

## UNECA champions local language on net

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The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) recently launched the Academic Network of African Researchers on Languages to undertake research on how "Internet language" can be simplified and translated into local languages. "We want to link computer sciences closer with languages with an objective of bridging the language digital divide that does hinder our local people from using ICTs especially in the use of Internet," said UNECA's Director of ICT, Science and technology Division Aida Opoku-Mensah.

At the same time, the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) has launched a programme to review the national ICT policies of African countries on how they address the issue of languages. "We would like to see which country has language in its ICT policy", said IDRC Senior Programme Specialist Dr. Adel El Zaim. He said it remains the role of African governments to monitor and implement policies encouraging use of local language and encourage its application in schools.

"If a government in Africa implements such a programme it would have created employment for the local software developers, while many local people would benefit from and understand the local content since it will not be in foreign languages," he emphasised. He noted that IDRC has set up an ICT project covering Morocco, Tunisia, Jordan, Egypt and Sudan but is facing implementation hiccups due to lack of a single language to be used in the process.

"In Morocco and Tunisia we had French, while in Sudan, Jordan and Egypt we found Arabic and English languages being used. We are talking of a knowledge society and in the end we had to use all the three languages in the network in order to enable them communicate with the rest of the World," he said.

Chairman of the advisory committee in ICANN, Mohammed Sharil Tarmizi said Africa's Internet penetration is only at 3.5 percent.

"We have more than 6800 languages in the world but how many of them are African and are used on the Internet? African governments should set up policies that give guidelines on how they should get involved in language issues and commit the telecommunication providers to venture into rural areas instead of isolating them," he emphasised. He said that out of the 6800 languages that were identified by the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisations (UNESCO), 94 percent are spoken by only 3 percent of the world population.

"In Africa we know there are languages that are not written and with time they would disappear. But if we use our local content, we would be enabling our people to create own jobs and products that are relevant for the emerging people and the emerging market," he said.