Internet times in southern Africa as SA, SADC launch SAIGF

By Issa Sikiti da Silva: @sikitimedia   1 Sep 2011

Internet governance in Southern Africa has taken a giant leap forward as South Africa teams up with NEPAD and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) to launch the Southern African Internet Governance Forum (SAIGF), the first of its kind in a region populated by more than 260 million people. The three-day conference launch kicked off yesterday, Thursday, 1 September 2011, at the Hilton Hotel in Johannesburg, South Africa.

Internet governance's components include questions of local content, access and diversity, cyber-security and its impact on vulnerable groups, managing critical resources, cross-border internet governance, openness and privacy, domain names, cloud computing and mobile internet, among others.

All these issues are set to be discussed at this conference - the outcomes of which will then be taken to the 6th annual meeting of Internet Governance Forum (IGF) later this month in Nairobi, Kenya.

Internet is a global business

There has always been a lack of participation of African countries at the global level of internet governance, and this had impacted negatively on the continent's cultural, economical and social development, Cecilia Onyadile-Mamelodi, of the SADC secretariat, told 120 delegates attending the forum.

Internet is a global business, she said, adding that governments alone will not be able to handle its multiple issues. Therefore she urged all sectors of society, including civil society and private business, to come to the party to help out.

Apart from highlighting the positive contribution of the internet in the region, she also mentioned the critical issue of cyber-security, which she said includes fraud, identity theft, terrorism, and various abuses.

According to the International Telecommunications Union 2010 figures, more people in Africa have been able to access the internet through their cellphones in 2009. Just last year, Morgan Stanley forecasted that within five years there will be more mobile internet users than PC users in the world.

Issues to be debated

However, such growth has reportedly brought various issues to the fore, including challenges of infrastructure, human rights, policy and regulation and affordability - issues that are also said to be debated at the inaugural SAIGF.

"If the internet access is not speeded up, we will never be able to bridge the digital divide as most of our communities will be left in the dark," department of communications (DoC) deputy D-G Gift Buthelezi said.

"Internet is very useful and without it, societies are lost and doomed, and as the government of South Africa, we are fully committed to this initiative and we will use whatever means at our disposal to ensure that it succeeds," he said.

South Africa, whose GDP equals the double of the remaining countries' total GDP in the region, is largely advanced in technology compared to other SADC countries. But far from being selfish, SA, Buthelezi said, will do its utmost best to help its regional counterparts to move forward.

"We should not wait for the rest of the world to offer us solutions that are not Africa's solutions, rather we should work hard to help each other and improve our internet access and affordability and other issues," NEPAD CEO Ibrahim Miyaki said.

The forum is being hosted by the DoC, in association with NEPAD, SANGONeT (an NGO) and the Association for Progressive Communications (APC).

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Issa Sikiti da Silva is a winner of the 2010 SADC Media Awards (print category). He freelances for various media outlets, local and foreign, and has travelled extensively across Africa. His work has been published both in French and English. He used to contribute to Bizcommunity.com as a senior news writer.
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