

Telling their own stories

Bambara, Lingala, Fula, isiZulu and Swahili: no, they're not names of pan-African Highway Africa delegates, but five of the nine African languages used on a new blogging platform called Maneno. The project started a year ago and is run by six people from different countries, spanning from Cameroon to America.

By [Thandeka Mapi and Gabi Falanga](#) 8 Sep 2009



Elia Varela Serra, a co-founder of the website, says: “We are not exactly using open source, but one can translate into any language, so that means any language can be used in the site and blogs are not edited.”

“We realised that African languages are treated as inferior,” Serra said, “people are not Internet-literate and if they can blog in their own language that might help boost Internet literacy.” The issues faced by broadcasting in African languages do not end with technology: “A lot of countries do not include African languages in the context of education,” added Serra.

“The motivation for this platform is to normalise the status of African languages,” Serra says. “We need more content from citizens to minimise the negative stereotypes about the African continent, and blogging can break the bad image about Africa.”

Serra hopes that 2010 will inspire an increase in coverage in other languages. “I hope that media coverage of the World Cup won't be dominated by English.” However, this will be a challenge in African countries where many people are not Internet literate, have no education in non-African languages, and do not have access to electricity and connectivity.

Serra feels it is important for people to have multilingual Internet access, not only so their voices can be heard, but also because language is an essential part of one's culture and identity. Using only one language results in exclusion and is detrimental to democracy.

In order for tools to be developed in different languages, there needs to be a critical mass of content. This means encouraging people to blog in their own languages and starting collaborative translation projects.

Two months ago Maneno also launched a website called [BarCamp Africa.com](#) for African countries to advertise events and exchange experiences.

Maneno can be accessed at www.maneno.org.

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