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Opening Remarks at the XML Training Workshop by

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

While many in Africa still remain untouched by the information revolution, its transformative effect on our global society cannot be denied. Information and communication technologies offer tremendous potential to raise standards of living and enlarge opportunities for individuals, communities, countries, and regions.

It is now also apparent that the promotion of ICTs should not be treated as a substitute for efforts to ensure the development and modernization of basic sectors; ICTs are not a magic wand to address the many problems facing Africa. Rather, it should be used to complement and enhance those efforts. Consensus also exists on the potential of ICTs to empower, benefit, and link people the world over, and to enable "global citizens" to express themselves and to know and respect one another and to enhance democracy and participation and oversight of citizens. ICTs equally have the potentiality to help increase dialogue among State institutions and the society at large.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The impact that ICTs can have on good governance is not easy to quantify but these new technologies clearly have been helping many countries to respond to international calls for standards of accountability, transparency, and participatory governance as critical elements of democracy and State legitimacy.

Good governance is a priority goal for the development of the African continent. Among the institutions central to promoting and consolidating good governance, Parliaments are especially well placed to take advantage of ICTs to foster

democracy and narrow the democratic deficit, to help shape the Information Society and to improve their own particular role within it.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let's consider the following four broad and non-exhaustive examples:

First, the capacity of a given Parliament in the area of oversight, law-drafting, and general parliamentary procedure depends on efficient administration and the institutional ability to gather, record, manage, and deliver information and knowledge to its Members and staff in a timely manner. This may be improved by introducing parliamentary information systems designed to increase the quality and speed of information flows. That would in turn reinforce the effectiveness and efficiency of the work of the MPs and administrative staff in the research and legislative domain, including on ICT-related legislation.

Second, openness, transparency, and accountability, as well as people's participation in the democratic process, largely depend on the quality of information available to MPs and parliamentary administrations and on citizens' access to parliamentary proceedings. Both can be improved through web-based and other ICTs applications, which in turn could dramatically strengthen the policy-making process.

Third, people's participation means more than access to information. The 2003 World Public Sector Report of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs found that, worldwide, while public administrations are increasingly making use of e-Government as an information tool, there is vast under-utilized potential for e-Government as a tool for increasing citizens' participation. And Parliaments are perhaps best placed to tap that potential.

Fourth, full and effective participation in the emerging global information network is crucial for an Institution that wants to avoid marginalization from the process of globalization. Parliaments today are confronted with a new reality of integration and information and knowledge exchange, as well as with a new demand for inter-parliamentary cooperation. And that requires a change in the way Parliaments act internally and interact with the outside world, including through the use of ICTs.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Last year in February 2005, UNDESA and the Kenya National Assembly organised in Nairobi, Kenya, an International Conference, "Parliaments' Information Management in Africa: Challenges and Opportunities of ICTs to Strengthen Democracy and Parliamentary Governance". I did attend that

conference too and I was also involved in the preparation of the Nairobi Declaration that was eventually endorsed by the 24 national and regional African assemblies.

I am pleased to see that the commitment expressed in that Declaration to move towards common standards and information services has now begun to take shape and we are moving ahead with an operational plan.

The present workshop should provide us with a better understanding of requirements and activities that we will have to undertake to actually realise the ambition of being able to effectively share and retrieve legal and parliamentary documents. All this will, hopefully, also support the determination of the African parliaments to work together in the new scenario of collaboration that the establishment of Pan African Parliament has brought about.

In conclusion, ICTs can transform our societies, our governments, and other political systems, at a remarkable speed. Parliaments are seeing the importance of ensuring services which are delivered electronically. Parliaments need to understand the Internet/ICTs much better and the ICTs expertise needs to understand Parliaments.

This workshop with the presence of many parliaments and universities is a major step towards building a mutual comprehensive dialogue and in a synergic relationship among parliaments and between Parliaments and universities. I am personally pleased to acknowledge the participation at this workshop, apart from the 8 countries of the original project, also of a delegation from the Parliaments of Nigeria, of South Africa and of the Pan African Parliament.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I strongly believe that this is the way forward and I urge all the participants to join forces to create together information services and applications, because this is the only way that all Parliaments, small or big, rich or poor will have the opportunity to benefit of high quality products and services at a sustainable cost. All this can really change the way parliaments have been working and even more importantly they way parliaments dialogue with citizens and promote participation and accountability.

Thank you for your kind attention.