

The SMR Knowledge Services e-Profile
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The Information Africa Organization (IAO): The Birth of A Movement Kenya's Focus on Youth Opens the Door to Amazing Potential for the Country

by Guy St. Clair

A Different Approach for SMR International's e-Profiles

As regular readers know, the objective with SMR International's *e-Profiles* is to write about people succeeding as strategic knowledge professionals. Describing their particular expertise in knowledge management (KM), knowledge sharing, and knowledge services, we seek to inform SMR's clients and colleagues about how these KM/knowledge services leaders achieve their success.

With this *e-Profile* of the Information Africa Organization (IAO), we take a different approach. We want to *anticipate* KM/knowledge services success by sharing impressions about an initiative that is just beginning, an activity that—from SMR's perspective as observers of KM/knowledge services development—has great potential for the people of Kenya and, we hope, even beyond Eastern Africa. We want SMR's clients and colleagues to know about this important initiative.

If there is any one characteristic that seems to have a strong impact on visitors to Kenya, it is the country's commitment to helping its youth.

It's not hard to see why. In a country of some 33 million people, youth (defined as citizens between 15 and 24 years old) make up some 60% of the total population. Unfortunately, the most important (and the most disturbing) statistic is the one that affects the future of the country: nearly 61% of the unemployed population belongs to this age group.

So everywhere you travel, whether in the four biggest cities (Nairobi, Mombasa, Kisumu, Nakuru) or in the countryside, there are many indications that youth is being thought about, worked with, given every opportunity that people can come up with. You see road signs leading to this or that youth centre, or you hear about meetings of young people who are getting together to talk about this or that subject (most often a job-search technique or an educational activity). And not surprisingly, in a country where religion is so powerful (mostly Christianity but with Hinduism, Sikhism, Islam, and traditional beliefs strong as well), faith-based organizations do their part, with religious organizations fully supportive of programs for helping youth find opportunities to bring focus to their lives.

Sadly, in a country with such high unemployment, finding those opportunities is not easy. One avenue given much attention is education, considered by some to be the route to success in this endeavor, and education is taken very seriously in Kenya. As it turns out, though, the high rate of well-educated young people is another contributing factor to this most important issue the country is dealing with, for even education is not turning out to be the magic elixir citizens want it to be. Without an economic infrastructure to support new business, innovation, and building for the future, even young people with strong educations cannot find work, resulting in a truly untenable situation as far as the

future of the country is concerned. It becomes something of a double whammy when you have a unemployment situation among young people in general, coupled with a huge, largely educated youth population looking for work.

It is this very challenge that brought about the creation of the Information Africa Organization (IAO), a new non-governmental organization (NGO). Registered as a legal entity just last September, the organization has been created, as its constitution states, "to build capacity of youth in information and communications technologies (ICT) to enable them to improve their livelihoods." The focus on youth, on education and employment, and—perhaps most significantly—on Kenya's future all come together to make this an exciting and extremely powerful paradigm for moving the country toward a new role as a knowledge society.

And it is not just ICT. That ICT and KM/knowledge services will be brought together (see sidebar) is made clear in conversations with IAO leaders and several of IAO's enthusiastic supporters, and the organization's primary objective is—as it must be in today's global workplace—far broader than focusing on ICT alone. Indeed, the duality of ICT and KM/knowledge services is right up front, with one of IAO's specific objectives candidly stated: "to recognize and document the experience and resources of youth in order to facilitate knowledge management that would otherwise go underutilized...." Other specific objectives listed in the IAO constitution speak of such KM/knowledge services-related activities as the development of a resource center or databank, training and strategic learning for relevant skills and expertise, communication, awareness, advisory services, and facilitated KM, all of which are features of and connect to any well thought-out knowledge development/knowledge sharing (KD/KS) initiative. And all of which, not coincidentally, attach to the success of KM/knowledge services in any organization or business, regardless of the environment.

But the concept of a knowledge society or a knowledge culture is not limited to the local, the national, or the regional. It is going to be with advances realized through an educated, knowledge-focused youth that Kenya will position itself for a leading role in the global economy. The whole scenario has been clearly spelled out for a while now, and we only have to return to the thoughts of the late management leader Peter F. Drucker, writing in *Executive Excellence* fourteen years ago, to get the point:

Knowledge has become the key resource for economic strength. Knowledge knows no boundaries. There is no domestic knowledge and there is no international knowledge. There is only knowledge. ...

That knowledge has become the key resource means that there is a world economy, and the world economy, rather than the national economy, is in control. Every country, every industry, and every business will, in its decisions, have to consider its competitive standing in the world economy and the competitiveness of its knowledge competencies.

Such thinking has obviously inspired IAO's founders, for the goal of the organization is discussed frankly and fully: strengthening the knowledge competencies of today's youth strengthens Kenya's competitive standing in the world economy. It is truly a remarkable undertaking these people have put together, and it is one that should—without hesitation—be supported and promoted throughout Kenya, both at the personal and professional levels and, most importantly, at the political level.

And the role of ICT and KM/knowledge services as an enabler in society is being considered not only in Kenya. As it happens, the launch of IAO could not have come at a more propitious time, for as this is being written the [African Union](#) is preparing to meet in Addis Ababa from 25 January to 2 February. Quite coincidentally (or perhaps not, depending on how one thinks about these things), the chosen theme for this 14th Ordinary Session of the African Union Assembly "Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in Africa: Challenges and Prospects for Development." This meeting—and the

ICT or KM/Knowledge Services? What is it? What's it to be?

