

**2009 Annual Ministerial Review of ECOSOC
Regional Ministerial Meeting for Africa**

On eHealth

10-11 June 2009, Accra, Ghana

Closing statement

by Mr. Thomas Stelzer, Assistant-Secretary General, UNDESA

Honourable Ministers,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

At the outset, I would like to congratulate the Government of Ghana for organizing such a successful meeting. It added an important regional dimension to our global deliberations next month in Geneva. I would also like to recognize and warmly thank the panelists, moderators and participants for contributing and sharing their experiences and perspectives with us.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is prudent to say that we had productive and insightful discussions. The quality of presentations was very high. The breadth and depth of ideas presented in the last two days cannot be summarized in a brief statement. But I will try to capture the essence of our discussions and deliberations.

Clearly, health and ehealth are part of the larger puzzle of the development in Africa. The development of Africa requires actions in many sectors and by many actors. There is a need to lay the foundation of long term development by prioritizing investments in infrastructure and human resource development. This is key for achieving the MDGs.

It is widely acknowledged in the region that realization of the health related MDGs is central to the achievement of the other MDGs. Yet, Africa is lagging behind on goals like reducing maternal mortality and the newborn mortality rates. This meeting has sent an unequivocal message that health should be given the highest priority. And that ehealth should be part of an overarching health and IT policy framework. These can be and should be pursued simultaneously.

In the area of ehealth, there were a number of useful proposals presented to this meeting. Some of the key suggestions worth mentioning at this point are:

Coverage of internet and mobile phones needs to be expanded throughout this region and made more accessible. Standardization and interoperability hold key to regional integration. Users, including patients, should be empowered.

While there is a need to scale-up ehealth in Africa, there should also be initiatives for impact evaluation: How ehealth actually helps in achieving results? What are the causalities and correlations? How to improve the content and make it more accessible to people? What is the rate of return in terms of investment?

Finding answers to those questions requires further work in this area. That can only be pursued by a trained workforce. A number of interesting proposals were made on this aspect. There is a need to create a core of ehealth experts, establish National Councils of health experts, launch specific training courses for health professionals and make ehealth an essential part of the curriculum.

We were also reminded that despite its immense potential, ehealth involves many ethical, legal and moral issues. These should be addressed through regional and global cooperation. There is a lot that Africa could learn through exchange of experience and lessons-learned and there is need to make these experiences relevant to the African context. Solutions should be tailored to the culture and ethics of this continent.

What are then the key messages that I am taking back with me from Accra, which I feel should be captured in the substantive session of ECOSOC and the Ministerial outcome:

First, the potential of ICT, mhealth and ehealth in generally improving health literacy for citizens, to equip health professionals with information, to serve as an intermediate substitute as the primary health systems develop – all with the aim of improving health outcomes.

Second, in Africa, access to the populations, especially to the rural populations is a big issue. And technology, both ICT and mobile telephony, holds a promising potential.

11 June 2009

Thank you.