achieving woman

Connecting Africa to the world web

Sophia Bekele is the Executive Director of DotConnectAfrica. The global telecommunications policy leader told BRENDA KAGENI how she intends to put Africa on the ICT world map

In 2008 ICANN, (Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers), decided to expand their offering of Internet generic top-level domains (gTLDs) from four to 21 to allow for other players in the market. This would promote competition within the global market and allow other players to participate and make money.

ICANN is the international organisation in charge of allocating resources and establishing protocols on the Internet to make sure the Internet runs smoothly.

In the past the primary endings of web addresses had been ".com", ".net", ".org", and ".biz". But with the expansion we begun to see endings such as ".sport", and ".travel" in web addresses. With that liberalisation also came geographic names. ".eu" was the first to be launched for Europe followed by ".asia" for Asia.

While this was happening, one woman was asking herself, "why not ".africa"?

Specific countries had their own country-based Top Level Domain (cbTLD), for example Kenya had ".ke", Uganda had ".ug", South Africa had ".za". There had not been a continental TLD for Africa as one.

FIRST AFRICAN WOMAN

"Close to 90 per cent of the African market continued buying the generic TLDs like ".com", ".net" and ".org". We were paying someone else instead of keeping the money here," says Sophia Bekele.

Having been the first African woman at ICANN Council of the GNSO (Generic Names Supporting Organisation), which advises on global Internet policy, Bekele wanted to do something for her continent.

She initiated the ".africa" project which she hoped would help foster the spirit of Pan-Afri-

SOPHIA AT A GLANCE

- Holds a Bachelor's Degree in Business Analysis and Information Systems
- Has an MBA in management Information Systems
- Has had managerial positions with financial/banking multinationals in Corporate America such as PriceWaterhouseCoopers and Bank of America
- Broke-off from her corporate career to focus Third-World technological development.
- Started CBS International, with a mission to transfer technology to emerging economies.
- Its affiliate, SbCommunications Networks Plc (SbCnet), based in Ethiopia, specialises in systems integration and is dedicated to serving emerging economies.
- She is a Certified Information Systems Auditor (CISA), Certified Control Specialist (CCS), Certified in the Governance of Enterprise IT (CGEIT), as well as a Rotary Paul Harris Fellow (PHF) and active being ambassador to various Rotary clubs.

canism and help Africa become more connected to the rest of the world.

"The ".africa" name is more than an internet identifier. It is branding Africa in a common theme," says Bekele. "It is branding African products and services. It is for all companies trying to do business in Africa and those that want a Pan-African identity. Having an African domain will help them in reaching out to Africa. It will boost business and boost regional integration."

With over 900 million Africans and 54 countries being targeted, the potential impact cannot be overstated.

Bekele hopes the project will encourage Africa to be part of the

Sophia's heart is in Africa, where, she says, you get an opportunity to build something from scratch and bring services to people.
[PHOTOS: MAXWELL AGWANDA]

knowledge and information community and encourage information sharing across the continent.

STUDIED IN THE US

DotConnectAfrica, DCA, a non-profit organisation consisting of NGOs, businesses, and governmental organisations is in charge of overseeing the operation and management of the ".africa" domain registry in the market.

DCA's purpose was to get the public involved in the process and to give back to society. Profits from the ".africa" project will be

reinvested in projects to develop the continent.

"We want to make it for Africa," says Bekele. "But while we are doing good we will also maintain a proper corporate and marketing profile so that we can meet our objectives."

Bekele, now the executive director of DotConnectAfrica, has worked as an advisor with ICANN and with her organisation, CBS International, a private California-based firm engaged in technology transfer to emerging economies, felt she had the passion and ex-

pertise to deliver on the project.

"I studied and lived the US but my heart has always been in Africa," says the Ethiopian born.

She has served on United Nations-sponsored committees, such as the Uneca-sponsored African Information Society Initiative (Aisi), where she represents the private sector in discussions about the economic development of Africa. She is also involved with the creation of policies towards bridging the economic gap between Africa and other economies, through the use of Information and communication technologies.

HELPING START-UPS

"The last two years I have been selling the ".africa" idea. It has so far been endorsed by the African Union (AU) and the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) and we are hoping more African Countries will endorse it. 60 per cent of the application process has been met. What remains is the $200,000 (Sh15 million) application fee, coming up with the technical registry and the registrars who will sell the name."

Says she: "We also need to ensure we watch policy issues with ICANN on the technical side so that we deliver a system that works well."

Bekele hopes that registration can begin by next year June and is calling for African countries to support the process.

"Instead of fragmenting the application process, Africans should support one initiative that has been approved and promote it. Any other African identities that try to sabotage the process should be seen with suspicion," she urges.

Bekele's current work is in advising in corporate development and communications programs for various start-ups within the US and assisting various companies in the public/private markets in corporate governance and risk management areas.

"I still do other projects but my whole energy is on ".africa". It is in Africa that you can get an opportunity to build something from scratch and bring services to people. It may not be financially rewarding but it is intellectually stimulating. Through this we can leave our Internet footprints in Africa."