

**Hon NN Mapisa-Nqakula, RSA Minister of Home Affairs, 2nd International ODF Conference, 9 October 2008, Pretoria**

It is my privilege to welcome you, IT practitioners and policy makers from Europe, Africa, South America, the Malay Archipelago and the Indian Sub-Continent. My Department has been tasked to lead the work of our government electronic documentation committee which is in line with our Information Society and Development (ISAD) Plan. The ISAD plan is targeted "to establish South Africa as an advanced Information Society in which Information and Information and Communication Technology tools are key drivers of economic and societal development." It is the task of my department to provide people with enabling documentation. For us to do that, information needs to be organised in a way that people can be identified, their status ascertained and thereby their access to public services improved. The ability to implement interoperable information systems that enable us to organise and structure information is key to the department's success.

The danger of poor interoperability between systems was highlighted following the tragic tsunami on the 26th of December 2004 when efforts in Thailand to rescue the injured and identify the dead were further frustrated by the lack of integration between the systems of different government agencies. It is in response to examples like this that the DHA is forging ahead to make open standards a priority. The emergence of open standards for document formats has further resulted in the ability to process and share documents using formats which have significant impact on the efficiency, interoperability and accessibility of public services. This has important implications for how we understand our democracy. Inclusivity in the context of the emerging South African Information Society requires us to address issues of multilingualism, accessibility, and access to services by under-served communities.

The choice of format used for the representation of documents in government is absolutely critical.

It is critical that we standardise on a single document format for exchange of information within government;

It is critical that the choice is aligned with our free software/open source policy;

It is critical that the document format guarantees our unfettered access to citizen information that we hold in trust;

It is critical that the control of the document format is not dominated by any single vendor, or group of vendors.

On the basis of the above we made the best rational and pragmatic choice available and specified that ODF - the Open Document Format - be used as the format for interoperability of government documents. This was specified in an amendment to our Minimum Interoperability Standard (MIOS).

I have said that the South African government is committed to making use of open standards. This is both a pragmatic imperative to avoid vendor lock in as well a democratic imperative to ensure ongoing access to information we hold in trust. But a standard is not a naturally occurring resource like a tree or a stone, which needs only to be located and controlled in order to be used. A standard is a socially constructed artefact - an agreement, a product of human consensus. How that consensus is reached is important. Who gets to say what and when. Who gets to listen. When developing standards for the formatting of documents in the information society, these questions take on a particular urgency. The storage and processing of South African citizen and visitor information in documents is central to the function of the Department of Home Affairs. We are aware of the civic

importance of standards for documents.

One of the many characteristics of a standard being open is that it allows participation in a transparent and non-discriminatory way. We participate actively in the development of the ODF through the direct participation of the Department of Science and Technology in the OASIS Office Technical Committee which maintains the standard (*note: OASIS is the Organization for the Advancement of Structured Information Standards*). This participation forms part of the activities of our e-Documentation committee.

The South African government has also participated directly in the International Standards Organisation sub committee, SC34, which is responsible for maintaining the ISO edition of ODF. It participates in ISO through its involvement and membership of technical committees of the South African Bureau of Standards. Membership and participation in these various technical committees has proven to be costly in terms of time and resources and demonstrates the concrete reality of our commitment to open standards. It has also given us something of an insight into the workings of the standardisation process in different national and international standards development organisations. South Africa was particularly frustrated by the acceptance by ISO of an overlapping document specification earlier this year. The ability and willingness of corporate private interests to dominate the multi-lateral, democratic process of consensus building within ISO has raised significant concerns, both here and abroad. South Africa appealed the process which was followed, and its outcome, together with India, Brazil and Venezuela. It is clear that, whilst we continue to engage with ISO through our national standards body, there is much which needs to be done to modernise and reform such international institutions to prevent such problems repeating.

But far from being deterred, our enthusiasm and commitment to open standards in general and ODF in particular, is stronger than ever. A benefit of gatherings such as this one, is that it provides the opportunity for organisations and state entities with a shared agenda to explore and create new opportunities for international collaboration in the increasingly important space of information standards. Many of the countries represented here, particularly our brothers and sisters from latin America and Asia, have, like South Africa, made strong commitments to the use of ODF in their various jurisdictions to facilitate interoperability and exchange of information. Many others are actively considering similar policies. It would be a great step forward, and a concrete indication of solidarity, if we were to use the occasion of our gathering to develop a protocol of agreement to use ODF as the preferred format for document exchange between our various state and other entities represented here.

I wish you success in your deliberations and trust that our visitors will have the opportunity to enjoy South African hospitality.