

# Saitoti challenges African states to embrace technologies

**BENEFITS:** When integrated into education, ICTs have the capacity to improve the delivery of education through distance learning

**Kenya's Education Minister Prof George Saitoti** has asked African countries to embrace Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) to improve the quality of education.

Speaking at the second International Conference on ICT for Development, Education and Training held in Nairobi last week, Prof Saitoti said since the 2000 World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal, Kenya has made considerable progress towards the attainment of Education For All by 2015.

The country has already formulated a policy framework for education, training and research in which it has made a commitment to integrate ICT in its education system,

besides strengthening open and distance learning.

"In education, the use of ICTs offers new ways in which the quality, effectiveness, and in particular, the flexibility of higher education can be improved," said Prof Saitoti.

He added that when integrated into education, ICTs have the capacity to improve the delivery of education through distance learning.

He, however, acknowledged the challenges that African countries face as they use ICT in education. He cited lack of skills among school managers and teachers and ICT policies in many countries, inadequate skills for the development of localised digital content and the high cost of software as some of the challenges.

Other hindrances are the poor state of infrastructure, particularly access to electricity, communication lines and connectivity to the Internet.

He said the challenges have contributed to the wide digital divide between urban and rural areas, the

rich versus the poor; the educated and the illiterate.

Citing the case of Kenya — where 56 per cent of the fixed telecommunication network is concentrated in Nairobi, with the other regions sharing the remaining 44 per cent — Prof Saitoti said the Communications Commission of Kenya is developing a universal access strategy, one of which is the establishment of the East African Submarine Cable System.

"When this is done, we expect the Internet costs will become affordable to the general public and beneficial for the enhancement of e-

learning in all our educational institutions," said the minister.

He said to achieve the integration of ICTs in education, the Ministry of Education in collaboration with the Ministry of Energy and the government of Finland has embarked on rural electrification of all public schools in the country. The Communication Commission of Kenya has also equipped and connected 16 schools to the Internet as a sign of commitment towards better education. Prof Saitoti said his ministry has also embraced a public-private partnership, which has led to the establishment of the Kenya Education Sector Support Programme, drawing support from various ICT multinationals.

For instance, he said, Microsoft has signed an agreement with the ministry to provide software at affordable rates, while MultiChoice Africa has completed the installation of digital satellite televisions in 20 schools free of charge.

Speaking at the opening ceremony, Ghana's Deputy Minister for

Technical Education, Kwame Twumasi, said African countries should develop their own e-learning curriculum to suit the local situations.

Ken Mbowaya, Hewlett Packard managing director for East Africa said his company has already developed the digital content that will go towards achieving the desired change in education.

The conference was held under the theme, "Building Infrastructures and Capacities to reach out to the whole of Africa," reflecting the attempts being made to set up regional ICT hubs to enhance education and training services.

The conference attracted 1,200 delegates from 88 countries.

Some 300 speakers from 55 countries addressed the conference, including representatives from Unesco, the International Centre for Technical and Vocational Education Training, the Global Development Learning Network and the World Bank.

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