



## THE AFRICAN ASSOCIATION OF REMOTE SENSING OF THE ENVIRONMENT (AARSE)

### **AFRICAGIS 2003 Conference: "Meeting the Information Needs of NEPAD", Hôtel Méridian Président, Dakar, Senegal (3-7 November 2003)**

The AFRICAGIS 2003 Conference "Meeting the Information Needs of NEPAD" (3-7 November 2003, see ANNEX 3) held at the Hôtel Méridian Président, Dakar, Senegal (see ANNEX 4), was organized by Centre de Suivi Ecologique (CSE), Senegal and sponsored by the Program on Environmental Information Systems in Sub-Saharan Africa (EIS Africa), the African Association of Remote Sensing of the Environment (AARSE), the African Organization for Cartography and Remote Sensing (AOCRS) supported by ESRI, FAO, Digital Globe, GEOSPACE International, MAPS geosystems, UNESCO, UN Economic Commission for Africa (ECA-SEA), UNEP, UNFPA, USAID, UNOOSA, WRI, World Bank InfoDev Program, the US State Department and the Royal Netherlands Embassy.

306 participants gathered at the Conference Centre from 50 countries, with more than 60% of the participants from 32 African countries and the rest from Asia, Europe, the Middle East and North America. From outside Africa, the highest attendees were from the USA (38) and France (36).

The Conference sessions brought together some of the major Geoinformation initiatives being implemented in Africa covering the oceans, land cover, environment, water resources, the underlying geodetic reference frame, and spatial data infrastructure. The objective was to provide a platform for building synergy among various on-going or proposed initiatives, all of which aim at providing information support for the implementation of NEPAD.

The focus of this year's conference was very much on NEPAD. Our Senegalese partners worked very hard to place the event at a very high political level, lining up some heavyweights behind the programme. The Opening Ceremony was held under the chairmanship of the Prime Minister of Senegal, His Excellency Mr. Idrissa Seck followed by His Excellency the Minister of Environment and Sanitation Mr. Modou Diagne Fada. Their speeches indeed underscored the importance of the meeting and the significance being attached to Geoinformation technologies by the Senegalese Government. The American Ambassador followed the speech of the two Ministers to Senegal who gave an excellent reflection of the status quo in Geoinformation technology in Africa in French. Several Ambassadors were present during the opening sessions (including the Dutch Ambassador to Senegal), which were officially highlighted in the Senegalese Press and Television. The opening address was followed by the inauguration of the posters and exhibitions.

The Minister of State and General Deputy Advisor to the NEPAD Secretariat, Senegal His Excellency Mr. Abdou Aziz Sow, opened the second part of the morning. The latter made a general presentation to outline the initiatives and set the tone for the AFRICAGIS '03 Conference and exhibition. Answering the Minister's call, the Secretary General of AARSE, Dr. Tsehaie Woldai, delivered the Draft Position Paper of AARSE on "Geoinformation for All" in support of NEPAD Strategy for Development and involvement of the communities in Africa. He cited a critical review of Geoinformation drive in Africa and the hurdles that is confronting many organizations involved in this technology in the last 30 years. Woldai's focus was not only directed at assessing the current sustainable development problems in Africa, but also on how the benefits of Geoinformation technology such as, remote sensing, Global positioning Systems (GPS) and Geographic Information Systems (GIS), GDI as well as the improved communications technology can be harnessed to provide the fundamental basis for sustainable development in Africa. With the response of Woldai, the opening ceremony was closed and the conference sessions started in the afternoon. The sessions focussed on four sub-themes followed by Panel discussions:

**Sub-theme 1: Between Poverty and Prosperity - The New Development Agenda for Africa**

This sub-theme reviewed the main issues and challenges of development in Africa as identified by the Rio (1992) World Summit on Environment and Development, and as articulated by Africa's leaders within the framework of NEPAD. The focus was on those NEPAD components that relate to environmental assets, as well as the human and natural resources, upon which Africa could create a prosperous future. Issues regarding the development challenges and the harsh realities in Africa were treated from a policy and political perspective.

Speakers were not expected to talk about Geoinformation per se. The central question addressed by this session was: What are the challenges that the development agenda present to information managers in seeking to support decision makers and various NEPAD implementation structures?

**Sub-theme 2: From Rio to Dakar – The Promise of Information Technology?**

This sub-theme revisited the first Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, and re-evaluated the promising role of information and communications technologies in sustainable development. Chapter 40 of Agenda 21 (from the Summit) dealt entirely with this, and gave a lot of impetus to the development of Geoinformation and its application to environment and development issues. Since the Summit many environment-related conventions and declarations have continued to highlight the role of information. For instance the Convention to Combat Desertification, the Convention on Biological Diversity, and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, all have sections dealing with research and systematic observation, information collection, (species) identification and monitoring, information analysis and exchange, communication of information, capacity building, education and public awareness.

