

AFÁRÁ

“At present, a yawning digital divide still exists in the world. There are more computers in the US alone than in the rest of the world combined. There are many telephones in Tokyo as in all Africa [...]. This digital divide can – and will – be bridged.”

Kofi Anan
United Nations Secretary General

A. PROJECT OVERVIEW

There is no doubt about the impact that the emerging Information Society will have on nations of the world and their economies. The key players will stand better chances at growing and maintaining strong economies while the nations that delay participation or *belittle* Information Society inclusion will have their economic meals in the proverbial groundnut shell!

AFÁRÁ is a practical demonstration of **Paradigm Initiative Nigeria's** (PIN) commitment to Nigeria's participation in the Information Society. **PIN** will, through the project, reach out to the rural dwellers and equip them with appropriate IT skills through the use of their own local language (selecting the *Yoruba* language as a pilot).

While appreciating earlier and ongoing efforts on the issue of local content, **PIN** seeks partners who will help make this project a reality. The project description is available in MS Word format, PDF format and also on the PIN website at www.pin.itgo.com/afara/index.htm

B. THE RULES HAVE CHANGED

Yesterday you could do things without any thought of Information Technology, but not today! You could afford to post urgent letters via snail mail and wait for the reply; you could stay in long queues because all the attendants can't just do the paper work as fast as you wished.. the rules have changed. Information Technology has changed the face of things. Now you can send an email and get instant – less than a minute – reply; overcome paperwork and unnecessary protocol at almost every level, etc.

Information Technology (IT) has sneaked into the lives and homes of those who live on earth today. And it will soon get better, or worse, depending on which side of the *divide* you are at. From employment to personal lives, IT will prove to be the missing link! Farmers will understand why they should delay planting based on weather analysis, fishermen will know when not to set sail, offices will not be

prisons anymore as work could continue outside that imposing building. Information Technology has changed the rules!

C. INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY: TECHNOLOGY VS. PEOPLE

The earlier handling of IT may have closed the door on the *unlearned fellows* by creating an idea of IT being a pure technology phenomenon rather than the tool of life it's supposed to be. Time and events have proved that any form of technology is the application of science in solving the puzzles of life.

IT is no less as its main objective should be to strengthen the areas where it is being applied – work and/or play. Since IT and even technology are about life, then we must stop seeing IT as something for a certain set of *gurus* and embrace it. Efforts to make IT applicable by, and to all, must be pursued.

D. LANGUAGE DEEPENS THE DIVIDE

Unfortunately, IT has unofficial *official languages*. Its numerous tentacles (particularly computers, software and the Internet) do not seem to understand or promote content in some languages, most of which are the languages of the peoples of the South. The sad fact is that language issues are deepening the wound that the digital divide is inflicting on developing nations. If technology, which should be used to solve problems, is not understood, the intending beneficiary will then have two issues to deal with – his problem that will not be solved, and he loses out of the competition.

Something must be done to bring local languages on to the World Wide Web (which is the world's new general notice board) and that is what **AFÁRÁ** (bridge in the **Yoruba** language) is all about: ***building a language bridge to help people cross to the other side of the divide!***

E. WAZOBIA: THE DIVERSITY FACTOR IN NIGERIA

In Africa's Nigeria (which is the setting for this project), "*come*" can be translated as, "*wa*", "*zo*", "*bia*", etc. Actually, there are as many local languages as there are dialects – and there are over 300 dialects! Unfortunately, the official language (English) is not understood or spoken by a good percentage of the population and that means that the task of taking the *gospel* of IT literacy to the grassroots is not a simple task – but it must be done.

AFÁRÁ, which seeks to deliver IT lessons in *Yoruba* (one of Nigeria's popular languages), is a project which will serve as a model for other initiatives (some of which may already be existent – a fact that we do not doubt). This will help Southern initiatives to join all possible forces in combating this *multiheaded* monster that may throw us years behind civilisation – the digital divide. There is an urgent task of making learning opportunities in the area of IT available in local languages in order to have (for example) the rural fisherman appreciate, use and benefit from the reality of IT.

