the adoption of the texts by ECOWAS Council of Ministers and the Authority of Heads of States and Government in June 2006. ECOWAS Member States will then embark on the challenging transposition path that will led to the translation of these decisions into their national legal frameworks by end of 2007, and the creation of a common ICT market in the region.

The project was launched in June 2004 by the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) in cooperation with the European Union, to support the establishment of an integrated ICT Market in West Africa. Stakeholders, including government representatives, regulators, operators and consumers from across the Region participated in the process from the start, and provided their input so as to make the texts appropriate and relevant to their respective interests and countries.

The content body of these decisions was derived from the best practice guidelines adopted in Accra, Ghana, at the 3rd Ordinary General Assembly of the West Africa Telecommunications Regulators Assembly (WATRA) in September 2005. In turn, these best practice guidelines are the results of work of a team of regional and international experts which was carried out, presented, reviewed and agreed to at a series of workshops involving stakeholders from across the Region and which were held throughout 2004 and 2005 on the various related regulatory topics (interconnection, licensing, spectrum management, numbering, universal access/service, model ICT policy and law).

These decisions mark a major milestone in furthering cooperation between the countries and in promoting the establishment of regional harmonized ICT regulatory frameworks and related integrated markets on the African continent and worldwide. These landmark decisions will certainly spur the development of ICTs in Africa. ITU's World Telecommunications Development Conference, held in Doha in March this year, saw the adoption of a Regional initiative for Africa that provides for the strengthening and harmonizing of policy and regulatory frameworks for the integration of African ICT markets. This will require the adoption of harmonized ICT policies and regulatory frameworks.

The work that has been carried out over the last two years by telecommunication/ICT regulators and policy–makers from the ECOWAS and UEMOA countries will also be of utmost importance to their counterparts in Africa since the ECOWAS decisions will without doubt serve as a reference and will certainly serve as an example to many future

ICT regional harmonization initiatives worldwide. To date, only two similar harmonized regional/sub regional regulatory ICT frameworks exist worldwide that are of a binding nature for all of their member states: the UEMOA Directives and the European Union New Regulatory Framework. The ECOWAS decisions will join this group of prestigious texts.