

AFRICAN UNION

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**DEPARTEMENT OF INFRASTRUCTURE AND ENERGY
INFORMATION SOCIETY DIVISION**

BRIEFING NOTE ON .AFRICA (Read “DOT AFRICA”)

Overview of Domain Names

When you use the Web or send an e-mail message, you use a **domain name** to do it. For example, the URL "http://www.african-union.org" contains the domain name **african-union.org**. So does the e-mail address "embassy@africa-union.org"

Human-readable names like "**African-union.org**" are easy for people to remember, but they don't do machines any good. All of the machines use names called **IP addresses** to refer to one another. For example, the machine that humans refer to as "**www.african-unions.org**" has the IP address **70.42.251.42**.

An often-used analogy to explain the Domain Name System (DNS) is that it serves as the *phone book* for the Internet by translating human-friendly computer hostnames into IP addresses. For example, the domain name **www.embassy.com** translates to the addresses **192.0.32.10**

In general, the Domain Name System also stores other types of information, such as the list of mail servers that accept email for a given Internet domain. It also reflect an identity and belonging to a geographic area and / or community

Generic Top Level Domains (gTLDs)

The first-level set of domain names are called top-level domains (TLDs) and the first of these are referred to as generic top-level domains (gTLDs). These include domains such as the well-known **.com** (dot com), **.net** (dot net) and **.org** (dot org). The second type is the country code top-level domains (ccTLDs) which are discussed in the subsequent paragraph

A geographic TLD (or *GeoTLD*) is a generic top-level domain using the name of/ or invoking an association with a **geographical, geopolitical, ethnic, linguistic or cultural** community. As of 2009, only two GeoTLDs were registered the sponsored domains Dotcat, for the Catalan language and culture, and DotAsia, although many others have been proposed.

Country code top-level domains (ccTLDs)

ccTLDs are two-letter domain extension codes intended to represent a specific country (for example **.et** for Ethiopia, **.ke** for Kenya, or **.dz** for Algeria..) These codes are derived from the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) country codes established in 1974 and are issued to the sovereign government of the particular country by the Internet Corporation of Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) and administered by Internet Assigned Numbers Authority (IANA). In theory, once a ccTLD is issued to a sovereign government it is under their complete control and no other body or government may interfere with its use.

The Business Side of the DNS

When an institution or company decides they want a presence on the Internet, they first pick a domain (DNS) name, usually something like company-name.com. The company then chooses a registry service with which to register that domain name for which the registry charges a nominal fee. Domain registration fees may range from 10-to 50 USD per year depending on the domain. The registry is accredited by ICANN to provide this service and has to pay annual fees to ICANN to maintain accreditation. Depending on the domain, the yearly income for a registry could be between 1 to thirty million USD a year. In general some other services are offered along with the registration of domains and thus, you might find some customers paying up 150 – 200 USD a year to the registry.

The DotAfrica top level domain (.Africa)

The DotAfrica TLD is proposed as a new gTLD for the promotion of Africa business, peoples and culture in the Internet. The origins of DotAfrica date back to 2000 when the namespace was claimed by non-African companies during ICANN's¹ first gTLD open application round. In response, a few African professionals strongly opposed that DotAfrica bid as it was not seen to be in the interest of benefitting the continent. In 2002, the same group of professionals drafted, a concept paper proposing a possible operational model of DotAfrica by Africans for Africa.

Since 2002, ICANN has been working on modalities for the introduction of a new application round for gTLDs and this has sparked renewed interest in the DotAfrica namespace. The implementation of DotAfrica will add value to the Internet namespace as a recognizable phrase which focuses on the African identity and captures the essence of the African community. DotAfrica will provide registrants with accrued possibilities for establishing their Internet presence. It is expected that African institutions, small and medium size enterprises will greatly benefit from DotAfrica, as they thrive beyond their local markets to invade the regional and continental marketplace. As individuals, businesses, organizations as well as community groups use the DotAfrica name they would be promoting a diverse and dynamic community within the DotAfrica namespace and realising the potential of the Internet as a platform for the economic growth of Africa.

The promise of the DotAfrica namespace has been recognised by a variety of entities. For instance, since 2007 an organisation called DCA (Dot Connect Africa) largely driven by one individual, has been expressing its interest to set up, own and manage the DotAfrica domain. This individual claims to have the support of the African Union Commission and UNECA. The African Union Commission has sent a letter to this individual stating the AUC does not support any individual on this matter and that AUC will go through an open process for setting up the Dot Africa. Further, DCA, through this individual is collecting letters of support from African member states with the intended

¹ ICANN: the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (www.icann.org)

purpose of demonstrating African community support of DCA's potential bid to ICANN for the DotAfrica namespace.

