Report calls for IT education in Africa

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Even in countries that lag behind in the information technology sector, there is a clear understanding that the gap between the rich and poor will only increase unless that IT divide is addressed. Yet some of Africa's richest nations are already cautioning that it's not enough simply to provide the infrastructure and software to make computer technology and telecommunications an integral part of the economic base. Rather, one South African research group is calling first and foremost on improved technological education from the earliest years upwards.

According to a report by Johannesburg-based BMI-TechKnowledge released this week, demand for IT equipment and services across Africa will likely reach $10 billion this year, but already there is an increasing divide between how much money is spent between urban and rural areas within the various countries.

Analyst Mark Walker pointed out that Africa too, like the rest of the world," is moving to an Internet-based platform for commerce, education, innovation, and entertainment. Wealth and productivity will go to those countries that gt more of their innovators, educators, students, workers, and suppliers connected to this platform via computers, phones, and PDAs."

Yet Walker argued that it was not enough simply to ensure that the networks and hardware was installed to make connectivity happened. Rather, he said that e-schools, or educating people not just about technology but also on basic technological skills by using available tools including computers and other high-tech appliances, were critical.

Furthermore, he said that there was a need for public institutions to tie up with private companies to ensure maximum use of the technologies as "we cannot trust the technology companies to make sure that everyone is connected because new technology, like free Internet telephony, threatens their business model. Whether the traditional politicians will be the engines of change for how people connect to their government, the marketplace, and each other is dubious. Thus, a joint approach, which creates its own system of checks and balances makes the most sense."

When it comes to allying with the private sector to ensure education, the New Partnership for Africa's Development, or NEPAD, has already taken steps to forge ahead, as 15 countries including Algeria, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Kenya, and South Africa have already agreed to work with the African organization and the private sector to ensure that local schools are equipped with televisions, phones, photocopiers, and other equipment, and that students are taught computer and other technology skills. Furthermore, NEPAD plans to extend the program to all African nations within a few years' time.

Certainly, NEPAD's efforts have gained more attention since the information society summit hosted by the United Nations in Tunis earlier this month, with many of the continent's leaders including the heads of Senegal and Nigeria actively calling for more aid from wealthier nations and partnerships with private companies to improve Africa's computer literacy and telecommunications capabilities.

Still, some who are directly involved in development assistance in Africa remain doubtful whether governments actually understand how they should go about having a larger number of people gain access to information technology and harness that knowledge into economic growth.

"There needs to be a good network...and follow-up" in order to ensure

that information technology does actually lead to economic development in a poorer country, argued Wayan Vota, program manager at the Gekcorps division of the International Executive Service Corps, a non-profit organization that provides volunteers and experts to help alleviate poverty across the globe. "Otherwise, it's just money wasted."

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