

# E-learning initiative: cost-effective means for the poor

By Emmanuel Onyango

MODERN Information & Communication Technologies (ICTs) – such as the Internet – enable the manipulation, filtering and the rapid communication and transfer of information. If used by an information skilled person it can greatly enhance the learning processes and the creation of knowledge, hence creation of wealth.

For sure information literacy is a challenging for everyone. This need not be underestimated because in an information society, wealth comes from knowledge which is created through accessing, assimilating, sharing and using information.

To be really effective at creating that knowledge people need to be trained to acquire the necessary information skills. Online training has proved to be the most cost-effective way that caters for the need of the poor in a

society.

E-learning initiative is a way of promoting education standards at all levels and as the case in Tanzania, various individual groups including higher learning institutions accredited in the country, have played a greater role to ensure that education and e-learning activities is given a priority set up in order to achieve the *Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)*.

To facilitate e-learning activities in the country, Government and private sectors have formed various online projects with a view to help cater for the needs of the poor and the vulnerable groups in the country.

A number of students from primary to higher learning levels who are the beneficiaries of these project, have been learning a lot about various educational curriculum and knowledge through online training at a lesser cost.

It has been envisioned that education and knowl-

edge helps the poor to improve their current livelihoods, address impediments and vulnerabilities that prevents them from seeking opportunities to improve their lives, and participate in new sectors of the national economy that require advanced skills and therefore offer incomes.

But the many deprivations that compound the misery of the poor and prevent them to rise out of poverty, is their lack of access to adequate education, training, acquiring skills and development and broader information and knowledge resources that could help them improve their livelihoods.

The Tanzania Education Information Network Services (TEIN), is a non-governmental organisation that has availed the potential of ICT so as to enhance the quality of education by giving the professional help to teachers, students and education administrators at all levels in the country.

The organization whose mission is to enhance quality education through ICTs mostly deals with effective channels of exchanging knowledge and exposure. To facilitate its mission, the network concentrates basically in e-learning programs through web sites.

To effectively implement its mission, the organization runs two websites namely, the students' web site <http://www.wanafunzi.or.tz> and Education sector website at HYPERLINK "<http://www.TanEdu.org>" <http://www.TanEdu.org> respectively

The Wanafunzi web site is an on-line discussion project aimed mainly at students to create opportunities for knowledge sharing and discussions on selected topics relevant to their age and studies, basing on the social, economic, political and cultural issues.

According to the website project co-ordinator, Atanas Cosmas, the web site vision

envisages every Tanzanian secondary school student, teacher and education administrators to become competent with the use of ICTs so as to reduce the digital divide that exists among them today.

The web site creates opportunities for knowledge sharing and discussions on selected topics relevant to students' age and studies such as educational, social, economic and political issues. The network educate both primary and secondary students in the country.

The Wanafunzi web site is a project which operates a Kiswahili language Portal, under the Tanzania Education and Information Services Trust (TanEdu). The idea was born in 2004 after realizing that most students in Tanzania face constraints when accessing the internet due to language barrier.

The main objectives of the project is to disseminate educational information obtained from various sources in and outside Tanzania and

thereby inform students on developmental issues related to education, healthy, environment, science and technology and particularly news on HIV/Aids, drug abuse and sexually transmitted diseases.

Tanzanian students are fluent in Kiswahili, which is the first official language. Wanafunzi is a ki-Swahili word which means *Student*. According to Cosmas, the site is sponsored by International Institute for Communication and Development (IICD).

The project was among several other that were conceived during the Round Table workshop entitled *ICT to enhance teaching and learning in primary and secondary education* held at Bagamoyo in 2002 and officially launched in 2004 by the principal education officer in the then ministry of education & culture Jasson Gwaseko.

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rapid communication and transfer of information. If used by an information skilled person it can greatly enhance the learning processes and the creation of knowledge, hence creation of wealth.

One of the showcase projects on information sharing on awareness and knowledge based is the *Sharing With Other People Network (SWOPNet)*, a project that is being managed by the Tanzania Commission for Science & Technology (COSTECH).

The SWOPNet portal electronically brings together all owners of ICTs projects under one roof through the site HYPERLINK "<http://www.swopnet.or.tz>" and is essentially very useful for publishing outputs from different projects in the field of ICTs conducted within Tanzania.

However, since the poor citizens have scarce resources coupled with their

limited education and in many cases illiteracy, the situation puts that at a disadvantaged when faced with sophisticated ICTs that are not adapted to their most pressing needs.

In such cases, community radios and modern ICTs including video conferencing facilities like that at the Tanzania Global Development Learning Centre (TGDL) become very appropriate as these facilities are meant to empower citizens by training.

According to the director of TGDL Charles Senkondo, the distance learning curriculum offered by his centre brings closer development changes and tackle people's problems such as poverty, crime and HIV/Aids issues.

There are also planned programs and training in specific skills and knowledge in order to eradicate or reduce notorious phenomenon in a society among youths such as drug abuse, unwanted pregnancies and unemployment.