

AFSEC Keynote address

Distinguished guests
Fellow Africans
Ladies and gentlemen, Good morning

This forum could not have taken place at a better time. Last Friday was Africa day and a few weeks ago it was another sitting of the African Union. For the first time in more than 40 years, the celebrations of Africa day were held in as many different cities including our own City of Johannesburg, which is probably one of the many cities where Africans are living together in harmony.

There has been talk about the United States of Africa before but during the last sitting of the African Union this topic featured with prominence and vigour. There was a clear indication by the African leaders that the time for working together as Africans to create solutions for Africa has arrived. Many attempts to forge ahead with this initiative have been retarded by the lack of political will amongst many countries but judging by the discussions in the last sitting there is political will to take the first step of this very long journey.

However long the journey may look to be, the next step has to be taken. From where I sit I see the standardisation or the harmonisation of standards and the integration of the power and telecommunications network across the continent as the next logical step.

Before we take our next step we need to take a look at the history of standards in Africa. The industrialised countries that colonised Africa had their own national standards. So whatever country they colonised had these standards imposed on their systems. At the time there was no harmony in the whole world, each country had its own set of standards. Africa was further driven into disarray by the conditions that were imposed by the foreign agencies that were funding various projects. Simply put, to get the funding you had to accept the standards imposed by the funding agencies.

Whilst there was little co-operation within the African continent, the rest of the world moved on. Regional and international bodies, such as IEC and CENELEC were formed with the sole aim of converging and harmonising standards across borders. Today the rest of the globalised world is reaping the benefits of harmonised standards.

Africa is unique and it will require solutions that are African and developed by Africans. The solutions must take into consideration the social, economic, historical, environmental and cultural aspects of Africa. Having said that though, it would be amiss of Africa not to take note of the lessons learnt by the rest of the

world during the journey to harmonisation. We need to take advantage of the more than 100 years experience that IEC has to offer. Not being part of the rest of the world is not an option.

The Electricity Supply and the Telecommunications industries are the vehicles Africa has to use to make the next step. Today we can phone home and say we arrived safely in Cape Town and charge our cell-phones with South African electricity without any fear of damaging our phones. That is the kind of world we should live in.

The power and telecommunications industries are the lifeblood of our economies. For manufacturing, mining, processing, agriculture and any other industry for that matter to operate successfully it must be supported by a reliable electricity and telecommunications infrastructure.

Africa is still the darkest continent. Africa is facing serious power shortages. A significant percentage of the inhabitants of Africa do not have access to power. Even South Africa which was said to have excess capacity in the 80's, something which I always found hard to comprehend, considering that more than 50% of South Africans did not have access to electricity, so how could we have had excess capacity.

The electricity that can be generated in certain parts of Africa, notably the Democratic Republic of Congo is enough to power up the whole of Africa. With harmonisation and standardisation of systems across the continent power shortages will be a thing of the past. One would hope that some Working Group meetings would be held easily via the net.

It is not surprising that Standards bodies, Electricity and Telecommunications utilities at the forefront of these developments, with initiatives such as AFSEC, UPDEA, SAPP and Westcor. All of these efforts will form a solid foundation for the creation of an Africa that is integrated.

In more ways than one standardisation or the harmonisation of standards will reduce the costs of integrating and interconnecting the African network. Contrary to the popular belief that the more standards there are the more difficult and expensive it is to do business in that country. It has been proved that the more productive and competitive the country is the more standards it will have. It stands to reason therefore that harmonised standards across borders will enhance the competitiveness of the African continent.

The standardisation process comes with other requirements such as accreditation and conformity assessment. Some countries fall short when they develop their Standards Bodies because when they motivate for the standardisation package, the conformity assessment process requires huge capital injection. I do not believe that every country should start building

Conformity Assessment Centres or laboratories. It is my view that the currently available conformity assessment schemes are sufficient for a start.

I have often heard people saying that IEC standards do not cater for the African environment and conditions, therefore they see no point in participating in the IEC processes. For as long as we do not participate the IEC standards will not cater for the conditions that are unknown to the participants.

The deliberations that you will be having during the next few days should be aimed at activities that will improve the well being of African population, promote and develop the application of harmonised standards across the entire continent. We must contribute to the improvement of health and safety in Africa.

As we forge ahead we should synergise the efforts of AFSEC and UPDEA to combat the fragmentation that threatens our success. I urge you to make use of the IEC available structures.

I think a world with “one standard, one conformity assessment accepted across the world” will be a nice place to live in.