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UNITED NATIONS
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Statement at the opening of the First International Conference on African Digital Libraries and Archives (ICADLA-1) Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 1st-3rd July 2009

by

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Mrs Buhle Mbambo-Thata, Chairperson of the Africa Section of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), and Executive Director of Library Service, University of South Africa; Excellencies; representatives of partner organisations;
distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen:

It is my singular pleasure to be with you all this morning and to welcome you to the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) and UN Conference Centre.

I would like, from the outset, to express the ECA's honour for the opportunity to host the First International Conference on African Digital Libraries and Archives (ICADLA-1). For us at the ECA, it is a gratifying recognition of the leadership role that we have played in issues related to access to knowledge for development.

ECA is a knowledge-based organization, working with key partners such as the African Union (AU), African Development Bank (AfDB), international organizations, regional economic communities (RECs), partner agencies, civil society organizations, think tanks, academic and research-based institutions to develop Africa's capacities and knowledge for the continent development goals and agenda. This Conference is therefore timely and significant and we value our collaboration with IFLA.

In its knowledge management work with institutions in the region, ECA has always recognized the value of local/indigenous knowledge as a necessary complement to information from outside sources. Both are essential elements of the development equation. The absence of local/ indigenous knowledge in the design and implementation of development projects has been the source of many failures. Its inclusion will lead to significant improvements and successes.

Dear participants, you are here out of common belief in the power of knowledge to fundamentally change lives and economies. We all see the tremendous possibilities that the information revolution brings for countries and individuals to realize their potential. At the same time we share great concerns about growing knowledge gaps and the digital divide, which can leave poor people and poor countries more marginalized in the new global community. The guiding principle is therefore that through building knowledge societies, individuals, communities and nations can reach their full potential.

We also believe that the most successful route to building knowledge societies is through building strong knowledge institutions and widespread awareness of new technical and cultural possibilities for sharing of information and resources, to multiply the effects of individual actions and intentions. In this regard, promoting knowledge for development is a vast undertaking, requiring multi-stakeholder processes and partnership and a coordinated approach.

The pursuit of knowledge-oriented development should be based on three cardinal principles:

- Access to knowledge is more than access to physical infrastructure;
- Libraries and archives are the vehicles of access to knowledge; and
- Empowerment of people comes through access to knowledge.

These three principles are interconnected on many levels. Access to information and knowledge empowers people and communities to take charge of their lives and to play a strong role in the future of their country.

Ladies and gentlemen, let me now elaborate a little about libraries and archives and their role in contributing to the economic and social development of Africa. Since their establishment, libraries and archives have been known as the custodians of knowledge, holding and disseminating information for essential purposes. However, in times of conflict we destroy these libraries and archives, thus destroying knowledge, information and cultural history. With the advance of technology, first the printing press and later the computer and internet, have come great possibilities to disseminate information and knowledge to wider audiences across the world.

Even in the 21st century, however, the role of libraries and archives in economic and social development is marginalized, and in Africa these are still only accessible to a few.

Libraries and archives, through the ages, have worked to bring together knowledge and information, preserving what we have accomplished and providing the fertile soil for ideas. They provide the opportunity for personal education, for learning from others and so forming new ideas of how to do things better or more effectively within our particular context.

The digital age also has brought with it new frontiers and possibilities for libraries and archives with regard to the sharing, preserving and providing access to information and knowledge. Although many countries and continents have moved with these new developments, Africa is still lagging behind, not just in its general development but also in its acquisition and use of technologies to preserve and provide access to its own African content for its people.

We therefore need enabling policies and strategies to move forward as one continent to preserve our content for our people. We need to form partnerships in and outside Africa to ensure access to our information and knowledge for our people, while ensuring also that knowledge and information is part of Africa's development strategies to enhance economic and social development.

It is my hope therefore, that all the organizations at this meeting will consolidate established partnerships and identify new ones in support of clearly defined initiatives among government, the private sector and other segments of civil society. I hope further that these initiatives will provide the experiences and lessons that we can share with all the stakeholders in this process

so that all (governments, private sector, civil society, partners) will make the necessary investments to build viable knowledge societies.

Conference participants, ladies and gentlemen, his First International Conference on African Digital Libraries and Archives will focus on what we have accomplished, what must still be done and what challenges must be addressed to ensure that knowledge is developed and that it is preserved and accessible for this generation and for posterity. Let us then combine our efforts, pool our resources, share knowledge and information and exchange experiences so that all regions of the world, especially Africa, may have equal access to the wealth of existing knowledge and information in order to benefit equally from globalization and improve the socio-economic conditions of its people.

In conclusion, I wish to sincerely thank all the partners, including IFLA and Carnegie Corporation of New York for their generous contributions, support and collaboration with the ECA in organizing this historic conference. I also want to thank all the participants for your positive response, and to assure you that the outcomes of your deliberations will be given due consideration in ECA's knowledge management agenda.

I wish the Conference every success and thank you for the attention