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DEPUTY MINISTER OF ARTS AND CULTURE, DR JOE PHAAHLA

Speech on the occasion of the Official Opening of The second International Conference on African Digital Libraries and Archives (ICADLA-2)

University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg
17 November 2011

Programme Director
The Vice-Chancellor and Principal, Professor Loyiso Nongxa
Members of the Academic Fraternity
Distinguished Guests
Ladies and Gentlemen

I would like to thank you for inviting us to officially open this second International Conference on African Digital Libraries and Archives.

The world today is interconnected. Now more than ever before it is easier than it was before to access information and advance ideas through technology. We are in the 21st century.

In recognising this as the South African Government in the 1996 White Paper on Science and Technology, we agreed that all South Africans should enjoy an improved and sustainable life, participate in the a competitive economy by means of satisfying employment and share in a democratic culture.

In order to achieve this vision, we identified three goals which are pertinent to the creative use and efficient management of innovation;

- The establishment of an efficient, well co-ordinated and integrated system of technological and social innovations which stakeholders can forge collaborative partners and interact creatively in order to benefit themselves and the nation at large;
- The development of a culture within which the advancement of knowledge is valued as an important component of national development;
- And improved support for all kinds of innovation which is fundamental to sustainable economic growth, employment creation, equity through redress and social development.

It is against this background that we welcome the need to convene under the theme "Developing Knowledge for Economic Advancement in Africa".

Since the adoption of the White Paper on Science and Technology we have made significant strides in building our research capacity.

The need to develop knowledge and ensure that it contributes to the advancement of the economy largely depends on what we do as Governments on the continent.

I am pleased to announce that as the South African Government working with institutions of higher learning, our nation is beginning to appreciate new technological advancements and more importantly embracing knowledge as strategic resource.

Through the Southern African Development Community we have also made a contribution to the advancement and development of knowledge through NEPAD and other organs of the African Union.

This Conference must assess whether we have succeeded in establishing an efficient well co-ordinated and integrated system of technology and social innovation on the continent and have we improved support for all kinds of innovation which is fundamental to sustainable economic growth, employment creation, equity through redress and social development.

This links to some of our Government's strategic outcomes. Our objective as the Department of Arts and Culture is to use arts, culture and heritage to drive the New Growth Path because of its accessibility to all sectors.

For many years before the democratization of our country, arts, culture and heritage were symbols of power for the minority yet on the other hand it signified backwardness for the majority of the population.

After 1994, South African arts, culture and heritage became a significant economic source which remained inaccessible for the majority who are supposed to be the natural beneficiaries of this resource. Efforts to open up this sector to the previously disadvantaged were met with much criticism to divert attention from the real benefits. As the Department of Arts and Culture we have embarked on a major awareness campaign to highlight these potential benefits to all our people, to ensure equitable access for educational, economic and social development as a way of contributing to social cohesion and nation building.

With this in mind, we acknowledge the role archives and libraries play in bringing about social cohesion and economic empowerment. Technological advancement brings about new benefits and challenges for a young nation such as ours. On one hand we have not yet matured enough to embrace all the new technologies, yet at the same time we are in a very fortunate position to extract the best from the tried and tested systems. This balance is critical for us as we move steadily forward to be part of the global platform where our economy plays a very important role. It is without doubt that South African innovation has claimed its place in the world of technological advancement, and this places us amongst the leading nations on this continent and beyond. The fact that we are the second country on the continent to host this important conference shows the confidence the continent has in our abilities and initiatives.

As we debate the African Digital Libraries and Archives, we should keep in mind the various challenges facing us as a continent. When talking about digitization one must

always think of access to information for all our people; especially the previously disadvantaged members of our communities. While it has been accepted that computerisation improves access to information, this assumption is based on the other assumption that everyone has access to a computer; this is definitely not so on our continent. Our National Archives and National Library Acts aim to give equitable access to library and archival material and we expect that all new innovations will take this legislative requirement into account. There are some technical challenges that may affect full compliance with this legislation one of which is the issue of capacity, and that of geographic location of these institutions. To respond to these challenges the Department of Arts and Culture has been building community libraries across the country with the aim of making access to information easier.

We are busy (as the Department of Arts and Culture) finalising the National Policy on Digitization of Heritage. This policy emanated from the initiatives in the digitization field which gave rise to many challenges such as ownership, sponsorship, heritage security, access, cooperation, and many more areas which are clearly covered in the policy. This policy was long overdue to guide our heritage practitioners and custodians to embrace this new technology within acceptable parameters. Heritage contributes to our country's GDP and we need to be able to measure this contribution against all the other economic contributors.

Through usage of ITC we can be able to measure access, usage and value of our heritage. The arts, culture and heritage of our nation is as colourful as our flag and the digital libraries and archives will allow us to share our colours with the world. We still have vast untapped heritage resources which we need to show off to the world. Some of our collections have already been inscribed in the UNESCO Memory of the World Register and we are working on having more registered. While we need to show the world our colourful heritage, we should not lose sight of the need to preserve it. While digitization is stronger as an access strategy, it also plays an important role in preservation. Our objective is to preserve our collective memory for future generations and with that in mind we are making efforts to improve preservation management of our heritage.

