Monsieur le Président de l’Union Africaine,
Messieurs les chefs d’État et de gouvernement,
Monsieur le Président de la Commission de l’Union Africaine, Mesdames et Messieurs les Ministres,
Excellences, Mesdames et Messieurs,

Permettez-moi tout d’abord de vous féliciter, Monsieur le Président, pour votre élection à la présidence de l’Union Africaine.

Je souhaite également remercier très vivement le Président de la Commission de l’Union Africaine d’avoir bien voulu m’inviter à prendre la parole devant cette honorable assemblée. C’est la troisième fois qu’il m’est fait l’honneur de m’exprimer à l’occasion d’un sommet de l’Union. Je mesure avec grande reconnaissance la place de choix que vous accordez à notre Organisation dans vos travaux. L’UNESCO, pour sa part, est particulièrement attachée au thème que vous avez retenu cette année : « La science, la technologie et l’innovation au service du développement de l’Afrique ».

Enfin, je souhaiterais, au nom de la délégation de l’UNESCO, exprimer mes plus vifs remerciements aux autorités éthiopiennes pour leur accueil chaleureux et leur généreuse hospitalité.

La rencontre d’aujourd’hui est l’aboutissement d’un processus de cinq ans qui visait à élaborer un plan d’action novateur en faveur des sciences et des technologies en Afrique. Ce plan, dont nous pouvons à présent discuter la mise en œuvre, établit un cadre ambitieux pour renforcer les capacités de recherche et de développement de...


Mr Chairperson,

Africa is a continent rich in biodiversity and in mineral resources. It is also a continent rich in knowledge and savoir-faire, passed down from generation to generation. But at the same time Africa suffers from extreme poverty; with roughly 13% of the world’s population, it enjoys only 1% of global wealth.

One of the factors preventing Africa from mobilizing its rich resources is the lack of a framework for building and sharing scientific and technological capacity. The Consolidated Plan of Action seeks to address this need. I would like to examine some of its key recommendations, and to tell you how UNESCO is lending its support. More detailed information about our contribution to these efforts may be found in the brochure, Science in Africa, which you will have received.

To begin, the Plan focuses on putting in place governance systems that will enable African countries to harness and share their resources to lead scientific
research. This requires not only improving policy conditions in African countries, but also strengthening the capacity of regional bodies to mainstream science and technology into their sectoral programmes and projects.

Today, UNESCO is working actively with many African countries to build good quality science policies, standards and monitoring arrangements. Integral to this is the preparation of reliable statistics, and we therefore warmly welcome the initiative to develop an African System of Science and Technology Indicators.

UNESCO is also assisting governments in developing policy environments conducive to scientific innovation. This entails fostering links between policy makers and research institutions, industry and the private sector. It also means building public awareness and understanding of science and technology. Informative democratic debate provides an important basis for informed political decision-making – especially with regard to the ethical implications of scientific progress. I shall return to this later.

As well as providing policy support to governments, UNESCO, along with other UN agencies, is cooperating with the African Union Commission and Regional Economic Communities to build a critical mass of science policy experts. We do this both through direct support to African institutions in developing policy courses, and through disseminating information and fostering exchange.

Effective regional governance lies at the core of the Plan's implementation. May I therefore take this opportunity to reaffirm UNESCO's readiness to cooperate closely with the African Ministerial Council on Science and Technology to ensure the provision of strategic guidance to all African countries on science policy issues.

It is clear that such political commitment to science and technology must be met with increased and sustained investment. I therefore strongly support the establishment of an African Fund to provide multi-year funding for the implementation of the Consolidated Plan of Action.

For such a fund to be sustainable, it requires solid support from African Member States. The target endorsed at the Khartoum Summit last year of devoting 1% of GDP to research and development (R&D) by 2010 marks an important step forward. However, we will need to work hard together to achieve this increase.
According to the recent UNESCO Science Report, the ratio of Gross Expenditure on Research and Development or GERD to GDP remains low in Africa – on average between 0.3 and 0.2 per cent. Moreover, these figures mask significant inequalities among countries. South Africa is responsible for 90% of GERD in sub-Saharan Africa. Egypt – and to a lesser extent Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria – carry out practically all the R&D that occurs in North Africa. Most countries will therefore need to make major new investments if the 1% target is to be met.

However, enhanced domestic funding must in turn be matched with increased international aid. The G8 has already put science and technology high on their development agenda for Africa and committed to the development of centres of excellences on the continent. We need to build on this, and urge donors to provide predictable and long-term funding. Such global solidarity will be essential to making the Plan work.

