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Higher Education in the Twenty-first Century

Vision and Action

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Note1: To meet UNESCO publishing standards, some editing of papers has been required.

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**Speech of Professor Narciso Matos
Secretary-General of the Association of African Universities**

The Image of Africa and Africa's Renaissance

For too long Africa's image has been one of natural and man-made disasters. It was not until recently and particularly in the past few years that this image started to change for better.

The adoption of political pluralism and realization of democratic elections in more than two thirds of Africa countries, the new willingness of the continent to condemn and actively oppose undemocratic processes, represents a departure from post-independence policies and a fundamental turning point for the continent.

In the economic front, liberalization and move towards market economies, the revival of mechanisms of regional cooperation such as SADC, COMESA and ECOWAS, and overall the macro-economic policies being adopted, are starting to yield positive results.

In this new context the challenge for African universities is to revisit their missions, organizational frameworks and internal policies, and to take the necessary measures to remain pertinent, relevant and even become competitive in the world of higher education provision, which is also becoming globalized.

Revitalization of the University in Africa

Among the priority problems to be addressed are the expansion of access, financing of the system, improvement of quality and relevance, more efficient and accountable management of resources, access to scientific information, and strengthening of research.

Other challenges facing higher education institutions in the continent are the need to strengthen regional and institutional cooperation particularly at the level of graduate training and research, to enrol equitable numbers of female students and to create an environment conducive to their academic success, the internationalization of curricula and study programmes, the strengthening of relations with and support to other sectors of education.

Refocusing Attention on Higher Education in Africa

In spite of the crucial role of higher education, most agencies and African governments dis-engaged from the sector in the 1980's and early 90's on the argument that rates of social return in basic education are much higher than in higher education. Denied of funds, African higher education was brought to near collapse.

The importance of basic education is indisputable, as is the responsibility of higher education to directly contribute to other levels and sectors of education. But, when so much is said about the knowledge based society of today and tomorrow, more still needs to be said in favour of higher education in Africa.

Africa, with about 800 million inhabitants in 53 countries, has a total of no more than 300 universities and 2 to 300 other institutions of higher education.

Africa's gross enrollment ratio in tertiary education was about 4.6 million in 1991, compared to 6.9 in Asia, 17.6 in LAC, 29.5 in Europe and 73.6 in North America. In Sub Saharan Africa it was 2.5. Africa has also the world lowest enrolment ratio per 100,000 inhabitants.

The world's average number of skilled personnel per million population is about 23.4 thousand. In Africa it is 3.4 thousand per million.

Against this background in the past few years African governments and some agencies seem to have started to rethink their higher education policies.

The great challenge to universities in Africa is to bring about a profound transformation of higher education as is currently provided in the continent, and make the higher education community contribute meaningfully to social, cultural and economic development.

The strategies required to achieve these goals should be geared towards generating improvements along the main axes of social relevance, quality, improved institutional management, access to information, including the use of new information and communication technologies, and academic solidarity and international cooperation.

May this conference contribute to encourage the kind of changes needed in Africa, thus ensuring that the Black continent regains a dignified place that it deserves within the community of nations of the world.