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UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,
SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

Address by
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Scientific and Cultural Organization
(UNESCO)

on the occasion of his visit to Gambia College

Brikama, The Gambia, 5 March 2003

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very pleased to be making my first official visit to The Gambia and to be with you here today at Gambia College, one of your country's leading educational institutions. I would like to thank you all for the warm welcome I have received.

Gambia College is not only the main teacher training institution in the country but also plays a key role in developing Gambia's human resources in other fields, including public health, nursing and midwifery, and agriculture. In view of the crucial contribution it makes, Gambia College must constantly endeavour to improve its services and operate as efficiently and effectively as possible.

Like many similar institutions in Africa and elsewhere, Gambia College has taken a keen interest in the potential of open and distance learning to strengthen and diversify its programmes. This does not mean, of course, abandoning traditional approaches using printed materials and face-to-face contact, which continue to provide important benefits and advantages. But it does mean that, through new information and communication technologies (ICTs) and modalities of distance learning, exciting opportunities for lifelong education and training are opening up. As the Honourable Secretary of State for Education has stated on several occasions, the digital revolution presents Africa with the chance to leapfrog certain constraints on national development. In fact, the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) calls for the 'reform [of] education from the standpoint of better quality and better access to ICTs'.

Today, a new phase in the history of Gambia College is being inaugurated thanks to WorldSpace satellite technology. The Afristar satellites have a footprint over the whole continent, allowing someone in the remotest area to access radio programmes available through WorldSpace as well as to download digital data relating to education, health, agriculture and trade – key areas in the development of any country. Institutions like Gambia College will be able to enhance the quality of current course provision, offer a wider range of programmes of study and avoid unnecessary duplication of effort.

This does not mean, however, that those accessing the available data must act as passive consumers. On the contrary, they need to be active producers, generating local content that is relevant, culture-specific and uses local languages. This local "value-added" would enrich the provision of distance education in the region. Gambia College can take a lead in this area by becoming a vector or mediator between digital data accessed through satellite technology and the local context of application. If courseware is sensitively designed in this way, and adequate student support is provided, teaching/learning processes can be enhanced at all levels of education and training – for non-formal education, teacher training, academic studies and vocational education and training as well as continuing professional education.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As we forge ahead to meet the targets of the Dakar Framework for Action and the Millennium Development Goals, distance education is increasingly recognized as a viable strategy for reaching out and reaching all. In this perspective, it seems sensible for countries in sub-Saharan Africa to incorporate distance learning methodologies into existing contact institutions in order to make the transition to dual-mode educational provision.

In making this transition, these institutions need to be strengthened. It is in this context that I have great pleasure to inform you that, in response to our request, the Japanese Government is now ready to approve the project aimed at strengthening the capacity in Gambia College by training staff in instructional design and the use of ICTs for providing technology-enhanced programmes. For this purpose, about US\$ 100,000 will be made available from UNESCO/Japanese Funds-in-Trust. It is hoped that this important project will have a major impact on human resource development not only in the country but also in the sub-region. Partnerships with other countries in West Africa will lead to the sharing of expertise, resources and infrastructure. Collaboration in developing and offering programmes with other institutions will not only enhance the strengths of each but will also help to achieve economies of scale.

NEPAD envisages that Africa takes its destiny in its own hands. This is only possible if the continent has a skilled and professionally competent cadre of human resources. Africa's institutions of higher learning must be renewed and revitalised to meet the challenge of constructing knowledge societies. To effect such a transformation, it is essential to create the high-level human resources necessary for giving form and direction to national plans and policies. These intellectual leaders must also re-shape the vision of national and regional development. Such changes require a strong commitment to excellence, to academic freedom and to innovation. I believe that there are clear signs that The Gambia has recognized the nature of this challenge and that Gambia College will play an important role in meeting it. I wish you well in your endeavours.

Thank you.