Promoting ICT in Rural Tanzania

By A Correspondent

FOLLOWING structural reforms going on in the country, with Tanzania adopting a two-tier administrative government comprising of central government (at national level) and local government at the level of district administration, opportunities for the introduction of information and communication technology (ICT) for good governance increased.

Consequently, the Tanzania Commission for Science and Technology (COSTECH) seized the moment and sought to collaborate with a number of foreign partners in spearheading ICT capacity building, which included training of specialised groups and assisting a number of institutions in establishing computer mediated communication (particularly [1] email).

COSTECH first ,experience with assisting local governments in utilising 'ICT for good governance [began in Kinondoni .Municipal Council in Dar es Salaam. The council was assisted in introducing ICT in some sectors notably health, education and civil registrations, covering some wards within the municipality. The experience confirmed the utility and value of ICT for good governance.

Acting on its own, the council increased its ICT equipment particularly personal computers from a mere handful to several dozens within the first year. Indeed, by early 2003 preparations were under way to embark upon an expanded ICT for good governance in the Kinondoni Municipal Council.

Buoyed by the experience of ICT in Kinondoni Municipal Council, COSTECH approached its foreign partners for assistance in introducing ICT at village level. Consequently, Unesco's Informatics Division commissioned COMNET-IT to work with COSTECH in Tanzania for the initiation of village-governance projects.

This project was conceived against the background of the unique circumstance of the Tanzanian country side. It may not be always visible but these villages have fairly advanced governance structures, complete with extensive data collection systems covering different aspects of administration.

The recent administrative restructuring just gave an impetus to the information systems. It is routine for villages to rolled information about their demographics, health services, educational services, agricultural products and other social services.

The system being used in the villages is the creation of registers.

They include the following: General household registers, educational registers and child survival registers. All these registers are kept at village level. But the main consumers of the information in the registers are higher authorities at the district level.

There is no belittling the importance of collecting information at village level for higher authorities at district headquarters. But would be better if such information collected at the village also benefited the villagers.

Otherwise, there would not be much motivation for keeping the registers up to date. Indeed, in the survey for selecting the best villages, it was observed that some villages were falling behind in collecting information for the registers.

The situation obtaining in villages in Tanzania as far as information is concerned, lends itself readily to the introduction of ICT for good governance, as well as supporting the development process in general.

Thus, for the purpose of undertaking this project it was simply a question of selecting the village with the best ICT infrastructure notably electricity and telecommunications.

For the purpose of project monitoring, villages situated along the main highways from Dar es Salaam would be best. The criteria used in looking for the best village was not just the appropriate physical infrastructure! profile. COSTECH also sought in its surveys to gauge the attitudes and preparedness of the villagers in participating in ICT projects for development.

Going by the above criteria, two villages were selected in Morogoro and Coast regions. They were all electrified and their villagers enjoyed telephone services (mobile and fixed). The first to be selected was Lunga-Lugoba Village in Bagamoyo District, Coast Region, while the second was Dakawa Village, Mvomero District, Morogoro Region. They were both very conveniently located. Whereas Lugoba is 125km on the highway from Dar es Salaam to Arusha, Dakawa is 220 km on another highway from Dar es Salaam to Dodoma.

Soon after the selection of the villages, what followed was the upgrading of facilities and infrastructure to enable the villages utilise ICT. Therefore, COSTECH established rapport with village government leaders in Dakawa (Mvomero) and. Lugoba (Bagamoyo) with the purpose of implementing the project in their respective villages.