The answer is both. In many respects, the present move toward the building of a knowledge culture—even the goal of developing a nation or region as a knowledge society—might be thought of as having grown out of ICT development, for such a direction has been anticipated and much discussed over the past twenty years or so. With such a dual development stream, it was natural for there to be confusion between what is shared (knowledge) and the means used to share it (ICT), but that kind of confusion now, thankfully, seems to be fading. While there continue to be some references made using one term or the other (e.g., “ICT” *vis-à-vis* “KM” or vice-versa), almost everyone now seems to understand that what we are speaking about is in fact a melding of two never very distinct disciplines. ICT and KM/knowledge services are now marching hand in hand, which is just the way it should be.

—GStC

accompanying discussions, debates, and press coverage—provide an excellent opportunity for raising the awareness of the African nations, and particularly of Kenya, to the value of knowledge development and knowledge sharing for its future. If ever there were an appropriate time to talk about knowledge value—whether speaking about value to an organization, business, country, or continent—or to put forward an initiative designed to influence the recognition of knowledge value, this is it.

In Kenya, thinking about the value of shared knowledge and communication—and the link between this value and society's—has been around for about four years or so. The subject was brought up in 2006 by the Hon. Rev. Moses Akaranga, then M.P. and Minister of State for Public Service, when he addressed the nation on Public Services Day (he is today IOA's Vice-Chairman). Noting that many of the achievements of public service had been “hampered by inadequate communication and feed-back strategy,” with the result that the public had not been sufficiently informed about “various reform efforts and initiatives,” Minister Akaranga made it clear that a new focus on communication would be part of the nation's future. He now finds himself positioned to help in the achievement of this goal. Working with IAO Executive Director William Mibei and the IAO board, he and his colleagues are building a framework for that very purpose: to make it possible for Kenya to strengthen its youth and make life better for all citizens through information, knowledge, learning, and communication. With this kind of thinking, IAO is positioning itself to lead the way in moving Kenya forward.

What's needed now? Funding is obviously the first step. Philanthropic, humanitarian, and development organizations—as well as governments—must be made to understand that goals such as those put forward by IAO are critical for the simple reason that they impact the next generation. Initial approaches can be relatively simple, according to some who have been working to get IAO started. For example, there is a vast array of information, knowledge, and strategic learning to be shared from people throughout rural Africa whose only known methodologies for knowledge development and knowledge sharing are oral tradition and apprenticeships; surely at least some of this essential knowledge can be captured. Once young people learn ICT and the principles of KM/knowledge services implementation, and then use what they learn in interactions with village elders, community health practitioners and herbalists, small subsistence farmers, individual merchants and vendors, and others who have important knowledge to share, the entire economy will be strengthened.

As important as funding, though, must be a serious and attention-grabbing awareness campaign. Whether it will come from professionals in public relations, advertising, and marketing or from professional societies, academic institutions, and ICT/KM organizations performing good works, the end result must be a campaign to ensure that all of society understands the value of shared knowledge in society's success and in the development of healthy, successful future citizens who will be part of that society. The corporate sector has a role to play as well, for it is through corporate support and the utilization of corporate public relations and advertising that the message will be conveyed to all of

Kenya's people. It has happened before on many occasions. One only has to remember the corporate support given to the American literacy campaign of a few years back—going all the way to the White House and enlisting the then First Lady of the United States to take on literacy as her personal crusade—that one realizes the effectiveness of corporate awareness-raising in such situations. When such activities are coupled with the influence of corporations and other organizations conducting business in Kenya, the opportunities seem almost endless.

Finally, though, the message must get to the people who can make things happen legally, and word must be carried to the Kenyan government. To its credit, Kenya's leaders prepared and published in 2006 a National Information & Communications Technology (ICT) Policy through the then Ministry of Information and Communications. That was, as happens in government, in another time and under different political leadership. In fast-forwarding to 2010, once awareness has been raised and acted upon at the political level, and once IAO has worked with government authorities to re-work the 2006 ICT policy and re-structure the policy to include current thinking in ICT and KM/knowledge services implementation, the road forward is bright indeed for developing Kenya's knowledge competencies.

There is much to be done, and another famous Drucker attribution seems to fit. Drucker has long been known for having put forward the notion that the successful organization is both "opportunity focused" and "results focused." In Kenya, it can be reasonably predicted that the Information Africa Organization is both. With the right connections, the right attention, and an established funding mechanism, IAO has identified the opportunity and affirmed the results it expects. Now it can go public.

Contact Information:

William Mibei
B.Com MBA Ph.D. (Cand.)
Executive Director
Information Africa Organization (IAO)
P.O. Box 66063
00800 Nairobi Kenya
Tel: +254 020 2487202
Mobile: +254 722 719599
wkmibei@yahoo.co.uk

Hon. Rev. Moses Akaranga
BSc. MBA. Ph.D (Cand.) EGH
Vice Chairman
Information Africa Organization (IAO)
P.O. Box 66063
00800 Nairobi Kenya
Tel: +254 733 761717
Mobile: +254 720 761057
honakaranga2000@yahoo.com

The author. Guy St. Clair is President and Consulting Specialist for Knowledge Services at SMR International, a New York-based professional services firm focused on change and its impact on people, organizational effectiveness, and knowledge services delivery. He writes frequently on KM/knowledge services for practitioners in research and knowledge management, and he is currently working on a knowledge strategy development project with the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-HABITAT) in Nairobi, Kenya.