UN partners with West African nations to boost information technology in universities

UNESCO chief Irina Bokova (right) and Soumaïla Cissé sign agreement

11 February 2011 – The United Nations agency tasked with promoting education and the West African monetary union today signed an agreement to launch a $12 million project to boost the information and communications technology (ICT) capacity of universities by creating a regional virtual library network.

Irina Bokova, the Director-General of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (**UNESCO**), and Soumaïla Cissé, the President of the Commission of the West African Economic and Monetary Union (UEMOA), which is providing the funds, signed the agreement in Paris.

The project is part of a wide-ranging cooperation plan initiated in 2006 by the two bodies, aiming to develop the use of ICTs to support an ongoing reform of higher education in the member countries of the UEMOA – Benin, Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea-Bissau, Niger, Mali, Senegal and Togo.

"Higher education is a vital force for development. Funding this project shows the commitment of your organization to reforming and modernizing higher education by creating centres of excellence," **said** Ms. Bokova.

"The new technologies are the most effective method to reach this goal, by creating virtual libraries accessible to all, accelerating exchange between professors and students and stimulating research," she added.

Mr. Cissé said the project will empower teachers, students and researchers. "We are indeed conscious that education is the key to the future, because emerging countries are founded on the quality of human resources. The virtual library we are creating will serve our young people both as roots and as wings," he said.

The three-year project will install ICT infrastructure, both material and virtual, in higher education institutions. The campuses of eight universities, one in each UEMOA member State, will be equipped with fibre optic equipment and at least 200 computers with high-speed connection, according to UNESCO.

In addition to a regional virtual library network to which universities will be linked, the project will set up a cyber institute giving professors online access to training courses. A central database for calculating students' course credits in all state universities will be established to help harmonize academic standards and facilitate student mobility.

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