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# Online Education Takes Firmer Footing in Africa

By Halima Musa

Africa is waking up to the opportunities in eLearning and even in countries experiencing violent conflicts, thousands are acquiring new skills and expanding their knowledge base through virtual education, delegates at this year's eLearning Africa conference in Dakar were told.

While the cost of acquiring basic and advanced education has gone up remarkably in reflection of global inflation, and educational funding has shrunk in several African countries, many public and private stakeholders including non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have employed innovative methods using eLearning window to deliver education to a growing number of people in large cities and remote locations.

According to the Chairman of the New Security Foundation, Dr Harold Elletson, while addressing delegates on 'post-conflict distance learning' at the eLearning Africa forum, "Over 100 million children still don't attend primary school. And, of these, 50 percent are in countries which are either suffering from conflict or recovering from it ... [but] 'distance learning' offered some really attractive, exciting and cost-effective options for developing or rebuilding education in some of the most difficult places in the world."

In Somalia, one of Africa's troubled spots with nearly two decades of violent conflicts; about 4,000 students from six universities have undergone training in journalism courses delivered in English Language. According to Sidiki Traore of the African Virtual University, in the face of terrorism and piracy in Somalia, the AVU in conjunction with its international partners has been able to "enhance human capital and provide hope and life" to thousands who would have been stranded by lack of opportunities through conventional means to improve themselves.

More than 1,350 people from 83 countries took part in the fourth eLearning Africa conference touted as the most comprehensive conference on ICT for development, education and training on the continent. The three days event held in Dakar, Senegal and was declared open by Senegal's President Abdoulaye Wade who outlined his vision for radical changes in African education while condemning European governments for restricting access for African students to educational institutions in their countries. Europe has closed the door for Africa and Africans to tap into the global education sector in European countries, Wade said and commended the organizers of the eLearning Africa conference 2009 for bringing stakeholders together to improve educational access on the continent using ICT tools.

President Wade has been in the fore-front of campaign to create the Digital Solidarity Fund, a common funding geared at improving Africa's economic wellbeing through improve usage of ICT. Africans have a duty to protect and advance their own educational goals, said Wade "At a time when Europe closes its doors, at a time when Europe is turning inwards, it is our duty to find a solution and eLearning is a part of it." He expressed delight to see "so many powerful minds interested in eLearning," adding that there can be no sustainable development without education. His words: "We are rich in human resources but they are wasted unless they are trained."

The Dakar conference was a major meeting point for stakeholders to galvanize ideas on improving the continent's education future through ICT. It also offered governments the much needed platform to create a common ground to resolve some of the challenges faced by the different countries. During the conference, fourteen African environmental authorities agreed to create an African Environmental eLearning Network to operate in the fourteen signatory countries. The network will consist of a number of sub-regional hubs and national eLearning centres. "One of the first tasks will be to develop strategies and action plans to mainstream technology supported learning to support their work in the areas of training, education and awareness raising."

The eLearning Africa conference is a yearly event organised by Berlin based ICWE GmbH, an international conference organiser with a focus on education and training. The Dakar meeting brought together speakers and delegates from various backgrounds. In attendance were ministers of education, senior government leaders, non-governmental organisations, school and university educators, developmental agencies and key business executives representing a variety of public ministries, governments, development agencies, international organisations and leading private companies from different countries.

The fifth edition of the conference, eLearning Africa 2010, will take place in Lusaka, Zambia.