

## **ECOWAS e-Learning Initiative to revolutionize Education in West Africa**

Among the critical challenges to education in West Africa is the fact that the region has a young, dynamic and fast growing population with almost 70 percent of the estimated 230-million people in the 15 ECOWAS member states under the age of 35 years.

The region is also saddled with a large proportion of disadvantaged or marginalized sections of the population in remote and/or deprived communities, including house wives, early school leavers and street children.

In addition, education in the region is characterized by dilapidated, overstretched, overused and inadequate number of buildings and other infrastructure for the ever growing population. Schools, institutions, universities and facilities are located only in a limited number of urban areas and the capital cities coupled with grossly inadequate or obsolete Information, Communication and Technology (ICT) infrastructure.

To address these challenges, ECOWAS Ministers of Education in 2004 requested the Commission to establish an online/distance education programme for the region using ICT.

In 2006 the President of the Commission set up the ECOWAS e-Learning Task-force which has produced a Policy Statement that now guides the Commission's pilot e-Learning Initiative with the purpose of revolutionizing education in West Africa as part of the institution's all-round integration programme.

The Commission has in fact recorded some progress on the establishment of an e-Learning and e-Services Centres in the region to provide e-products and equip youths and other sections of populations with the requisite skills and tools.

The principal objective of the public/private focused ECOWAS e-Learning Initiative is to make education not only more accessible, but also affordable by youths and the larger society thereby creating flourishing ICT enterprises and making the youth more employable, engaged and capable of realizing their full potentials, making them useful to themselves, their countries and the community.

The importance of education, e-Learning and training as a means of providing skills, removing ignorance and encouraging participation in the information society cannot be over-emphasized vis-à-vis the ECOWAS overarching objective of fostering regional integration.

The e-Learning Initiative only part of the ECOWAS several steps at putting ICT in the front burner of its development agenda for the development of a technology-driven education system in the region.

The 6<sup>th</sup> International Conference on ICT in Tanzania presents another opportunity for the ECOWAS Commission, member States and partners to review progress on ICT and E-Learning approaches for the purpose of charting a road map on the way forward.