Mr Chairperson,

The Consolidated Plan of Action places particular emphasis on the need to reinforce the human and institutional capacity for scientific research in Africa. It anticipates the creation of a veritable continent-wide system of innovation, based upon centres of scientific excellence, supported by institutions of higher education, and linked to new science and technology parks.

UNESCO will be a key partner in this ambitious endeavour. Last year in Khartoum, the African Union decided to establish an AU/NEPAD/UNESCO High-level Group to prepare a comprehensive programme for creating and funding these regional centres of excellence. We are most eager to get this group up and running.

The large-scale expansion in scientific research envisaged in the Consolidated Plan of Action will require new and innovative approaches. It will notably depend on our ability to mobilize the potential of new information and communication technologies (ICTs). The latter can be instrumental in expanding the reach, quality and relevance of centres of scientific research and higher education. They can also prove critical to addressing shortages in teachers and learning materials.
The Avicenna virtual university is an excellent example of what can be achieved in this regard. In follow-up to the Khartoum Summit, UNESCO is working to see how this initiative may be expanded to cover all of Africa.

One particular value of ICTs is their ability to facilitate networking, partnership and exchange. In this connection, I wish to underline the importance of strengthening cooperation with the large number of highly trained African scientists in the Diaspora. Several countries in the region have already established programmes to draw on this resource. We need to learn from their experiences in order to strengthen this vital link across the continent.

However, one thing is certain. Empowering African countries to become major players in science and technology will require investment not only in higher education and research, but right across the education sector. A well-functioning and inclusive education system that provides good quality learning opportunities for all is a basic precondition for scientific progress. This is why – as I announced before this distinguished assembly last year in Khartoum – UNESCO will give its full support to African countries in their efforts to implement the Plan of Action for the Second Decade of Education in Africa. As you well know, our success here is fundamental to all development efforts.

Mr Chairperson,

Let me now turn to some of the specific research and development needs addressed in the Consolidated Plan of Action.

First and foremost is freshwater. You have identified this as a priority for development. It is also an area where UNESCO is providing recognized international leadership.

UNESCO’s freshwater programme is focused on capacity building, in particular through the UNESCO-IHE Institute for Water Education in Delft, the Netherlands, and soon through our new facility in Perugia, Italy. The primary aim is to establish a strong scientific, technical and human resource base that is equipped with the requisite knowledge to better manage this important resource.
We are already working in partnership with UNEP and the NEPAD secretariat to develop a network of centres of excellence in water science.

Together with the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), UNESCO has also directed a World Water Assessment Programme (WWAP) Report for Africa. This Report, which should be available soon, will help focus research on key regional challenges. I also hope that it will provide the basis for greater cooperation between UNESCO and ECA in this area.

Another important project that UNESCO has initiated regards the application of satellite remote sensing for the integrated management of ecosystems and water resources in Africa. The project consists of a network of universities and research institutions that use satellite technology to identify land and forest degradation, and changes in the coastal and marine environment. The network is centred on a number of UNESCO Chairs, which have recently been established in African universities to reinforce capacity in this important area.

In follow up to this Summit, UNESCO intends to host by next spring a high-level meeting of African experts on the “Critical Role of Satellite Remote Sensing and Geo-information for Sustainable Development in Africa”. The UNESCO Secretariat is already working with the office of the African Union Commissioner for Human Resources, Sciences and Technologies to plan this important meeting. Its aim is to assist the African Union in developing a pan-African vision for the application of satellite remote sensing for sustainable development.

I would also like to highlight the importance of the Global Ocean Observing System in Africa (GOOS-Africa), both for monitoring environmental change and for developing early warning systems for disaster mitigation, including tsunamis.

In November last year UNESCO supported, in full partnership with UNIDO, UNDP and FAO, the recent Pan-African Leadership Workshop held at the University of Cape Town on the progress of GOOS-Africa and large marine ecosystems. This high-level workshop captured the vision of leading African experts and defined the future of operational oceanography and remote sensing in Africa for the upcoming twenty years.
The progress of GOOS-Africa will be critical to UNESCO’s work in developing Tsunami early warning systems.

In coming months UNESCO will be expanding the Indian Ocean Tsunami Early Warning System to include East African States. The 4th meeting of the Intergovernmental Coordination Group will be held at the end of February in Mombassa, on the kind invitation of Kenya, to address progress in this regard.