A global Information Society is emerging and the task of deploying IT training in local languages is as important as waking up tomorrow! Character sets, keyboard standard layout/keys, etc keep rearing their heads as bottlenecks in this area of local languages. Nigeria must learn to build on its present success stories and efforts in the area of making IT truly for all. Such successful efforts include Zinox's introduction of the ₦ sign (which I always had to get from N and the *double strikethrough* font effect – so much labour on one character!) to the keyboards they manufacture and the National Information Technology Development Agency's (NITDA) Yoruba/Ibo/Hausa keyboard.

There is no better time than now to seek lasting solutions to the issue of the digital divide – the one that exists even within families (the smallest unit of the global village) due to the IT/Local Language *tussle*.

F. A PRACTICAL APPROACH

Paradigm Initiative Nigeria (PIN) is a **youth-led** *Information and Communication Technologies for Development (ICT4D)* organisation (www.pin.itgo.com) run by a crop of young people who are passionately interested in the liberation of Nigeria from the shackles of IT illiteracy. PIN is proposing a practical approach in form of a project to help solve the problem of IT knowledge availability in local languages, using the *Yoruba* language as a pilot.

The project, **AFÁRÁ** (*bridge* in *Yoruba* language) will help make IT knowledge available in the *Yoruba* language, beginning with the use and application of computers. Building on the locale's attachment to the radio and audio sources, the project will employ two approaches:

- (i) IT knowledge will be made available in an interesting format via selected stations that locales listen to. A *picture book*, illustrating the content of the lessons will also be made available to the target community.
- (ii) IT knowledge will be packaged in audiotapes, accompanied by a *picture book* illustrating the content of the lessons.

This will require the joint effort of:

1. The PIN team
2. Students studying the *Yoruba* language in the University

3. University professor (or lecturer) teaching the language
4. Radio stations that reach locales (AM stations) and are willing to broadcast the lectures
5. A radio station's recording studio
6. Graphic artist(s) to help illustrate the lessons

All project participants must demonstrate a high level of enthusiasm and passionate interest in the success of the project and must be willing to work with the entire team.

For the purpose of the project, the following will need to be produced in the *Yoruba* language:

- Lecture on the impact of IT on life and career – with strong focus on local career paths (e.g. fishing, hunting, farming, petty trading, etc)
- Computer appreciation training course
- Lecture on the need to acquire PCs and to use them as a universal tool

This project will, of course, record greater success if computers are made available to locales as soon as they demonstrate a strong willingness in acquiring IT skills and using them on-the-job and at home. Local content software projects will also be a strong advantage as *feeder projects*; thus we will seek partnership with such for the overall success of the initiative.

G. THE BIG PICTURE

It may not be uncommon to say that this is an ambitious project – and it is one! Looking at the big picture or expected results of the project will help understand the urgency of such a task. Rural dwellers form a sizeable proportion of most Southern nations, and will:

- (i) Appreciate and understand the PC and IT applications
- (ii) See the need to acquire PCs – either with their own savings or gifts/donations (this would help put an end to the habit of caging PCs in public schools)
- (iii) Use IT in their homes, on their jobs and with everything they do

H. CONCLUSION

This project is built around a team of dedicated people, **and the first task is to identify who such people are!** A quick listing may help here:

1. A University professor (or lecturer) teaching *Yoruba* and with interest in the project
2. Students studying the local language and will be willing to pursue the project as their final year project (depending on approval) and as contribution to the community

3. Graphic artists willing to help reproduce IT in pictures
4. Radio stations willing to integrate the project into their programmes, as a demonstration of their commitment to educating the people (e.g. Radio Nigeria, Voice of Nigeria, Radio Lagos, News Agency of Nigeria, etc)
5. A radio station that will allow the use of its studio for the recording of the IT materials on audio tapes

This project, while possibly serving as a model for Southern efforts at bridging the digital divide, is **Paradigm Initiative Nigeria's** contribution to the positioning of the Nigeria as a global player in the field of Information Technology, as stated in the nation's IT policy document. We believe that it is not a question of **if** Nigeria will be great again, but a question of **when and who**. Can this generation be the one to answer the **when** and **who** question? **PIN** says **yes...** what do you say?

Please visit www.pin.itgo.com/afara/index.htm for more details, and feel free to contact us by sending an email to pin@gbengasesan.com.