

Opening speech given by
Mr. Einar Gunnarsson, Permanent Secretary of State,
Ministry for Foreign Affairs
Nordic Africa Days: “Africa Unplugged”
October 18, 2012 at 9:00
Venue: University of Iceland „Hátíðarsalur“

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me pleasure to open this conference. First of all, allow me to extend a warm welcome to the many speakers and international guests that are present here today. Thank you for coming to Iceland on this cold/shining/beautiful day to participate in this important conference.

This conference is held in cooperation between the Nordic Africa Institute and the University of Iceland, with support from the Ministry for Foreign Affairs in Iceland and the Icelandic International Development Agency. The Nordic Africa Days are now for the first time held in Reykjavík, the same year as the Nordic Africa Institute is celebrating its 50th anniversary. It is a great honour for Iceland and I sincerely congratulate the Nordic Africa Institute on this occasion.

The Nordic Africa Institute was established in 1962 at a time when important changes were taking place both in Africa and in the Nordic countries. Many African countries had recently, or were about to, gain independence. Hope and confidence about the future was in the air. In the Nordic countries there was a growing awareness for the need for more knowledge of the political, economic and social situation in Africa and the cultural differences in the continent.

From the beginning, the Institute has facilitated cooperation between Nordic researchers and emphasized linking them to African researchers and institutes. Iceland joined the Nordic Africa Institute in 1964 and became a member of the Programme and Research Council. Iceland has ever since regarded this partnership highly.

During the last 50 years the Nordic Africa Institute has evolved and matured as a centre for research, information and documentation and it has gained international recognition as an multi-disciplinary institute of high quality.

The theme of the Nordic Africa Days this time, takes a cue from musical performance. In the context of music “unplugged” it conveys different meanings referring to essence or originality, creativity and improvisation. The conference thus draws attention to the specific attributes of the African continent and its global interconnections, highlighting the importance of looking into the future, as well as acknowledging the past.

The theme “Africa unplugged” also raises questions about the continent’s interrelationship with the rest of the world by both asking how these have affected its population and how it can move forward. As such, the conference aims to highlight the development of the continent’s infrastructure, ownership of natural resources and development that is beneficial to its inhabitants.

As an academic conference, the Nordic Africa Days in Reykjavík gives scholars opportunity for the next two days to scrutinize the various issues at stake. The goal is to look at both specific topics and global ones from the perspectives of

various disciplines. Place questions and issues of interest within a context that highlights increased knowledge, generated from research conducted among African populations.

For the Icelandic academic society, it is particularly valuable to have such an event here; to stimulate already growing interest in the African continent among Icelandic students and to inspire and support our already active Africa researchers and others interested in the development of the continent. Iceland has been an active participant in the United Nations Universities since the year 1978 when the first programme for training of geothermal specialists was established. Hundreds of specialists have since then been trained, thereof many from Africa. Every year a group of African students, many of whom are already established scholars, stay in Iceland as fellows within UNU training programs.

Icelandic scholars already have active collaboration with African scholars, institutions and universities, in addition to conducting research with communities in Africa. This conference gives them opportunity to present and discuss their research within a larger academic community engaged in African studies. The scheduled panels reflect a vibrant and diverse research, as you can see from the program ahead of us.

I would like to thank the Nordic Africa Institute and the conference organisers for offering such an exciting programme.

Director of the Nordic Africa Institute, conference participants: Again, I wish all of you welcome to Iceland and I hope that you will have a successful

conference. On behalf of the organisers I declare that the Nordic Africa Days 2012 in Reykjavik are now open.