

# Ugandan IT movement gets boost from Austrian government

By [Amy Lieberman](#)

31 Aug 2009

When one woman living near Gulu, a city in northern Uganda, found her mushrooms would not grow, she was left befuddled and desperate. She was a widow with five children in school, and the mushrooms were the only source of income for the impoverished family. After approaching neighbours and family for ultimately ineffective advice, the woman turned to a seemingly unlikely source in the rural, agriculture-based landscape: the internet.

With the help of a few information technology professionals, this woman learned that she had to improve her ventilation system in the tent.

Now, months later, the woman's business is thriving. She exports mushrooms to as far as Sudan, and has hired workers for extra support. Money is no longer a major issue.

"She says that the internet and computers changed her life, and they really did," Barbara Kreissler, a United Nations Industrial Development Organisation program manager, told MediaGlobal.

"It's stories like this where you realise, 'Wow, computers are not just for sophisticated, rich guys.' They can be an incredible development tool, especially in rural communities, and simply provide information that everyone can use."

Since 2006, UNIDO has partnered with Microsoft, and later with Hewlett-Packard, in a push to grant developing nations access to computers and IT technology. The programs span across various regions, but Uganda, a land-locked developing state, has been at the forefront of the program, as the pilot country.

Uganda wasn't "one of the usual suspects," like Kenya, South Africa, or Egypt, Kreissler said, as its market is relatively small. Nonetheless, Microsoft agreed to partner there, focusing on three established goals: creating access to affordable hardware, equipping the computers with relevant software, and providing locals with adequate IT training.

The partnership has made laptops, complete with a one-year warranty, available to Ugandans for US\$175.

If people have problems with their laptops, they are able to bring them to one of Uganda's eight functioning rural Businesses Information Centres, which promote the development of local entrepreneurial skills with access to the internet, as well as technology tutorials and assistance.

They also have the option of recycling some of the computer's parts, like steel and plastic, reducing the level of electronic

waste.

A recent €500,000 donation from the Austrian government will enable UNIDO to construct four to five additional centres across the country. At least two of these centres will be run on solar energy, a first for the nation. The Ugandan government will supplement the donation with an additional US\$200,000.

Other UNIDO initiatives in Uganda include a computer refurbishment plant, launched in July 2008. Since then, it has refurbished 10,000 computers, and Kreissler expects that the demand for this will “expand quite a bit” in 2009. The program's success has led UNIDO to try and develop similar institutions in Trinidad, Tanzania, Kenya, Jamaica, and Nigeria, among other nations.

“We realised we need to bring IT solutions close, rather than having people travel all over to receive help,” Kreissler explained. “Getting a refurbished computer provides people with an additional income stream as well since it extends the life of their computers.”

UNIDO's collaboration with Hewlett-Packard has resulted in the Graduate Entrepreneurship Training through IT, or GET-IT programme, in Uganda and nine other nations. In these GET-IT centres — there are 28 globally — students receive internet training, guided to assist them in entrepreneurial projects.

“It's a furnished classroom with computers where young people can be trained in IT,” Kreissler said. “It is going to respond very well to the desperate need of young people to learn these skills that they can immediately apply to their own schooling and work.”

The global financial crisis is also a youth crisis, Kreissler noted, as she said that young people make up more than 40% of the world's unemployed, and that in Africa, that statistic is closer to 60%.

“We believe that this knowledge and training, along with materials, can really make a very significant contribution to these people's lives, and that potential should not be undermined,” Kreissler said.

**Article published courtesy of [MediaGlobal](#)**

For more, visit: <https://www.bizcommunity.com>