Wanted: Digital Village Managers

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18 Jun 2007

In its efforts to bridge the digital divide between urban and rural Kenya the government is to introduce a training program for 1,000 digital managers.

Nairobi - As one of the Government of Kenya's commitment to bridging the digital divide between urban and rural areas, the Kenyan Ministry of Information and Communications is set to roll out a Digital Village Project, in which 1 000 Digital Village managers will be trained to manage digital villages in the country's 210 constituencies.

The project is a Public Private Partnership that seeks to take Information and Communication Technology for Development (ICT4D) to the rural communities in Kenya and make ICTs more affordable and accessible to the wider population. As part of the preparations, the ministry has already placed advertisements for the position of Digital Village Managers to undergo an intensive three- week training program. The core of the project involves a collaboration of government, civil society and individuals with the aim of supporting and investing in digital schools, kiosks and centres. According to the project, a digital school is an educational ICT facility established in every location with five to 10 computers each. A digital kiosk is a commercial ICT facility to be established in every constituency with one to five computers each. A digital centre is a development ICT facility to be established in every district with 10 to 20 computers each.

Rural stakeholder

With the Ministry of Information and Communications and the World Bank being the implementing agencies, the project will be owned and operated by a stakeholder within the rural community. Due to the high rates of unemployment and poverty levels within the country, digital villages are expected to create employment and enhance economic and social development in rural areas.

Each digital village will provide electronic services to the community, such as email and other Internet services and electronic banking including money transfer services. Other services to be provided are electronic governance, which includes access to police abstract forms, P3 forms, identity card application forms as well as loan application forms for the Youth Development Enterprise Fund recently launched by the government.

Meanwhile, the Communications Commission of Kenya, the telecommunications industry regulator, is set to improve phone services, especially in the rural areas by cutting down the cost of building infrastructure. Under the proposed facility, telephone, electricity and Internet connections will be routed through a single cable. According to Information and Communications Minister Mutahi Kagwe, the government has chosen the path as it promises faster development of ICTs in the developing world. Kagwe, however, says that infrastructure sharing should not be limited to ICTs. Instead, cables, gas pipes and even oil pipelines should be laid as road construction goes on.

Major challenge

Last month, CCK unveiled a Geographic Information Systems (GIS) electronic software to map out the country's infrastructure networks. As regards the digital divide between urban and rural areas, James Waweru, CCK Director General, noted that the disparity between urban and rural areas poses a major challenge in the growth of ICTs.

Furthermore, the continent remains slow on the uptake, especially of communications services, due to lack of infrastructure and high connectivity costs. "The scenario is compounded by the fact that rural areas also lack other enabling infrastructure, most notably roads and power", observed Mutahi.

The idea of using the cable network to offer telephone and Internet services was first mooted by the Kenya Power and Lighting Company (KPLC) several years back. That idea has now come to pass following CCKs proposed facility. However, CCK will be hard pressed to convince mobile phone operators Safaricom and Celtel, as well as the sole landline operator, Telkom Kenya, given that they have already invested heavily in their own infrastructure.

Measures already in place

Meanwhile, Safaricom Limited, Kenya's leading Mobile Services Provider fully appreciates the role that its Information Technology system plays in its quest to remain as the local market leader, by the steps that it has taken to protect its data through the implementation of American Power Conversion (APC) Symmetra PX4O-80KWUPSes. Safaricom's IT Network Manager, Fred Kamwati says that the Symmetra PX UPS serves to protect the company's enterprise data centres, user PCs and it specifically protects the LAN/WAN Routers, switches and servers.

"Mitigation measures were already in place for data protection but the implementation of the APCs Symmetras has resulted in a reduced number of user support calls for individual UPS," he says. "We implemented the power protection solution because of the assurance of system availability and opted for APCs units because of its reliability, scalability and support," he adds.

The APC Symmetra equipment was bought from and installed by Legend Power Systems, APC's authorized distributor, installation and support centre.

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