



**Welcoming address by Gherardo Casini
Executive Coordinator a.i. of the Global Centre for ICT in Parliament
at the International Workshop
Towards the Establishment of an African Parliamentary Knowledge Network
on ICT, legislation and documentation
20 March 2007
Abuja, Nigeria**

Excellencies,

Honourable Members of Parliament,

Distinguished participants,

It is a great honor to be here in Abuja to welcome you to the International Workshop “Towards the establishment of an African Parliamentary Knowledge Network for ICT, documentation and legislation”.

I wish to thank all of you for having traveled long distances to participate in this event, which in our view touches on a critical aspect of parliamentary development and, at the same time, represents a key input to the conference “African Legal Resources” to be held here in Abuja in the next two days.

On behalf of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, I wish to express my deepest appreciation to His Excellency Honorable Austin Opara, Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly and, through him, to the National Assembly of Nigeria, for hosting this event, and for being such a wonderful partner in its organization. We are extremely grateful for the generous hospitality extended to us on this important occasion.

Today’s workshop is organized as part of the implementation of the project “Strengthening the Capacity of Parliaments in Africa to harness Information and Communication Technologies (ICT)”. This initiative complements and integrates the Department’s current activities in this important area of work.

Over the past years, we have paid special attention to the use of new technologies as a means to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of parliamentary work, to improve parliaments' ability to discharge their constitutional responsibilities, and to increase inter-parliamentary cooperation.

Since late 2002, the Department, with the generous support of the Government of Italy, has been working towards the modernization of parliamentary practices in nine African Parliaments. This successful project has now evolved into a full continental challenge - the Africa i-Parliaments Action Plan -, a major initiative embraced by several African assemblies under the auspices of the Pan African Parliament.

The United Nations built on this African experience to establish the Global Centre for ICT in Parliament, an initiative launched in 2005 to promote a structured dialogue among parliaments both on the use of new technologies in parliamentary process and on the role that parliaments and legislators can play for the advancement of the Information Society.

The experience of Africa showed us in fact that inter-parliamentary cooperation can be strong and vital, and coordination can pay off. It indicated to us that a continental approach, genuine partnerships, and inter-parliamentary dialogue are possible and can avoid unnecessary duplication of efforts, generate economies of scale, and, at the same time, promote consensus and common understandings.

But we also learned that political will and political endorsement are necessary ingredients to sustain ambitious projects and changes.

Today, I hope that we will be able to place all this lessons into practice with a concrete objective in front of us, the establishment of a continental African Parliamentary Knowledge Network on ICT, documentation and legislation. This workshop has been designed with the explicit purpose to exchange ideas and find consensus around such a Network and, eventually, to agree on a common framework for its establishment.

We all know that information access and exchange are critical for enhancing the effectiveness of parliamentary assemblies. The application of new technologies benefiting from common approaches and the agreement on standards and guidelines for documentation and legislation can greatly improve the ability of parliaments to capture, manage, and share information internally within their institutions, but also to exchange experiences with other parliaments and the public at large.

Many parliamentary bodies already make extensive use of new technologies and innovative practices to carry out their most important tasks, especially in managing documents and supporting the legislative process. And several initiatives currently underway in Africa highlight the potential value of establishing cooperative networks for exchanging information among parliaments to support the creation and application of IT capacity, such as in the case of the SADC Parliamentary Forum.

Existing parliamentary knowledge networks in other regions of the world - the European Centre for Parliamentary Research and Development and the U.S. National Conference of State Legislatures - have demonstrated over time their effectiveness in serving the need of improving parliamentary processes, and where possible with the effective use of ICT.

At present, however, there are no permanent information exchange mechanisms in Africa that can promote a continuous dialogue and cooperation among all African parliamentary administrations in this area, and add value to their work at continental level.

Today, we shall work together to assess whether there is a need for such a network in Africa and how it could be best structured to respond to parliaments' needs; who should be part of it; how it should operate and around which functions; where to locate its secretariat and how to ensure its sustainability; and mostly, what political support should the Network receive to be established.

Distinguished Members of Parliaments,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

the United Nations stands ready to support the development of an improved cooperation among parliaments, legislators and officials in Africa and will continue to work with donor governments and multilateral organizations to ensure that parliamentary development ranks high on the development agenda.

My hope is that this meeting can provide a platform for frank discussions among African representatives and for an open and constructive dialogue with experts from around the world in order to achieve a concrete outcome to be pursued, through a collaborative effort, in the years ahead.

Thank you.