

**Official Opening Speech Delivered at the Third International Information Ethics
Conference for Africa, University of Botswana Library Auditorium 6-7 September 2010**

By

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The Organising Committee for the Conference

Conference Host Prof Stephen Mutula

All Delegates here present

Ladies and Gentlemen

Good morning. It is my great pleasure and privilege to preside over the opening ceremony of the Third International Information Ethics Conference for Africa on the theme '*Teaching Information Ethics in Africa-Current Status, Opportunities, and Challenges*'. I am informed that the conference has brought together delegates in government, industry, NGOs and academics from Africa, Europe and North America who are gathered here to interrogate and dialogue topical issues on the subject of information ethics with a view to developing a curriculum for Africa in this field.

I am also informed that this conference is inspired by the Geneva Declaration adopted by the Geneva World Summit on Information Society (WSIS) of 2003 to which most African countries including Botswana are signatories. This conference therefore comes at an opportune time for Africa and the world especially in the context of creating a globalised information society where:

- Information forms a key strategic resource on which the production and delivery of goods and services is dependent
- Economic transformation is being underpinned by technological transformation in the way in which information can be processed and distributed
- Widespread use of information and communications technologies is facilitating the growth of the so-called traded information sector in the economy

- Informatisation of the economy makes global integration of economies, both nationally and regionally, possible.

For Africa, this conference has significant implications in the following respects:

- Africa's tertiary institutions have for a long time lacked behind their European and North American counterparts in the teaching of information ethics and this conference provides a veritable framework for addressing this lacuna in Africa's higher education sector.
- Africa society is largely oral-based and due to inadequate documentation of tacit knowledge, sharing of such information is hampered. This is exacerbated by the fact that the African continent is hardest hit with HIV/AIDS pandemic and yet the cultural practices and secrecy surrounding open discussion about sex makes difficult the design of effective interventions to mitigate the challenges occasioned by this scourge.
- Youths in Africa especially those living in the remote parts of the country that drop out of primary and junior secondary school levels become more vulnerable and easily relapse into illiteracy because of the paucity of reading resources at their disposal and poor previous information literacy competencies. The lack of a culture of reading should be seen, further, as having a negative impact on the exploitation of available accurate information that influences personal attitudes and behaviors towards life issues such as the HIV/AIDS pandemic
- Africa suffers from information poverty arising from the pervasive digital divide which in some cases is caused by inimical restrictive access to information and also because of lack of requisite institutional infrastructure to facilitate access to information especially in the custody of governments
- The NEPAD e-Commission for Africa is currently rolling out Internet connectivity and associated ICTs in schools on the continent. The likely negative impact of this information and communication technologies on moral values and principles particularly if they are not well planned and harnessed cannot be overlooked. Besides, issues such as access, privacy, trust and confidentiality need our collective attention.

Back home, the choice of Botswana as the host of this conference is befitting in two main ways:

- Firstly, the Government of Botswana is committed to embracing the digital era as reflected in the milestones achieved in the formulation of the National Information and Communications Technology (ICT) policy, and the putting in place of an enabling regulatory frame work for

the operationalisation of the policy in order to enhance universal access and universal service for its people. Government of Botswana perceives the ICT policy as a strategic tool in driving social, economic, cultural and political transformation in this country.

- Secondly, Botswana Government attaches great value to the central role of information in the socio-economic development of its people. In this regard Vision 2016 is the nation long term development blue print that envisages among other things Botswana attaining the status of “an informed and educated nation” by harnessing the information resource.

These efforts by the Government of Botswana are testament to our commitment to leveraging the information resource to improve the socio-economic status of our people. But as we exalt the virtues of information, we should be cognizant of its empowerment value for those who are privileged to gain access to it and the disadvantaged majority in society who are excluded from easily gaining access to it. This conference therefore is timely and a wakeup call to all of us in academia, government and private sector to the urgency of collectively addressing the challenges that impinge negatively on the development and access to information in Africa so that our people can participate on equal footing with other citizens of the world and benefit from a globalised information society.

The high presence of top academics in this field from countries as far as USA, Germany, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe, and of course Botswana demonstrate the eagerness with which the outcome from this forum is awaited not only by your peers but also by your governments. The country reports that will be delivered on the state of information ethics education in Africa will provide a framework for development of the very much needed curriculum in this area.

Besides, the diversity and richness of the topics that will be addressed in this conference such as intercultural cultural analysis; moral traditions; information privacy; intellectual property, information poverty, digital social inclusion/exclusion, open government and information transparency; children information ethics, and Internet and information ethics are at the heart of long standing issues affecting Africa and have therefore the potential to catalyse governments and other partners to provide the necessary resources for development of information ethics curricula and its implementation.

Mobile and wireless technologies have over the last decade offered a significant alternative platform for use and access to ICTs by the general population in most parts of Africa. In terms of voice telephony, expansion of cellular phone networks which can only be described as phenomenal has become the de facto choice surpassing fixed-line by several folds. Information ethics as it relates to use of mobile phones need your attention too.

Please allow me restate Rafael Capurro's view that there is a long history of Information Ethics in Africa especially with regard to oral and written traditions throughout many centuries about different kinds of information and communication practices using different moral codes and media based on dynamic and complex processes of cultural hybridization. He says, *the function of cultural memory is not just to express what belongs to the collective memory of a community, but to engage the will of its members to connect them through the task of creating it.*

Consequently, I see this conference building on this rich diversity to provide a critical reflection on this history in order to promote greater awareness of Africa's cultural legacy. As many of you may also be aware information ethics opens a space of critical reflection for all stakeholders on established moral norms and values, it provides the catalyst for a social process, and is a space for retrieving the rich cultural memory necessary to our field. This cultural memory permits to reshape identities and contribute to the world's information and communication cultures – and to make a valuable contribution to the current global debate on intercultural information ethics.

I can therefore not help but join hands with Rafael Capurro in challenging African scholars gathered here and others elsewhere to take as their main moral responsibility the field of information ethics to enrich African identities by retrieving and re-creating African information and communication traditions. I think that retrieving the African cultural memory with regard to information and communication norms and traditions is the main challenge for African information ethics scholars. African scholars should critically analyze the different strategies of social inclusion and exclusion in the history of African societies, including traumatic experiences such as slavery, colonialism and apartheid.

This will no doubt enhance and accelerate the rate of digital information adoption and use for socio-economic and political development in Africa. Besides publication of papers that would result from this conference; the resolutions reached will even be more beneficial if they are

transformed into products and services that can change the way we do things, which is why a forum such as this one is laudable.

In conclusion, Director of Ceremony, Ladies and gentlemen, my task was however simple, to make the opening remarks which I have done. I wish therefore to conclude by wishing you fruitful deliberation in the two days that you will be here. I believe that the outcome from this conference will go a long way in laying a strong foundation for the development of an information ethics curriculum for higher education that will take cognizance of African diverse cultures, values and morals. I now declare this conference on information ethics for Africa officially open. Pula!! !