Once the National Policy is in place, each heritage custodian institution will be required to develop institutional digitization strategies which will be the implementation tool in compliance with the policy. It is my wish that such strategies will address the needs which influenced the development of the national policy in the first place. I also trust that new knowledge will be developed in this area, so that future generations will learn from our efforts. Since the arrival of digitization, our heritage institutions have been too careful to embrace this new innovation and those who have done so have been faced with ownership challenges which emanated from the grant conditions. We do not wish to restrict partnership with international donors, but we urge that any agreements affecting our nation's heritage must be done in line with the requirements of the national policy. So that we all work together to protect, preserves, promote and safeguard our heritage for our people, now and in the future. This is very important!

For centuries Africa has been fed with knowledge which has been created from western principles and culture. While it should be acknowledged that this western culture and education has shaped who we are today, there is a void in our critically curious minds as to whether this western knowledge held us back or propelled us forward. I am throwing this to you the think tanks, the knowledge creators, the educators and the learners, for you to help us understand ourselves in the context of global participation. Best recorded civilisations are supposed to have come from our continent, how is it then that we seem to have lost our civilisation and have to become consumers of foreign knowledge systems and civilisation? How good have these been to us and our continent? If we talk about early inventions or religion we find that Africa was at the forefront of all this; the same if we talk about innovation and engineering. The Timbuktu manuscripts in Mali, the Cradle of Human Kind in South Africa are a testimony of all this.

I think it is about time we take our place in the future as an equal or dominant power in the innovative world. The economic benefit in digitization has to be shared with those owning the technology, yet the benefits emanate from our cultural and heritage resources. Africa has vast opportunities for economic growth, and yet the benefits are only enjoyed by others while our own people, particularly the youth will remain consumers of products rather than inventors. We have to support initiatives to develop young minds in science, technology and engineering.

It is encouraging to learn of such initiatives as the African Digital Libraries and Archives as it is a giant stride towards bridging the information divide. We need to share information and knowledge for us to move as one continent. Our South African Bill of Rights commits us to respect and give effect to basic human rights. It is our objective to ensure these rights are neither eroded nor misused. The rights of one must not compromise the rights of the other. Safeguarding these human rights is the responsibility of each and every African Citizen. As Africans we need to re-embrace our traditional values and indigenous knowledge systems. Unfortunately many of these have been lost through colonialism and whatever is left is contaminated or distorted. As an educated generation I call upon you all to work towards recovering and recording these lost knowledge systems. We need to tap into our initiative that our Government is putting forward to improve the lives of each and every South African, and in so doing contributing to the enhancement of social cohesion and nation building.

Through digitization, we are able to capture, share, compare and debate our collective findings so that we can come up with agreed content. We cannot leave this for others to do it for us. Two such important initiatives recently took place in the North West Province where the 8th Annual Oral History Conference took place and was hosted by my Department; and the IKS Conference hosted by the Department of Science and Technology. Both conferences took place between 11 and 14 October 2011. We have to make sure that the recommendations emanating from both conferences feed into the agenda of this Government, which is about reducing poverty levels; creating

jobs/employment opportunities, and generally creating a "caring and prosperous nation".

I urge educators and the information sector to ensure IKS is incorporated in the education systems. Let us learn from the ancient scribes of Timbuktu and many other African scholars of the past. We coordinated our efforts as Government and civil society to assist the Malian Government with the work to preserve these manuscripts which form part of our African documentary heritage. Our desire to dispel the stereotypical depiction of Africa as a continent of song and dance urged us to contribute toward this important project. This project should serve as an example of how Africa can work together to achieve what used to be unachievable in the past. Let us safeguard our heritage as it is this heritage that gives us our proud and common identity. We cannot fail our future generations by continuing to perpetuate western influence at the expense of our own arts, culture and heritage.

This generation has a huge responsibility to our future generations. Our history, our stories and our contribution to development have been misrepresented or distorted. This then creates the need to correct these distortions and misrepresentations. Our cultures have been contaminated to the point where some of our values are questionable. The relationships of our ancestors across the continent have been understated and nations have been led to believe that they are rivals. Our continent has been under attack for centuries to stop it from blossoming. What can we do to resolve conflicts? Is political intervention the only solution? What is the role of civil society? What is the role of academics, learners and educators? How will initiatives like digitization contribute to peace and development of our continent? Will this create employment opportunities and if so will this be sustainable? As politicians we need answers, we need to be guided by you, the learned archivists and librarians.

In conclusion allow me to assure you that my Department and other Government departments are in support of innovative thinking. We will work with you in pushing our African agenda forward to eradicate poverty on our continent. Our hearts cry for people in Somalia, Libya and Ethiopia, for the suffering they are going through. These are our people; these are our brothers and sisters. For many, poverty has been used to divide our people. The IT platform knows no boarders and we need to utilize it to bring our people together. We need to use it to share information and knowledge. It is said that little knowledge is very dangerous; therefore we must increase efforts to educate our children about our continent. Is our curriculum empowering our children or is it developing them to continue where we left; being servants of others? How much of the work of the African Digital Libraries and Archives filter to the education system? Does a child in Angola know about life in Morocco? Does a child from Francophone Africa compare to a child in Anglophone Africa in terms of academic development. Your work here colleagues will go a long way in responding to these hard questions. Talk without action is useless. I therefore urge you to talk but go a step forward and act upon your decisions. You need to be decisive, proactive and persistent to ensure as success of this noble initiative, for the present and future. I look forward to receiving a report of this conference. I thank you!