

Over 200 Attend Colorful PIC Kenya Launch

Three-fold increase in visitor numbers within one week

Over 200 guests comprising information management professionals, librarians, researchers, persons with disabilities, public relations officers from government ministries, and the media attended the colorful launch of the refurbished Kenya Public Information Center recently.

Held in the lawns of the country office, the event was attended by representatives drawn from the four categories of disability (physically challenged, visually impaired, deaf and mentally challenged). The occasion featured entertaining dramatized poems by a performing arts youth group, a tour of the facility, diverse presentations, and a garden reception.

Barely a week after the event, visitors to the PIC have increased almost three-fold, from 25 to an average of over 60 users a day - on some days the number is as high as 75 - due to the exposure of the event.

In a moving speech on behalf of the Society of Professionals with Visually Disabilities, the secretary of the society, Reginald Oduor, said the assistive technology in the PIC that helps the visually impaired overcome their sensory limitations, was a distinctive innovation that would help bridge the information divide between the sighted and the visually disabled.

"For example, I have been a lecturer in Philosophy for over 10 years, yet because of the difficulty of accessing information, my doctoral thesis remains undone. Now with this center, my hope of completing it has been rekindled," he stated.

He added, "This project is a great boost to our endeavors to move ourselves from the fringes of society to its very core. As we often say, we do not need pity; we need opportunity and this center provides just that."

Mr. Oduor, noted that the PIC allowed the visually impaired to access information from the "Internet information goldmine" without using the expensive route of printing in Braille. "Using a screen-reader (PIC software that verbalizes the contents of a computer screen), I am today enjoying Greek philosophical classics downloaded from the Internet after years of being starved of them."

"I have been a lecturer in Philosophy for over 10 years, yet because of the difficulty of accessing information, my doctoral thesis remains undone. Now, with this center, my hope of completing it has been rekindled."

He said that in the information age, persons with visual disabilities were in danger of being left behind, because of limited technology and the need to rely on friends to access information. "I know of no single cyber café in Kenya that makes assistive technology available. With the launch of this PIC, we in the community of persons with

visual disability can now come in here, and enjoy accessing the Web effectively, without worrying about the cost.”

Paraphrasing the Greek mathematician Archimedes, he appealed to the public to “give persons with disability a place to stand on in the information age and we will contribute to moving the society from underdevelopment to progress.”

He commended the PIC staff for involving professionals with visual disability in the design of the PIC and for “listening to our perspective with a view to making the center as relevant as possible.”

Victor Kamau, an unsighted senior counsel with the Kenya chapter of International Justice Mission, a faith-based NGO that rescues the poor from injustice, said, “Now I’ll research and write all my appeals from here.” He was one of 12 professionals with visual disabilities at the function.

The country communications team will produce the special PIC launch brochure in Braille and mail it to the members of the Kenya Society for the Blind to promote use of the center, the only facility in the country that provides such services free of charge.

“This project helps us (the visually impaired) move from the fringes of society to its very core. We do not need pity; we need opportunity, and this center provides just that.”

Chief guest and Minister for Education, Science, and Technology, Hon. Prof. George Saitoti, encouraged ordinary Kenyans to use the PIC, saying it had “the most up-to-date literature on development matters” and specific subjects such as poverty reduction, disability, planning, and gender. “Since the facility is here in Kenya, let us make the best use of it.”

The minister said many Kenyans were aware of the World Bank grant of \$US 50m last year to support the country’s free primary education program that provided millions of text books to poor children who were previously outside the schooling system.

“This experience has no doubt made many ordinary Kenyans appreciate the role the Bank plays in national development and in education in particular,” he stated.

Quoting Bank President Jim Wolfensohn’s comments at the launch of the Bank’s revised disclosure policy, Country Director, Makhtar Diop, said information dissemination “makes an important contribution to the Bank’s mission of reducing poverty and promoting sustainable development. It empowers development stakeholders by putting information in their laps.”

Diop said the Bank saw information sharing as core to the development process and that both policy makers and the public ought to have access to vital information.

Dramatic arts group, *Shades Classics*, that has performed at State functions, received rousing applause for a parody of marital conflict over the spread of AIDS, and a poem on the value of libraries entitled *Information Drives Progress*.

The revamped PIC located in the East wing of the country office block, has depository libraries in seven higher learning institutions across the country, some of them over 400 kilometers from the capital, Nairobi. Plans are underway to expand this network and to strengthen the existing partnership with the Kenya National Library Services, which has a countrywide reach.

The newly-refurbished PIC's seating capacity is now 54, up from 12, and a special gate to facilitate entry by the public has been built. There is wheelchair access through ramps from the car park to both the upper and lower floors and a courtyard with garden seats provides an ideal setting for users who need a break.

Ends

This article prepared by Cosma Gatere, Country Communications Specialist. For further information on this event and the PIC email cgatere@worldbank.org

