

COREVIP 2003 (17-21 March 2003)**ENGLISH VERSION OF KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY HIS EXCELLENCY, DR.
AMARA ESSY, THE INTERIM PRESIDENT OF THE COMMISSION OF THE
AFRICAN UNION****THE ROLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN THE BUILDING OF
AFRICAN UNION****Introduction**

It is for me an honour, a privilege and that rare combination of pleasure and duty to speak at this Conference which brings together the highest authorities of African Universities. The regular organisation of this Conference over the past ten years bears testimony to its unity.

Let me congratulate and thank Professor François Rajaoson and his team as well as his colleagues from the Association of African Universities for having focused this Conference on the theme of African Union and for giving me the opportunity to talk to you about a topical issue.

I also wish to congratulate and warmly thank the Prime Minister, the government and the people of Mauritius who have agreed once more to host this large-scale Pan-African meeting. We acknowledge with great appreciation the efforts made by the Mauritian government every year to host regular meetings which enable Africans to share their experiences, analyse together problems of the Continent, propose solutions and take decisions. We need to emphasise that these efforts are a major contribution to the construction of African Union. We must also stress the strong commitment of Mauritius to the Continent, the strength of its African heritage which it cherishes, an important part of its multicultural inheritance which gives it many horizons. At the same time Mauritius knows how to embrace positive human values whatever be their origin and adapt as well as develop knowledge and high technology. The African Universities which are gathered here should analyse this Mauritian model, which is based on creative diversity, in order to understand it and draw inspiration from it in the construction of African Union. The topic of your Conference could not be debated in a more ideal context.

I have, therefore, been asked to introduce the main theme of your Conference, that is, “The Role of Higher Education Institutions in the Building of African Union”.

The Role of Higher Education Institutions in the Building of African Union

1. Since the historical Conference which was held in Durban, South Africa, in July 2002, African Union is on the move, at least at the institutional level. Now all the potential of this movement must be fulfilled.
2. African Universities have to take up a formidable challenge. It is a long-term task, a tremendous undertaking which will eventually transform the lives and activities of millions of Africans. We will succeed because it is an imperative need which must be fulfilled sooner or later. At this moment in time, the world is constructing and consolidating huge regional blocs. Some have been built on a solid economic basis, others are being built in stages.
3. Africa has neither economic clout nor the necessary time. It must, nevertheless, without delay, keep pace with the world or incur the risk of continuing to be marginalised. Consequently, we must find proper shortcuts, all the more so since Africa lags behind other countries and is saddled with many handicaps. Besides the political will of African leaders, there must be a general mobilisation at all levels, at all the institutions, in all African communities which must try henceforth to identify, review, implement and activate all the levers available.
4. If all the institutions, if all the communities have an important role to play in the promotion of African Union, what is the value of higher education institutions in the fulfillment of this major objective?
5. Schools, in general, and universities, in particular, are where the modern man is fashioned. The building of African union is, therefore, an important task.
6. Studies have shown that universities play a more important role in Africa than in any other part of the world. In contrast with the rest of society, universities house the highest concentration of knowledge, competencies, capacities and technical expertise in a wide array of fields. Higher education institutions do not only constitute the main reservoir of human resources and monopoly of knowledge in specialized fields. They also train and engender a human capital which can shape the future of a country. Higher education institutions also provide high-level training to tutors, teachers, politicians, officials, public administrators, managers, leaders of civil society, intellectuals, thinkers, etc. They play a determinant role in research, analysis, evaluation, information and technology, and, consequently, in economic development and social progress. In Africa it is the academic community, and those communities which it has formed and injected into society, which can most of the time provide innovative thinking and studied reflection on contemporary issues. The university is the locus of knowledge on and for Africa. Above all, the university fashions leaders. Therefore, the university is a key institution in the

strategic framework geared to African union. It is a “fundamental lever” in the promotion of African union. How do we activate this lever? I have identified several modes.

7. First, higher education institutions must adopt certain measures at the internal level in order to contribute significantly to the promotion of African union. To achieve this, the university must meet a number of prerequisites, namely academic freedom, autonomy, equity, equality, shared responsibilities in administration, a sense of duty, etc.

8. The academic community as a whole (administrators, faculty, students) must not participate in any micro-nationalist activities, or any politics that discriminates against other Africans.

9. The intra-university space must be “normalised” as far as possible in order to project the image of a community that already meets the prerequisites for the promotion of African Union.

10. The second set of measures concerns curricula. Higher education institutions must develop a “differential pedagogy” so that they can contribute actively to the promotion of African union. What this means is that teaching must be holistic. This differential pedagogy will promote research, and the production, circulation and dissemination of knowledge and rallying themes such as African citizenship, the fundamental unity of Africa through its history and culture, “African renaissance”, etc.

11. The theme of African Union should also guide teaching, research, dissertations, publications, etc. Likewise training programmes for teachers, tutors, leaders, etc. must be designed such that they promote African Union.

12. A researcher has identified “fourth-degree” training centres which are developing alongside higher education institutions. These centres provide courses that update and upgrade knowledge to professionals who have already acquired experience in active life. They are either regional (IDEP, CESAG, ESAMI) or national (national schools of administration, “institutes of management and public administration”, military schools, agricultural schools, etc.) In the same way as the universities, these centres must promote African union. However their relative isolation and the absence of links with universities and research centres thwart their potential to become instruments of development. Just like higher education institutions, these centres must work more on concrete projects. Universities and “fourth-degree” centres should not only include themes linked to African union in their curricula; they must, above all, collaborate on integrative development projects such as NEPAD, CSSDCA, the African Economic Community as well as programmes of regional economic cooperation.

