

## Digital Doorway makes its début at the African Union

The growing relationship between the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the Meraka Institute of the CSIR has started to bear fruit. Ethiopia has joined the list of other African countries that are set to benefit from this collaboration. As a Department of Science and Technology-funded initiative, the Digital Doorway — a free-standing, robust computer terminal — has an impressive track record locally and regionally. Digital Doorways are found throughout South Africa and one has recently been installed in Lesotho.



Mary-Jane Kgatuke (front row, centre) at a farewell function before she returned to South Africa

A demonstration of a three-seater Digital Doorway to African Union (AU) representatives gathered in Addis Ababa, was held on 31 October 2008. The Digital Doorway was purchased by UNICEF and delivered by the Meraka Institute to Addis Ababa in a remarkably short period of time. The purpose of the demonstration was to highlight the UNICEF Rapid SMS facility (similar to the Meraka Institute's [MobilED technology](#)) and the Digital Doorway's usefulness as a tool for emergency response and connectivity.

This Digital Doorway was then donated to the Pioneer Adama Youth Group and launched on 1 November 2008. Adama is an educational initiative for young people interested in technology, which focuses on localising software into Amharic, a local language.

Timing and coordination between partners working on this joint project was vital in pulling off the assignment. Shipment from South Africa was made in time, thanks to the efforts of Louis Bapela of Ingwapela (a local SMME), who was responsible for ensuring that the kiosk was shipped and delivered in Addis Ababa. Christopher Fabian of UNICEF and Addisu Tiruneh, an engineer from Addis Ababa, visited the Meraka Institute during October 2008 to ensure adequate training for Addisu to commission it.

The launch event was a resounding success. Tiruneh set up the unit and selected the software used to demonstrate the system, which included a video, a maths game, Wikipedia in Amharic and the Firefox internet browser.

Fabian reported that the kiosk was in constant use during the event, with at least 15 children around it at any one time right up to its conclusion. An additional South African flavour was provided at the event by Channel O, a South African-based music channel, the disc jockeys of which strongly endorsed the Digital Doorway and presented its key to the Adama Youth group. This gesture sent a powerful message regarding the Digital Doorway's ability to unlock the potential of its users.

The demonstration to the audience through the Digital Doorway of RapidSMS, which was developed by Adam McKaig, a software developer, and his colleagues at UNICEF, reinforced the versatile nature of the unit as a computer and communication device.