In 2000 the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution (54/68) requesting the development and implementation of "the Integrated Global Observing Strategy (IGOS) so as to enable access to and use of space-based and other Earth observing data." The Johannesburg (WSSD) Declaration (September 2002) further highlighted the important role of information, and more specifically Geoinformation technologies. There are 6 references to information and communication technologies (ICT) in the WSSD Plan of Implementation, and at least 12 specific references to key Geoinformation technologies (satellite remote sensing, geographic information systems, and global positioning systems).

How much progress has been made in Africa to date? Speakers documented some of the key challenges and issues in implementing various initiatives in Africa to improve access to and the use of information against the background of progress in the wider ICT domain since Rio, and their relevance in terms of the possibilities and solutions they provide in support of sustainable development activities and decision making. Of course, being a conference for Geoinformation practitioners, special emphasis was placed on

Geoinformation and how, used within the framework of NEPAD and progressive national ICT policies, they can empower local communities and support development activities.

### **Sub-theme 3: Geography and the Environment — Harnessing Knowledge for Action and Change**

The central question addressed by this sub-theme was: what opportunities do current Geoinformation technologies (remote sensing, geographic information systems, global positioning systems, locations services, etc.) present in documenting, characterizing and quantifying environmental and natural resource assets for development in Africa? Emphasis in the presentations was placed on how to leverage knowledge, and highlight the paradigm shifts and commitments necessary for the application of Geoinformation to have practical relevance to issues of environmental governance and justice, transparency in the management and exploitation of resources, poverty reduction, and sustainable development in Africa.

The audience benefited from best practices in current knowledge management practices and experiences as they apply to resource allocation and utilization, as well as experiences relating to local/indigenous knowledge management practices.

### **Sub-theme 4: Access to Information for the NEPAD: Challenges and a strategy for action**

This sub-theme highlighted various initiatives in response to identified needs for harmonized information on resources to support sustainable development in Africa.

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## **B. Panel Discussion**

The objective of the panel discussion was to tie things up:

- What/where are the GAPS in the various on-going initiatives?
- How can these initiatives work together to create a more effective synergy through networking, collaboration and partnerships?
- What are the current and emerging capacity building needs and issues?

Discussants were based on the addresses of the following keynote speakers: Craig Schwabe, Adigun Ade Abiodun and Karima Bounemra Ben-Soltane.

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### **The next challenge**

AFRICAGIS '03 addressed itself to the challenge of being relevant to the emerging aspirations of the continent. How can the African Geoinformation community better promote and support relevant programmes to meet needs within the framework of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD)? How can the international community assisting Africa more effectively in this respect?

The conference format in general included: opening session and 14 invited keynote addresses and 137 papers into 11 plenary and 24 technical sessions. It also included 3 Pre-conference Workshops and 32 exhibitions.

Workshops:

1. Francophone Awareness Workshop on Geoinformation Tools (organizers: UNECA and EIS Africa)
2. Africa Environment Information Network (organizers: UNEP and DEWA)
3. The Use of Available Global Landsat Data Sets for Meeting the Information Needs of NEPAD (organized by UNOOSA)

Exhibitions:

Intergraph, SAMBUS (Ghana), ESRI (USA), GEOSPACE (South Africa), MAPS Geosystems (United Arab Emirates), EIS-AFRICA, UNFAO, USGS (USA), Hewlett Packard (USA), CSE (Senegal), DTGC (Senegal), UCAD (Senegal), DMG (Senegal), DGPRE (Senegal), DPN (Senegal), RCMRD (Kenya), CNTIG (Ivory Coast), CERSGIS (Ghana), African Institute of South Africa, IGB (Burkina Faso), BSA (Mauritanie), Clark Lab (USA), GIMS (South Africa), Airborne Laser Solutions (South Africa), Centre Régional AGRHYMET (Niger), ComputaMaps (South Africa), ISTAR (France), SCOT (France), ITC (The Netherlands), ST2I,

All submitted abstracts were presented, with few exceptions. Presentation time was short, focusing on the main points of each paper, with discussion handled at the end of the sessions. The presentations gave valuable and detailed information and were mature in many aspects. The abstract proceedings including some of the invited papers were distributed during the conference. In spite of the long conference daily duration (up to 6:30 p.m. sometimes), the attendance was very high and constant to the workshop end, and discussions were lively.

Two meetings (AARSE Council, EIS General Assembly) and 10<sup>th</sup> year AFRICAGIS Award (EIS Africa and AARSE joint selection of people who have contributed to AFRICAGIS success) were conducted during the conference. Besides, a cocktail party at the beginning of the conference and an ITC alumni party (see BTOR of Mark Noort or Saskia Templeman) allowed a better social interaction and fruitful discussions. The Gala Dinner accompanied by the Senegal National Ballet at the Hôtel Méridian Président on Thursday (the 6<sup>th</sup> of November) was by all standard sensational and was arranged by the local organizing committee and attended by the His Excellency the Minister of State responsible for the NEPAD Secretariat in Senegal.