

MobilED goes global: South African ICT research outcomes intrigue UNICEF

The potential of utilising the Meraka Institute's MobilED (mobile education) platform to achieve digital inclusion in the developing world is one of the outcomes of a visit by researchers to New York earlier this year. Fruitful discussions and surprising synergies emerged during this visit to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) by centre manager Kagiso Chikane, Merryl Ford, who heads the ICT for education, youth and gender research group and Michael Jenkins, a consultant to the institute. The Meraka Institute is a national research centre managed by the CSIR.

Mobile learning was a theme that emerged strongly during discussions. The Meraka Institute has made strides in this regard through its MobilED project, which uses cell phones as a tool for learning. A learner can send an SMS containing a keyword to Wikipedia, the world's largest collaborative online encyclopaedia. The system then calls the learner and the article is 'read' using a speech synthesiser. The learner can then use the keypad on the cell phone to rewind, forward or jump to certain sections of the article. By connecting speakers to the cell phone, the information can be made available to a group of children. Content can be added by dictating information to the article, thereby making children participants in and contributors to the information society.

Speaking after the team's return, Ford remarks, "UNICEF was really excited by this technology. It represents a way to reach people with limited or no ICT infrastructure in the developing world. It also enables these people to access information sources on the internet in cost-effective ways."

Ford is most excited by the prospect that UNICEF may use MobilED technology for its projects around the world. Our Stories is a joint project with Google, One Laptop Per Child (OLPC) and Story Corp, which will allow 5 million children worldwide to record their history, their way of life, comments on their environment and much more via this innovative technology. By clicking on Google Earth, it will be possible to hear audio recordings of these digital contributions. MobilED has been earmarked as the audio collection tool that will be used in Africa.

UNICEF also intends to use MobilED as an inexpensive broadcasting system in a rural village. The audio information collected via the cell phone using MobilED's audio wiki functionality can be broadcast using cheap speakers connected to a PC.

A Dr Maths-like platform - the maths tutoring system developed by the Meraka Institute using MXit, has also drawn interest and may be replicated in Iraq using a cell phone chat client service to enable house-bound learners in Iraq to be tutored by volunteers in the United States.

An incidental yet powerful illustration of the efficacy of MobilED was an audio report filed by a UNICEF reporter on the MobilED platform after she was confined to Jamaica as the tropical storm, Hurricane Dean, passed south of the island on 20 August 2007. Despite the devastation to infrastructure wrought by the storm, the cell phone masts were still standing and allowed the report to be sent by the MobilED server.



From left: Merrick Shaefer (UNICEF), Michael Jenkins (MetaLab, UK partner), Christopher Fabian (UNICEF), Kagiso Chikane (Meraka Institute), Erica Kochi (UNICEF), Merryl Ford (Meraka Institute), Lauora Lazouris (SA Mission to UN), Sharad Sapra (UNICEF)

"Research from Africa is now setting the agenda for digital interventions in Africa," Ford comments. "Our world-firsts are grabbing attention and suggest that these may be the most appropriate solutions to consider." Created within an African context and environment, there is no doubt that research from the Meraka Institute is making a difference as it seeks out and cements new partnerships.

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