Preface

Most rural Africans depend on natural resources—the land, water, and wildlife—for their livelihoods. Even those living in the towns and cities rely on clean air and water, sanitation services, and proper waste disposal to maintain the health and well being of their families.

This report, *GIS: Supporting Environmental Planning and Management in West Africa*, is an important one for those of us committed to improving the management, use, and conservation of natural resources and the environment in Africa. What is uniquely useful about this study is that authors in three countries—Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, and The Gambia—have identified and documented successful attempts to use modern information technologies, specifically geographic information systems (GIS), to improve the quality of public decision-making in their countries, particularly with respect to the environment and natural resources management.

From Burkina, we have examples of using GIS to enhance the management of regional water systems, to plan for drought and provide early warning of famine, and to develop national environmental action plans. In Côte d'Ivoire, we see that GIS is being used to strengthen management of forest concessions, boost collection of local taxes, and make better decisions about investments in new public services and infrastructure. GIS is being deployed in The Gambia to identify the most suitable sites for new waste disposal facilities in the Greater Banjul area, as well as to help optimize agricultural investment and production while protecting the environment and natural resource base. I know from my experiences in Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Sudan, and Uganda that there are many other examples of policymakers beginning to use geospatial information to strengthen their decision-making processes and in turn to make this information available to the public.

We in Africa need access to the best possible information on our natural resources so we can derive optimal value from them, maintain our natural capital, and enhance people's incomes and living standards.

The sponsors of this study, the joint USAID/WRI Information Working Group, along with their many collaborating African authors, are to be congratulated. Their report sheds much needed light on how Africans are making use of these important information technologies. Thanks to this effort, more experts and policymakers throughout Africa can learn from these experiences and become inspired to document their own.

Much remains to be explored and learned, however. We look to such groups as EIS-AFRICA, the newly formed pan-African NGO, and the African Association of Remote Sensing for the Environment to continue to support the development and use of GIS and provide the networks and meeting places for bringing Africans together to share ideas, information, and technologies.

I strongly recommend to my colleagues in the international agencies and governmental organizations that we sustain these initial efforts and help develop the training capacity and the underlying information systems needed to create more such success stories.

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