Division for the Advancement of Women
Department of Economic and Social Affairs
Capacity Building for Promoting Gender Equality in African Countries

Panel on
Strengthening the capacity of national machineries through the effective use of
information and communication technologies

Tunis, Tunisia
18 November 2005

PANEL SUMMARY

Introduction

The Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW) of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) organized a panel on Strengthening the Capacity of National Machineries through the Effective Use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) as a parallel event to the World Summit on the Information Society, on 18 November 2005 in Tunis, Tunisia.

The panel was moderated by Mr. Patrizio Civili, Assistant Secretary-General for Policy Coordination and Inter-Agency Affairs, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Panelists included: Ms. Antoinette Alexis, Ministry of Health and Social Services in the Seychelles; Mr. Timothy Gebriel Mgonja, Ministry of Community Development, Gender and Children, United Republic of Tanzania; Mr. Driss Mnajja, Ministry of Women, Family, Childhood and Older Persons, Tunisia; and Ms. Francesca Pobee-Hayford, Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs, Ghana.

In his opening statement, Mr. Civili informed participants about the four sub-regional workshops and one regional meeting organized by DAW/DESA in 2004/2005 to address the gender digital divide in Africa. At the regional meeting, hosted by the Economic Commission for Africa in September 2005 in Addis Ababa, representatives of national machineries and ICT policy makers established a regional e-network of national machineries in Africa, adopted a Declaration and a Strategic Framework for Further Action.[1] In addition, to expand opportunities for information management and dissemination and exchange of good practices, DESA developed a website prototype for national machineries in Africa.

Achievements highlighted

Panelists emphasized that the national machineries for the advancement of women, established over the past three decades in almost all countries of the world, played an important role in promoting, designing, implementing, and monitoring policies for gender equality and the empowerment of women, and in facilitating gender mainstreaming in all policy areas, including in national ICT policies. They highlighted a number of activities carried out by the national machineries through the use of ICT. For example, the national machineries in Ghana, Tanzania and Tunisia developed websites to ensure dissemination of information relevant to the promotion

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[1] See http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/panel/effectiveICT05/index.html

of gender equality and the empowerment of women. In the Seychelles email was routinely used in disseminating information to the National Gender Steering Committee. The national machinery in Tanzania was developing a computerized system to monitor and evaluate the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action. The Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs in Ghana developed a draft ICT Strategy for Gender Equality, based on the National ICT for All Development Policy.

Obstacles and challenges

Panelists highlighted the following obstacles and challenges faced in their efforts to make effective use of ICT:

Despite some progress, the national machineries have continued to face many constraints and challenges in effectively using ICT in their work—constraints related to access to and utilization of ICT, mandates, location, political commitment, power and financial and human resources. For example, access to effective communications infrastructure, including equipment, such as fax machines and computers, and Intranet and Internet connectivity, was limited. This particularly constrained collaboration with the ICT sector, as well as with line ministries and other development partners.

Gender mainstreaming in the ICT sector had proven to be a challenge, in some cases due to lack of gender specific content and involvement of women but also because of the gap between policy and implementation. Despite efforts to make national ICT policies gender-sensitive, these policies remained gender blind in most countries. The national machinery had reviewed and evaluated six sectoral e-strategies: e-governance, e-security, e-commerce, and e-health, and ICT in agriculture and gender equality, and found that gender perspectives had not been integrated into these policy documents.

Panelists emphasized the lack of human, financial and technical resources. With limited government support, national machineries had to rely on their external development partners, which in the long run had negative implications on the sustainability of resources.

Another challenge was the lack of women in decision-making positions in the ICT sector. While men dominated high status and higher paid jobs, women were concentrated in lower status and lower paid jobs. Progress had been made in Tunisia where the Secretary of State in the Ministry of Communication responsible for Technology, the Internet and software, and the Director General heading the National Agency of Electronic Certification were women.

Lessons learned and good practices

A number of good practices and lessons learned had been identified. Successful strategies mentioned by the panelists included combining new technologies, such as computers and mobile phones, with traditional communication channels, such as radio and print media. Due to the lack of computers and faxes in some offices of the national machineries, communication had taken place through the use of cellular phones. Cellular phones were also more accessible to women than computers, especially illiterate women. In addition, the Internet had proven crucial for linking up with services supporting women, such as domestic violence and child maintenance programmes.

Panelists stressed that in order to make progress, strategic alliances and partnerships, including with the ICT sector, were crucial. In the Seychelles, they had led to cheaper ICT equipment for

the national machinery. An important lessons learned by national machineries was that it was useful to make their challenges known to other stakeholders in order to form constructive alliances with other government bodies as well as with civil society, including non-governmental organizations, media and the private sector.

Interventions from the floor

Speaking from the floor, a representative of the International Federation of the Red Cross congratulated the panelists for making such refreshing interventions on the use of ICT for facilitating development. He suggested that the African Development Bank be approached to provide financial/technical assistance to the national machineries. He acknowledged that a major challenge was to sustain the progress made so far. A representative of the Ghana-India Kofi Annan Centre of Excellence in ICT emphasized that many organizations undertake similar work and gave the example of her organization's work being replicated by the national machinery in Ghana. She proposed that greater efforts be undertaken to ensure collaboration and coordination of their respective activities in order to avoid duplication. The Minister of Namibia welcomed the establishment of the regional e-network and emphasized the need to ensure that this resource be made accessible to stakeholders in rural areas where the lack of electrification would be a particular challenge to its effective implementation. A representative of a Mauritanian non-governmental organization emphasized that the national context had to be considered and indicated concern about the structural problems in many countries, such as basic infrastructure, illiteracy and lack of girl schooling, to facilitate the integration of ICT into development. A speaker from Tunisia provided several examples of the country's success in electrification and provision of access to ICT throughout the country. A representative of Serbia and Montenegro emphasized that a national ICT policy that was completely gender blind had been issued three weeks before that conference.

Recommendations for future action

Recommendations for future action included to:

- share experiences at the regional and global levels;
- collaborate and cooperate among stakeholders, including through the establishment of websites and Intranet;
- increase the use of mobile phones;
- support ICT in schools to promote ICT skills from an early age.
- develop an implementation framework for gender mainstreaming in the ICT sector and a monitoring and evaluation framework.

The Division for the Advancement of Women was requested to:

- assist national machineries in reaching out to rural women, including by promoting and establishing networks where professional women could link up with rural women;
- provide equipment;
- support the Coordinator of the regional e-network; and
- conduct needs assessment on the effective use of ICT, skills, equipment and content development in the national machineries.