13. African universities must embrace not only the workplace but also the whole of society so that they do not become ivory towers. They must be engaged in society and

become universities of development. In this respect, M. Pai Obanya argues that the universities of Lagos, Dakar, Nairobi should be regarded as universities in Lagos, in Dakar, in Nairobi. In other words, they must serve the society where they are located, be involved in African society as a whole in order to play a predominant role in the promotion of African Union. Universities provide vital underpinning for the promotion of African union. If the academic community does not demonstrate commitment, and is not convinced of the relevance of a political project, a development project, a social project, it could become a major obstacle to the successful implementation of any of these projects by active society.

14. Another equally important movement for the promotion of African Union is the systematic development of cooperation and exchange between African universities. This programme is no doubt most important for our purposes as it takes into consideration all the other activities for the promotion of African union.

15. The first stage in this programme of cooperation is at the regional level. Africans of a certain generation all recall with nostalgia the pre-independence Universities (federal and regional) which were the hotbed of ideas of unity, of African solidarity, of brotherhood, and which formed most of the African leaders who spearheaded the nationalist struggle and led Africa to its independence. The subdivision and proliferation of national universities has inevitably restrained the construction of a united Africa. It is, therefore, important that we bring the strength and vision of this past into the present so as to ensure a successful future. We must revitalise regional centres, or create new centres that would fulfill the same functions. An in-depth study must be made on this issue under the auspices of the African Union, the African Association of Universities, UNESCO, regional economic associations, decision-makers (ministers) and stakeholders in development. It would be useful to identify, create and develop regional centres of excellence. The advantages are too numerous to be listed here. One may recall the Consultative Conference of the OAU in 1963 which proposed the setting up of not only an African bank but also an African university. The recent opening of the Virtual African University in Kenya does not necessarily exhaust the possibilities of that proposal. In the light of the new information technology, on the one hand, and a knowledge society, on the other, and the creation and proliferation of virtual universities, higher education will become more and more individualised. Every student will be able to have instant access to knowledge at any time wherever he/she may be. He/she will be able to log on to a host of knowledge providers. But students will be physically and geographically isolated from regional centres and other centres of excellence which are the breeding ground for the promotion of African union. Faced with this new challenge, the traditional residential universities will have to develop strategies that will overcome the lack of educational materials devoted to the promotion of African unity. Perhaps we need to set up chairs for the promotion of African union and integration.

16. Many African countries have inscribed African union in their constitution. Some have set up ministries entrusted with the portfolios of African Union or African integration, and most have opened permanent missions at the Commission of African Union. In the short term, African universities could develop a programme of seminars in collaboration with the Commission of African Union until they design appropriate curricula.

17. A thorough study of the state of cooperation and exchanges between universities, faculties, higher education institutions, professional schools, etc. must be conducted in order to evaluate and strengthen collaboration. It would be necessary to coordinate these collaborative initiatives into a strategic plan geared to the promotion and fulfillment of African union.

18. Indeed there are diverse networks of exchange: networks of universities and faculties, regional and sub-regional networks, thematic and linguistic networks, private networks, etc. These networks should be classified, assessed, intertwined and oriented towards Union to the extent that they constitute the basic structure of African Union. These networks must be linked to integrative projects and institutions (NEPAD, regional economic associations, single currency in Africa, general history of Africa, etc.). Universities and higher education institutions in Africa must not only generate ideas and theoretical knowledge. This knowledge must be applied empirically. We can understand the disappointment and frustration felt by academics and intellectuals when projects and institutions, which harnessed their efforts, collapse: for example, Lagos Action Plan, PANUREDA, etc.

19. The whole academic community (administrators, faculty, researchers, students) must be able to move freely so that universities, regional centres, centres of excellence, exchange programmes, networks operate as organic elements of African Union and regional economic associations. This calls for a more consistent visa policy, or the creation of channels of academic exchange, and the adoption of a clause that would appeal to African governments to soften immigration laws for academics. This could limit the brain drain since the exodus of African professionals within Africa is not a brain drain but a “brain circulation” that is beneficial to Africa.

20. Eventually the development of a network of exchange, and the regionalisation of universities and centres of excellence as instruments for the promotion of African Union presuppose the creation of a sphere based on trust and peace that embraces men, ideas, knowledge and technologies. Solidarity, tolerance, mutual respect, shared values must also prevail within each State and between states. In this sphere of communication every African professional could use at least two working languages.

21. Besides the African Association of Universities, what other institutions could contribute to the definition and implementation of a programme of promotion for African Union? There are other competent professional associations such as UNESCO, ADEA,

BAD, the Foundation for the strengthening of resources, teachers' and students' unions, sponsors of multiple educational networks (Commonwealth, Francophonie, etc.). All the other stakeholders, and, in the first place, the beneficiaries, that is, the African Union and the regional economic associations (SADC, CEDEAO, COMESA, etc.), should take part in this enterprise.

22. I will conclude, as I started, by strongly reiterating that the Union will not be viable unless it is closely associated to universities, higher education institutions, and "fourth-degree" centres. The missing link in the trilogy of Power/Private Sector/Civil Society is Knowledge. The role of Knowledge at this stage of the intellectual development of our societies is vital.

23. This is why I heartily hope that there will be stronger cooperation and bonds between the Commission and African higher education institutions. The Union should provide more financial support to AAU activities and African universities should be more engaged in the programmes and activities of the Union. At the next Maputo Summit which will examine structural proposals for the Union, contacts will be made in order to identify concrete ways in which the Commission of African Union, but, also later, all the other organs of the Union (Pan African Parliament, Court of Justice, Economic, Social, and Cultural Council) could benefit from the intellectual and technical support of competent African and international universities. In the meantime your Association should contact the Secretariat of NEPAD to develop close collaboration.

I wish your Conference a lot of success.

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