

**COMMON MARKET FOR EASTERN  
AND SOUTHERN AFRICA**



**STATEMENT BY**

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SECRETARY GENERAL**

**AT THE OPENING OF THE  
HIGH LEVEL ICT POLICY FORUM**

**Kigali, Rwanda  
1-3 September 2004**

Your Excellency Paul Kagame, President of the Republic of Rwanda  
Honourable Ministers,  
Your Excellencies Ambassadors Accredited to the Republic of Rwanda,  
Representative of Co-operating Partners and International Organizations,  
Distinguished Participants,  
Ladies and Gentlemen.

It is a pleasure and honour for me to join Honourable Nkusi in welcoming you all to this High Level Policy Forum, which seeks to enhance the implementation of the COMESA Information and Communication Technology (ICT) strategy and programmes. I salute our distinguished Guest of Honour, His Excellency Paul Kagame, President of the Republic of Rwanda.

We thank you and pay tribute to you Mr. President for your leadership and for your commitment to social, political and economic development of Rwanda, in particular, the COMESA region and Africa in general. It is refreshing to be in your great country, which, ten years ago, was engulfed in the worst form of genocide, but since then, Rwanda has made remarkable progress to become a beacon of hope, peace and economic development.

Rwanda, under your able leadership, has embraced the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) principles. In fact, Rwanda is the first African country to go through the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM). Indeed, your personal identification with the development of ICT in Rwanda makes Kigali the ideal venue for this meeting.

### **Honourable Ministers, Distinguished Delegates**

As the report of the South - South Commission which is chaired by President Benjamin Mkapa of the Republic of Tanzania concludes, globalisation has set in motion a process of far reaching change that is affecting everyone. At the centre of this change is new technology – mainly information and communications technology, supported by more open policies. Today, we have a world more interconnected than ever before, and things continue to change daily to integrate even more. This spans not only growing inter-dependence in economic relations that is trade and investment, finance and organisation of production globally, but also socio-political interaction among organisations and among individuals across the world.

The potential is good, and the growing interconnectivity among people in the world is producing a class of citizens who nurture the realisation that we are part of the global community. Wisely managed, it can produce great results. But sadly Africa and, for that matter, COMESA member States, are far from realising this potential let alone participating effectively.

The COMESA region is lagging behind in developing the ICT services when compared with other regions of the world. The tele-density for the region is around 3.24%, which is extremely low when compared with Europe, Asia and Americas, which have a teledensity of 41%, 13.64% and 34.12% respectively. In order to improve the ICT services geographically, we should have a target of increasing the

density to at least 10% by the year 2008. To obtain this target an investment in excess of US\$6 billion annually is required. I am aware this is a tall order given the fact that in 2002, telecommunications investment in Africa as a whole was only US\$1.22 billion. But it can be done if we choose to and that choice does not require capital outlay in terms of hard cash but a willingness to work together to change the status quo. We need to create a conducive environment in order to attract local, regional and foreign investment into the sector.

### **Honourable Ministers,**

Another equally important issue is the affordability of ICT services. Although globally prices for services and equipment have remained steady and even declined over the last few years ICT costs are still too high in relation to our citizens' income and when compared with other regions. The subscription for a telephone line as a percentage of GDP per capita is 11.6 % for Africa whereas it is literally free in the developed world. To create an information society we need to bring down the monthly fee for internet connection from the current levels of about US \$50. That too can be done by creating a huge market which can bring economies of scale and thus reduce the cost of services.

### **Mr. Chairman**

COMESA ICT programme has three main facets: infrastructure development; policy and regulatory reforms; and development of ICT services.

On the development of infrastructure and services COMESA is promoting the development of a regional telecommunications network through a Regional Telecommunications Company (COMTEL) which will upgrade and extend ICT links within the region. COMTEL is a public and private sector partnership, which will connect all member States using optical fibre and other terrestrial technologies. As indicated earlier one aspect in which we can reduce the cost of services is to expeditiously implement the COMTEL Project and also facilitate regional and cross-border roaming services. The current practice of buying and selling SIM Cards for each COMESA country is cumbersome and very expensive.

The Regional ICT Policy Regulatory Harmonization, which is funded by USAID, has seen the successful development and adoption of a Common ICT Policy and Model Bill as well as policy guidelines through the work of the Association of Regulators of Information and Communications in Eastern and Southern Africa (ARICEA) and these are already being implemented by member States.

As you may be aware, the Secretariat carried out an assessment of the progress being made in implementing the Common ICT Policy and Model Bill by member States and to determine problems being faced by member States if any in order to find ways to facilitate the process. The report of this assessment will also be discussed at this forum.

I am further pleased to report that COMESA has received additional financial support from other development partners. On 18<sup>th</sup> June 2004, I signed a 21 million Euro Financing Agreement under the EDF9 with the European Commission on behalf of

COMESA, EAC, IGAD and IOC for the implementation of the Regional Information and Communications Support Programme to compliment the activities we have started under the USAID funded programme.

The program's main areas of focus are: to support further policy development and regulatory reform, development of high speed internet connections, enhancement of Customs Administration data management, e-readiness and information development and capacity building and training of human resources in COMESA Countries.

In the third area of development of services, it is very important for member States to bridge the digital divide between urban and rural areas as well as across the countries. E-commerce, E-government and other e-applications is the way for the future and we need to act now in order to bridge the digital divide and to create an information society. This of course calls for an appropriate e-strategy. I am pleased to report that the Secretariat in conjunction with the ECA, have commissioned a study on a regional e-strategy. The report will be submitted for initial discussion at this forum.

Related to all these areas is the on-going WTO Doha Round of negotiations and the soon to commence Economic Partnership Agreement between the European Union and the countries of Eastern and Southern Africa. Given the strategic role that ICT plays in trade in services our participation and contribution to shape the global and regional landscape is not only necessary but of crucial importance. You will have an opportunity to exchange views on this.

**Honourable Ministers  
Distinguished Participants**

All this work would not have been possible without the support of our co-operating partners. In this regard I wish to express our sincere appreciation to the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) for their support to the COMESA ICT Policy and Regulatory Harmonization Programme since its inception in 1998. Our appreciation also goes to the EU for providing financial support under EDF9, which will ensure that there is implementation of the programme at country level. I would also like to thank the Economic Commission for Africa, Federal Communication Commission, Universal Postal Union, Commonwealth Telecommunications Organization, International Telecommunications Union and other partners for their support of COMESA ICT activities. We welcome the representatives of USAID and ECA to this forum.

**Honourable Ministers,  
Distinguished Delegates;**

The purpose of this forum is:

- To share experience on policy and regulatory reform;
- To enhance development of ICT infrastructure and services; and
- To identify areas requiring facilitation, co-ordination and harmonization.

With your continued support and increased commitment, I am sure that we will be rewarded with success in our pursuit of the ICT programme.

I would like to thank, once again, His Excellency the President and the people of Rwanda for the hospitality accorded to us since our arrival and for hosting this High Level Forum.

I thank you for your attention.