

Mapping Africa for Africa

Mapping Africa for Africa (MAFA) is a new initiative intended to accelerate the pace of geo-information activities in Africa and to be a catalyst for promoting the importance of geo-spatial information for decision support in the development of the continent. As a contribution to African renaissance, MAFA is expected to spearhead a plan of action providing the fundamental geo-spatial information/maps for sustainable development in support of projects under the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD).

MAFA results from the "Durban Statement on MAFA" agreed at the International Cartographic Association conference held in South Africa in 2003. It presents recommendations and an action plan for the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), under the guidance of its Committee on Development Information (GeoInformation subcommittee, CODI-Geo) to implement activities relating to MAFA in collaboration with ICA and other global institutions and organisations. The obligation of ICA to create a Working Group (WG) on "Mapping Africa for Africa" has already been met.

The MAFA initiative has to address the poorly mapped status of Africa: only a few countries have maps covering their territory adequate for national development purposes. Further, environmental and economic needs of Africa extend beyond territorial boundaries, requiring maps covering large regions for intervention and support purposes. African governments need to recognise national mapping as a key national asset the progress of which needs to be enhanced.

One of the challenges of ICA is to prepare for a world that will increasingly depend on the effective use of geographic information and the application of cartography and GIScience. It is upon this premise that the ICA WG on MAFA will address the promotion of international technical and scientific support, along with advisory services from ICA and its affiliate members.

Similarly, the WG has to develop strategies that will aid countries in Africa in capacity development and knowledge sharing. As the leadership role of ICA in Cartography and GIScience is internationally known it is expected to promote awareness of cartographic issues and resources in Africa to the international community. Thus ICA will be seen to be contributing to the understanding and solution of African problems through the use of cartography and geo-spatial data.

MAFA therefore has a daunting task ahead of it. Its urgent work includes the establishment of the African Reference Frame (AFREF) and an audit of the geo-spatial data available in African countries. Initial data capture needs to be supplemented by maintenance; also required are updating programmes and conversion of existing fundamental datasets to digital form using innovative and standardised methodologies. Decision-makers have to be persuaded to allocate sufficient financial resources at national levels to develop the geo-information infrastructure.

Ultimately, development in Africa will advance when people in Africa have the knowledge and capacity to identify their own spatial data problems and agree on their own solutions.