

UNDP supports development of local content in Ghana

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Information they say is power and can make or unmake a people or individuals depending on the uses to which they apply the information.

But for rural communities everywhere, it is difficult to access, let alone to apply the information for development. Now more than ever, people everywhere are realising the importance of information and its ability to empower them democratically and economically for development.

The United Nations as a lead world body is urging governments to build an informed society as part of efforts to develop and halve the world's poor through the implementation of key development strategies including the application of ICTs to meet the Millennium Development Goals by 2015.

For Ghana, the need to create an informed society that can be part of nation building is not new having an information services department that used methods such as public address systems with mobile vans to spread information to especially, the remotest part of the country. This mode of disseminating is still used to inform people about government programmes on immunization, constitutional and other public educational campaigns.

However, the world has changed so fast and the mode of disseminating information has also undergone a revolution towards the use of all forms of Information, Communication and Technology (ICT) to empower the various segments of the population.

The UNDP, the UN's global development network in the country, admits that the traditional methods of presentation and the spread of information were outmoded and required certain reforms to make them more effective.

Under a UNDP ICT Support to the Ministry of Information and National Orientation (MINO) project, the former is collaborating with the latter to train information officers of Community Information Centres (CICs) under the Ministry of Communications to develop local content for use at all levels of the society. The implementing agency of the CICs under the Ministry of Communications is the Ghana Fund for Telecommunications Operators (GIFTEL).

About USD 240,000 is being spent in 2007 alone on training, capacity building, the development of the government's portal, the development of local content of all kinds of information for dissemination to the varied sectors of the society and also to aid in the government's e-governance project in a cost sharing agreement between the MINO and the UNDP.

Under this project, the UNDP is supporting MINO to develop the ICT capacity of District Information Officers (DIOs) and other officers within the ministry to enable them develop and disseminate local content effectively. The content include national governmental policies, programs through community based

socio-economic activities and information to feedbacks from the citizenry to the government. The project is basically to cover all areas of information needs of the country.

Some information officers have already been trained under the project to manage and disseminate information gathered at the central level for the national portal while others would also help disseminate similar information at the local level for effective spread of the development agenda. The DIOs are expected to develop offline information packages and disseminate them to communities without internet facilities. More than 40 CICs are currently operating out of the 230 centres being established throughout the country.

The most unique aspect of this programme is the development of content tailored to suit individual communities. For instance, while content on the Ghana portal is general and is designed for all citizens and audiences outside of the country, specific content have been developed for districts in Saltpond and Dodowa in the Mfantiman and Dangme West Districts of the Central and the Greater Accra Regions on a pilot basis. While Dodowa is a purely farming community, Saltpond is a fishing community and the developers of the content acknowledge that the two communities have different needs, economic potentials and different occupation that require different solutions to empower them economically.

The information gathered and developed into local content are also tailored to expose the tourism potentials of the communities and aimed to enable citizens add value to local tourist packages and commercialise them for visitors. In Bolga in the Bolgatanga district of the Upper East Region for instance, the three partners (UNDP, MINO and GIFTEL) are devising means to develop story telling into a commercial venture for the people.

Apart from the development of the Ghana portal and the implementation of the two pilot projects at Dodowa and Saltpond, there has been ICT Train-the-Trainer workshop in Microsoft Unlimited Potential for 22 information officers selected from all the 10 regions of Ghana. There has also been ICT capacity building workshop for 30 selected DIOs facilitated by 5 ICT trainers from the MINO under the supervision of CIC coordinators.

The UNDP has supported MINO with 20 computers, 30 pen drives, 25 headsets, and other multimedia equipment for the DIOs to enable them build their competences in using the computer for information gathering, development and dissemination through the CICs.

The project is currently supporting the MINO to develop a state-of-the art Local Area Network at its head office and also earmarked a two-week Train-the-Trainer workshop for 40 selected Journalists in E-Journalism in October 2007.

As part of its objectives, the project is expected to allow people at the grassroots level to have a voice in nation building rather than wait for mobile information vans to move round with public address systems to just give information on newly introduced programmes by the government.

And by this collaboration the implementing agency, the GIFTEL, is able to make the CICs more functional and also to integrate other uses of the Centres such as training of local people in ICTs and the day-to-day application of the facilities to include the development and use of local content, especially information on tourism, farming, health and education.

According to the UNDP the overall objective of this project is in pursuance of its agenda to advocate for change and connect countries to knowledge, experience and resources to help people build a better life.

Truth Lumor, UNDP's official in charge of the programme, says the sponsors believe that through the development and dissemination of information, the citizens of Ghana would be linked to knowledge, sharing of experiences and also resources.

"This strategic intervention from the UNDP is also geared towards creating knowledge based societies to facilitate the implementation of the Government of Ghana's E-governance project."

Mr Lumor says there is no specific time frame for the project and since local content is needed as far as there is information to be communicated either from the government to the public and from the citizenry to the government, the project aims to develop a capable team of DIOs to ensure continuity and sustainability of local content development as part of its goals.

Some challenges of the project have been the delay in the recruitment of DIOs and other supporting staff by the MINO which held back the implementation in addition to the drift demand of high capacity in the use of ICT for multimedia packaging and information dissemination. While the UNDP remains committed to building the ICT capacity of the Information Office to expedite the processes involved in the drift, the project management team hopes to have a smooth implementation in 2008.

Mr Lumor, however, acknowledges that Ghana had made inroads in the development of local content but also notes there is a lot to be done in getting information to the very rural folks.

"The traditional methodologies employed posed numerous bottle necks and made the packaging and dissemination of information very difficult in terms of resource mobilization and sustainability. UNDP acknowledges MINO's effort to drift from these traditional methodologies of information dissemination to more effective, efficient and sustainable ICT driven methodologies that would ensure timely availability of relevant socio-economic information."

It is expected that when the DIOs and their supporting staff are well equipped with adequate ICT skills to disseminate information, there would be a significant increase in development and availability of local content as well as accessibility to such contents, Mr Lumor adds.

The UNDP also believes the project is embedded with a lot of benefits and would at the long run ensure that the MINO is endowed with the required resources, infrastructure and human capacity to meet the information needs of the people and also to have information concerning governmental and non-governmental projects readily available to the public to reduce the cost of information dissemination during educational and awareness campaigns.

Implementers of the project also expect that societies would be well informed and educated about the role of ICT in community development and to increase ICT literacy rate, create more demand for information and make information available on timely basis and accessible to all Ghanaians.

For further information contact the iConnect team: editor@iconnect-online.org

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