

DIGITAL

Finally the first ICT villages take off in parts of the country

The digital community has been a lofty idea for the last few years, but a regional organisation has finally sent the ball rolling, writes NJONJO KIHURIA

Villagers in Mwingi, Ngurumani in Magadi, Isinya, Isiolo, Marsabit, Nyahururu, Homabay and Nakuru are the first to realise the digital dream through a volunteer programme started by the Arid Lands Information Network (ALIN).

Though Alin's core function is to facilitate exchange of information between communities, for years the documentation of this information has been challenged by the limited capacity of its member organisations on the ground to document experiences. The volunteer programme was therefore initiated to fill the gap of trained and skilled personnel to document project experiences and knowledge in the eastern Africa's drylands.

In an interview Alin's manager in charge of capacity building and partnerships Noah Lusaka, noted that some project generate good information on practical technologies and successful approaches to tackling prevailing conditions "but sadly the information rarely circulates for the benefit of similar projects even in the same district".

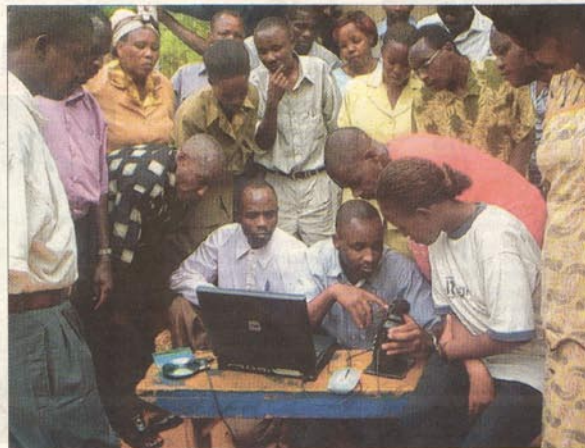
But the new programme that involves the recruitment of fresh graduates from various universities and other institutions of higher learning and who volunteer their ICT skills to the communities, is gradually reversing this challenge.

local development content from communities in the region using different multi media approaches. "We have established 15 community knowledge centres (CKC) equipped with computers with access to internet through GPRS, where the volunteers are based. The volunteers help in running the centres and train community members on basic ICT skills," said Lusaka, speaking last week after the graduation of 10 graduates who had worked as volunteers for one year in CKCs across East Africa.

In Kenya the centres are based Kyuso in Mwingi, Ngurumani in Magadi, Isinya, Isiolo, Marsabit, Nyahururu, Homabay and Nakuru.

In Tanzania, the volunteers are based in Shinyanga in Dodoma region and Kayunga in the Karagwe region, while one was based at Wakiso in central Uganda. The volunteers train community members on application and use of ICT tools including computer knowledge, accessing the internet and writing skills among others.

Lusaka says it is at those centres that the documentation of the local knowledge is done, disseminated from and from here the communities also directly access the information they require. The volunteers who are either fresh diploma or degree holders in community development, environment, journalism and communication are before posting inducted on volunteerism, the scope of Alin's work and



Volunteer workers take villagers through various ICT steps

PHOTO / NJONJO KIHURIA

built their capacities and through linkages with other organisations, the volunteers whom we also train on how to do CVs and report writing get job opportunities when they complete the one year volunteer service"

On the other hand the grassroots organisations that partner with Alin can now through these trained volunteers have their voices amplified through the documentation of their indigenous knowledge which is later published in Alin's quarterly magazine, *Baobab*, aired through community radios or through the internet.

Lusaka says that through the information exchange programme, the communities can learn from the experiences of others and adapt the simple technologies that work, especially in the dry zones. Through the volunteer programme, Alin is now able to do proper documentation and have able representation in the field.

"We now get good quality documentation in form of articles, while the volunteers support us in logistics especially when we have to conduct seminars and workshops. Our presence in the field is also being felt and it has become easy for

replicate or use the shared ideas, especially in drylands where infrastructure is wanting.

"There are many development actors in Africa, but rarely is the information they generate shared among communities. We are trying to fill this gap by ensuring the communities share information especially on agriculture and the environment to enhance production of crops and livestock".

Though it has reduced the number of volunteers from 15 last year to ten this year to enable it focus on specific CKCs so that it can make appropriate follow-ups, Alin hopes to expand the programme in future to involve more young people in development issues.

"We envisage that in the near future we will have a pool of communication experts especially from the dry zones who can through the various media bring out the development issues of those areas. Charles Maina Mureithi who is a supervisor at the Ng'arua community knowledge centre, recounted how the volunteer who had

Daily Nation Monday March 31 2008

State to create link website for graduates

BY STANDARD CORRESPONDENT

THE Government will create a website that links fresh graduates with employers.

Mr Benjamin Cheboi, the secretary to the Higher Education Loans Board (Helb), said yesterday the website would list potential employers and available skills. It will be in place in the next three months.

Speaking during the closing of a workshop organised by the Arid Lands Information Network (Alin) for community information volunteers, Cheboi said the website will enhance the capacity of fresh graduates to get jobs and realise their potential.

"It is expensive for people just out of college to stay in big towns looking for jobs. But they can access a website listing job opportunities

nearer home anywhere in the country and the employers can gauge the skills they need from the same site," he said.

The Helb secretary also urged diploma and first degree holders who had completed one year of volunteer programme with Alin, to be self employed and seek loans from his board to advance their education.

"Advance your education and instead of sitting idle waiting for job opportunities to come your way. With the one year experience you have gained, you can seek loans from the Ministry of Youth Affairs to set up your ICT businesses," said Cheboi.

The volunteers drawn from Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania have been working with Alin's partners in East Africa to promote access to information exchange for rural communi-



Ndemo

In his speech, Information and Communication Permanent Secretary, Dr Bitange Ndemo, deplored the limited access to ICTs for the youth and rural communities, but appreciated the Alin's efforts in promoting local content generation and sharing of un-

tapped indigenous knowledge through information products such as open Enrich software, the Baobab journal and CD-ROMS.

He said Alin's strategies in involving young graduates in development, promotion of ICTs and delivering information to needy communities, was contributing to the country's policy of an ICT-driven society. "We applaud Alin's youth volunteer programme for equipping young graduates with ICT skills, preparing them for the job market and making them relevant to society," said Ndemo.

The ministry's Deputy Secretary, Mr Henry Mugasia, who read the speech on behalf of the PS, commended the NGO for its efforts to bridge the digital divide, noting that little effort had been made to take basic ICT facilities to rural communities.