



Let's work together to develop ICT

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The penetration of the fibre-optic cables into East Africa has generated a lot of opportunities. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) practitioners are excited about the string of goodies associated with the initiative — high speed internet connectivity, reduced costs in data and voice transfer, increased coverage, among others.

While experts believe that ICT is the linchpin to the economic development of this country, a lot of effort and commitment from all stakeholders remains a necessity if success is to be realised.

On July 18, 2005, President Yoweri Museveni (accompanied by minister Isaac Musumba) launched the first NEPAD e-School in Africa at Bugulumbya S.S in Kamuli District. In his speech, the President pledged to ask the Ministry of Education to "put aside a budget" to support the programme. The facility being in a rural setting, was just as strategic, in a sense that, nearby communities and schools would access it. Unfortunately, the project later failed partly because the President's pledge was not followed up. When the President makes a pledge, stakeholders and area representatives are expected to make a follow-up. It is sad that this did not happen and the target group lost out.

In 2003, the Uganda Communications Commission (UCC), through the Rural Communication Development Fund project (RCDF), developed websites for over 60 districts in Uganda, and on May 31, 2007 at Soroti Hotel, the information minister, Alintuma Nsambu, officially handed over websites to respective districts for maintenance, usage and management. The formal transfer of ownership of web portals from UCC to districts was done with the hope that, information sharing and documentation of best practices would be done and shared on websites, let alone using web portals for fundraising. To date, few Ugandans know about this initiative simply because district leaders who were present at the hand-over ceremony, did very little to popularise the ICT project. <http://www.kamuli.go.ug/> is Kamuli's authentic website; and it speaks volumes about the period of abandonment. On logging into the site, all you see are funny dots and lines. To access information on any district in Uganda, google.com may be used; however, the question of authenticity of the content is unknown.

To curb this, districts should put in place ICT departments with the task to develop and maintain websites, document and disseminate best practices and also build the capacity of fellow staff. Remember, even the longest journey starts with the first step.

The UCC website notes that by 1996, Uganda had only two Internet service providers, 14 radio stations and 3,000 mobile phone subscribers. By March 2007, numbers had grown to 17 internet service providers, 158 radio stations and 3,015,493 mobile phone subscribers. TV Stations also grew from four to 32. "Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted" Albert Einstein's statement, squarely describes the way we measure progress. We are more interested in quantity rather than the actual impact (quality). We are carried away by the number of internet service providers, TV stations and phone subscribers, but overlook key questions like; how has this benefited the average Ugandan? As a result, is the average person earning a dollar per day? These are issues ICT is meant to address.

The Government's effort to promote ICT is tangible. Firstly, an autonomous Ministry of ICT was put in

place; taxes were scrapped off cameras, computers and related accessories. Better still, the Government promoted ICT in learning institutions, a case in point is Makerere University faculty of computing and information technology. Unfortunately, ICT graduates are confined in towns where the smallest population stays. How then will the digital gap reduce? Collective effort is the answer.

This financial year, the Ministry of ICT got the least budget share and everybody seemed contented. To address the digital gap, the ICT ministry needs to lobby for better budget shares to strengthen service delivery. The budget should be good enough to enable massive sensitisation campaigns. It should also be good enough to establish structures that reach the grassroots.

The few people with Internet knowledge basically use it for Facebook, Twitter, reading mails and surfing pornography. People acquire "good" phones only to show off, yet they could be used for internet banking or getting market information. Radio and TV stations have specialised in politics and hate-propaganda.

It is true ICT needs a chance in this country, good policies and realistic implantation plans will do the trick.

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