Given UNESCO’s responsibility for ocean issues, I would like to take this opportunity to remind you of the 13 May 2009 deadline for the submission of claims for the extension of the Legal Continental Shelf, in accordance with the provisions of Article 76 of the UN Convention on the Law of the Seas (UNCLOS). The Continental Shelf is very rich in mineral and bioactive resources. Today, it provides around 25 per cent of global oil and gas production and accounts for about the same proportion of the world’s known reserves. An initial assessment for Africa indicates that the total potential area that may be claimed for the continent is some 4 times the size of France. It therefore represents a substantial source of wealth. UNESCO, together with NEPAD and UNEP, is already working with African countries to raise awareness and provide assistance in preparing the scientifically validated submissions required for claims. I must emphasize the importance and urgency of this task.

Mr Chairperson,

Beyond freshwater and oceans, let me refer to three additional areas for action.

The first is biotechnology. Modern biotechnology presents unprecedented opportunities for Africa. It can help countries address such critical problems as lack of food security and the prevalence of disease. It can also stimulate economic growth and industrial development. I am therefore deeply encouraged by the African Union’s decision to focus its first capacity building programme on this subject, and wish to pledge UNESCO’s full support. UNESCO has significant experience in this area, in particular in setting up centres of excellence and coordinating international networks. For instance, we have recently established an International Biotechnology Centre in India to promote international cooperation. We have in addition founded three Chairs in biotechnology in Africa, which will
serve as catalysts for research in key areas identified in the Consolidated Plan of Action.

A second and related area is **bioethics**. As the Biotechnology Strategy endorsed by African science Ministers at their meeting in Cairo last November underlined, biotechnology and biosafety must be pursued in parallel. We need to make sure that African countries can capture the multiple benefits of new scientific advances, while at the same time manage the potential challenges and risks they may pose.

The declaration of the 5th Ordinary Session of the World Commission on the Ethics of Scientific Knowledge and Technology (COMEST), which met in Dakar just one month ago, provides an important framework for moving forward in this area. ECOWAS Ministers pledged to place social and ethical concerns right at the heart of scientific policy and research.

UNESCO is fully committed to supporting them in this important endeavour. We have already launched several capacity-building initiatives. Let me highlight just two of the most important.

The first is our work in establishing national bioethics committees, which can help advise governments, develop policy and legislation, and review research proposals. Three pilot projects have already been set up in Malawi, Ghana and Madagascar.

The second regards our efforts to promote ethics teaching in Africa, both through the development of programmes, and through the identification of funds. A resource centre for Africa will be established in Egerton, Kenya, to support this initiative, in close cooperation with the UNESCO Chair in Bioethics of Egerton University.

Let me add that the next Ordinary Session of the International Bioethics Committee will also meet in Africa – in Nairobi – in May this year. This will provide another opportunity to focus on the particular ethical concerns of African countries.

The final area of action, and one of the Plan’s major themes, is strengthening Africa’s capacity to harness, apply and protect **indigenous knowledge and technologies**.
There is a need to raise public understanding of the invaluable contribution that local knowledge and technologies can make to biodiversity conservation and sustainable development. Links between formal R&D institutions and holders of indigenous knowledge must be supported. These are issues that UNESCO seeks to promote across all its science programmes.

It is in addition necessary to improve the continent’s capacity to protect these local resources from piracy and related misappropriation. I therefore welcome plans to establish a Pan-African Intellectual Property Organization.

Mr Chairman,

In conclusion, I would like to pay homage to the President of the African Union Commission, and to his commissioners, for their great work in organizing this Summit. I applaud your decision to place science and technology at the heart of the Union’s political agenda. As last year with education and culture, you have raised a question that is essential to sustainable development.

I totally share the new Secretary-General’s remarks of this morning that the United Nations system must continue to make Africa a priority. Certainly, I can assure you that UNESCO will continue to do so. We will be very happy to work with the new President of the African Union to strengthen the Organization’s action in Africa, in all our areas of competence.

Six years ago you, the leaders of Africa, expressed your concerns, identified your priorities, and defined the way forward. You invited the international community to accompany you through the New Partnership for Africa’s Development which, much more than a programme of the African Union, is a vision, a hope, a commitment.

This is a commitment that we, as partners, must honour and serve in a spirit of respect for African leadership. Our presence here beside you today is the sign of our engagement in the field of science and technology.

I wish you every success in your deliberations. Thank you.