

## NEWS IN DEPTH

## COMMENT

THE SUPPORT the Millers Association Zambia (AZ) which has been found inflating the meal prices.

AZ has directed the traders to sell the commodity at the recommended price of 2,000 per 25-gramme bag of breakfast meal and 2,500 for a similar quantity of roller meal. Recently, President Yanawasa also expressed displeasure at the traders had maintained high prices despite the Kwacha falling and maintaining its strength against the United States dollar.

The traders' reference to higher prices not only has negative economic consequences but has a social bearing on the majority of Zambians who depend on the meal as a staple. The millers' association should not end at issuing threats to the traders who are exploiting consumers and selling above the recommended retail price.

The association should publish a list of exploitative traders so that they can be a consumer boycott. Many workers struggle to make ends meet and high prices for basics such as the meal can only worsen an already difficult situation. Notwithstanding the various economic fundamentals at play, it is anomalous to have essential commodities such as mealie meal sold so dearly as if they were luxuries.

Essentials such as mealie meal are priced beyond the reach of consumers, what are they going to eat? Conversely, if people are to spend all their savings on mealie meal, their quality of life

By AMOS SIMBAYA  
**INFORMATION** communication technologies (ICTs) play a key role in shaping education and social economic development. But the technical complexity demanded by ICT tools has created a digital divide between the developed countries and the third world nations, and between the rich and poor within African societies.

Education is one of the major setbacks that African countries are facing today. This sector around the globe is undergoing exciting changes from school and house-based models to various forms of network-based education.

For example, in Zambia, The Global Teenager Project (GTP), launched in 1999 by the International Institute for Communication and Development (IICD), has enabled Zambian schools to bring the full potential of ICTs into the classroom.

If funded and supported properly, such a project can be used to develop e-learning as a viable form of education delivery.

However, the greatest challenge with e-learning is whether it can produce a fundamental change in much of Africa's education system.

The issue of e-learning

in Africa has brought in an important ICT discussion that African countries should adopt E-learning. Such discussions have attracted many thought-provoking questions about e-learning in Africa.

The most important aspect of any change in any system is the need for demand. Some may be of the view that African countries should embark on changes in education to include e-learning in particular.

This will definitely call for an assessment. The question in this regard could be to find out whether there is demand or need by African countries to improve in formal or informal education, and whether e-learning is the ultimate solution to this improvement.

E-learning has received various definitions. Some have indicated in their definitions that e-learning should be more than just a new tool for formal education. Let us put it straight.

E-learning is the type of education that is facilitated by the use of digital tools and content. Typically, it involves some form of interactivity, which may include online interaction between the learner and their teacher or peers. Examples could be the type of education offered using electronic delivery

methods such as CD-ROMs, video conferencing, websites and e-mail. This method of education is often used in distance-learning programmes.

The African education system has predominately been classroom-based. This means there has always been a physical learning environment between a student and a teacher. However, the emergence of e-learning has allowed some people in Africa to acquire and improve their education in different disciplines.

The question that arises is whether E-learning can replace or supplement instructor-led classroom training and help African countries to solve other problems. This question can only be answered by having discussions on E-learning issues in Africa.

An example of such discussions is the E-Learning 2006 Conference (1st International Conference on ICT for Development, Education and Training, Addis Ababa, May 24 - 26, 2006).

Some of the issues that will be tackled during this conference include capacity development supported by e-learning, access and connectivity issues in Africa; e-learning in

the fight against HIV and AIDS; cutting-edge developments aimed at Africa; e-learning, and design, development and delivery.

Others are online collaboration, moderation, teaching and learning.

Among these topics of discussions, most African countries will be interested in access and connectivity issues in Africa and online collaboration, moderation, teaching and learning.

This is because acquiring or enhancing education through e-learning has its share of obstacles especially in a third world country like Zambia.

Firstly, there is the question of access to the Internet and cost of e-learning. This form of delivery of education requires that an individual must have at least access to broadband connectivity. However, most African countries have only a small proportion of people that can afford broadband connectivity and this usually is at their places of work. If access to the Internet is one of the obstacles to e-learning in Africa and that many individuals therefore would have to use organisational resources.

But how will organisations



*E-LEARNING in Zambia is a new concept.*

(employers) treat their employees using organisational time and resources to enhance their education. Since e-learning is a new concept in Africa, one cannot give clear perceptions of how employers perceive

this issue. Additionally, the major obstacles education through e-learning may face in Africa are availability and affordability of computer hardware, software and Internet connectivity for e-learning. There are

few options to reducing the cost of ICTs in Africa today. Another obstacle is cost of acquiring the education itself, about 80 per cent of Africans live in abject poverty therefore very few people can afford acquiring

education through e-learning from institutions outside their countries. Therefore, one can only hope that more ICTs conferences could be held so that ICT issues can be discussed and then a resolution is found.