Preserving DotAfrica for Africa

DotAfrica is supposed to be the name space serving the aspirations of Africa's one billion people and 53 countries. This unique name space will be run in parallel to the current ccTLDs and as such it is imperative that the sponsoring organizations and registrants understand its distinctive value as well as the need for DotAfrica to co-exist with African ccTLDs without negatively impacting on the ccTLDs. Also, there is a need to see DotAfrica as a community domain which should be operated on behalf of the community and for the community's interests. In this regard, operating DotAfrica cannot be seen as just another business opportunity, neither should it be granted to a for-profit business or corporation, be it an Africa grown business or not.

As a community domain name, DotAfrica should therefore be operated as a not for profit organization, as is the case with current community based TLDs such as **DotEu** (DotEuropa) and **DotAsia**. To achieve this requires that African stakeholders are fully aware of and sensitised to the issues surrounding DotAfrica so as to avoid being misinformed and disinformed.

Learning from DotAsia and DotEuropa

The DotAsia Organisation is a not-for-profit, membership-based organization incorporated in Hong Kong as a "limited by guarantee and not having a share capital" corporation. DotAsia is the Sponsoring Organisation and Registry Operator for the DotAsia Sponsored Generic Top Level Domain (gTLD). The governance structure of the DotAsia Organization is constituted based on two types of membership organizations: i) Sponsor Members that are organizations in the Pan-Asia and Asia Pacific region, managing country code Top Level Domain (ccTLD) registries in the region and ii) Co-Sponsor Members that are Internet, Information Technology, Telecommunications, non-profit, NGO or other relevant community organizations in the Pan-Asia and Asia Pacific region. DotAsia reinvests its benefits into technical and socio economical projects for the Asia pacific region. DotAsia has signed a registry service agreement with Afiliias, a renowned international registry; DotAsia started operating in 2008 and has so far registered 200,000 domain names.

DotEuropa is available to 500 million Europeans in 27 countries and has registered more than 3 million names since 2005. DotEu started with discussions at the Council of the European Union in 1999. In 2003, the Council appointed EURiD, a consortium of three founding members (the respective registries for **.be**, **.it**, and **.se**), as the operator of the DotEu registry. Consequently, in 2005, the DotEU gTLD bid was accepted by ICANN. Currently, EURID has four other associate members, including the Academia research network of Slovenia and business Europe.

The African Union and DotAfrica

The African Union Commission strongly believes that the introduction of the DotAfrica will create an attractive regional home for the Pan-African Internet community. As the first sponsored registry to be operating from Africa and, therefore, serving the specific needs of its communities, DotAfrica will echo ongoing operation and the successes of other sister community TLDs such as DotEu (DotEuropa) and DotAsia that have created a new Internet identity for their users and businesses which seek more regional presence without being confined within the limits of one country.

In view of the needs expressed by the African community at large, and in order to fast track the launch and operation of DotAfrica, the Extraordinary Session of the African Union Conference of Ministers in charge of Communications and Information Technologies (CITMC) held in Johannesburg acknowledged the benefits of the DotAfrica domain name to Africa and adopted a resolution (in the Olivier Tambo Declaration) to "***Establish dot Africa as a continental Top-Level Domain for use by organizations, businesses and individuals with guidance from African Internet agencies***".

Following the endorsement of The Olivier Tambo Declaration by the Head of States and Governments Summit in January 2010, the African Ministers in charge of Communication and Information Technologies who met at the Third Ordinary Session of the African Union Conference of Ministers in charge of Communication and Information Technologies in Abuja, Federal Republic of Nigeria, from 6 – 7 August 2010, requested the AU Commission to "***Set up the structure and modalities for the Implementation of the DotAfrica project.***"

The AUC Open Process for the setting up of the Dot Africa

To implement the decision of the African Ministers in charge of Communication and Information Technologies, the AUC set up a task force composed of eminent African experts in the domain. Following the recommendation of the task force, the AUC has opted to adopt an open process through which i) AUC will apply for the operation of DotAfrica during the next round of the new GTLDs which ICANN will be launching soon (June 2011), ii) Launch a call for tender through which an entity will be selected to operate the Dot Africa domain on behalf of member states.

Call to Action

Given the history of DotAfrica, the AUC application to ICANN for DotAfrica could be challenged by an individual and or an institution that would like to stake a claim to the namespace. The proper procedure in this case is for the AUC to enter into dispute resolution with the challenger(s). If no agreement is reached, then the domain will be auctioned and as such whoever provides the highest bid will be given the domain. To avoid this situation and to secure the DotAfrica Domain name for the interest of the community, AU Member States and stakeholders are called upon to support the proposed AUC process for securing the namespace and to make this support widely known. Member states are further called upon to emulate the Republic of Ghana and

write letters to ICANN and the ICANN GAC² expressing their support of the Abuja Declaration of the African Ministers in charge of Communication and Information Technologies as well as for the AUC open process for the implementation of DotAfrica.

² Government Advisory Council