

Development: Make use of African skills

JOHANNESBURG/CAPE TOWN: The theme of the third biennial Knowledge Management Africa (KMA) conference, which opened Monday, 3 May 2009 in the capital of Senegal, is lofty - "knowledge to reposition Africa in the world economy". But the aim is more down-to-earth: to find ways to apply vital information to the basic question of improving the lives of Africa's people.

KMA is an initiative of the Development Bank of South Africa, which seeks to build networks that facilitate the sharing and use of knowledge across Africa. This takes place via an online hub linking five regional chapters on the continent - each chapter has a particular focus; the West African hub focuses on technologies for development for example - as well as regular conferences and meetings.

"Networking takes place at the continental level, through KMA chapters," Dr Snowy Khoza, the initiative's chairperson, told IPS ahead of the conference opening. "Individual members can request or respond to issues by posting them online. Conferences create an environment for interaction at a personal level."

Researchers and practitioners will present on a broad spectrum of issues, ranging from safeguarding intellectual property rights and indigenous African plants like aloe vera to discussions of the importance of open access to scientific and research publications and strengthening rural communities' responses to climate change around Lake Victoria.

"Our activities and programmes are formulated to support and empower communities in Africa. For example, the aloe vera plant which is used for medicinal purposes: we need to review and acknowledge the way Africans have used this plant for generations. We need to support the notion that indigenous African knowledge can be a solution to the continent's problems," says Khoza.

The emphasis on building, enhancing and applying knowledge at the local level using various technologies runs parallel to similar initiatives such as AgCommons, which focuses on providing location-specific information to smallholder farmers to help them make better decisions.

One scheme in Uganda uses cell phones to get precise information about crop diseases and appropriate measures against them to farmers, while allowing farmers to report symptoms of diseases to the authorities - simultaneously improving data collection and giving farmers advice and early warning and advice on how to avoid potentially devastating losses.

Another project poised to begin later this year will put very high resolution images taken by satellite in the hands of smallholder farmers in four West African countries. The pictures reveal the presence of trees, as well as "stress pockets" - associated with depleted soils - and areas of high productivity.

"My belief is that farmers in most cases are the experts, and they know their land very well," says Pierre C. Sibiry Traore, a scientist with the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics. Traore concedes that small farmers already know almost everything that these images show, yet they have shown keen interest in the printouts.

"I'm tempted to think that maybe the value of the information is not at the level of an individual farmer, but more at the smallholder community level, where they can use it as arbitration tool, or as a way to deploy new resources," he says.

Traore envisions the information being used to highlight issues of land tenure, serve as a tool in conflict resolution or guide implementation of conservation measures like contour-ridge tillage, which maximises water retention and protects soil from erosion, but requires resources and expertise beyond the reach of an individual farmer.

The pictures could both clarify the potential of joint efforts among neighbouring smallholders and provide hard data that will help them make their case to find external support for such projects.

The conference in Dakar, however, has a strong focus on looking within the continent for solutions.

"The idea behind KMA is to make use of African skills for development, instead of only seeking assistance from America or European professionals. There is an online database, "Who's who in Africa", which provides contact details of African experts in the fields of media, medicine, technology, engineering, law and other sectors," says Khoza.

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