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East African Organization Receives International Library Award For Creating Knowledge Centers in Rural Areas

*\$1 million Access to Learning Award recognizes Arid Lands Information Network
for providing access to information and technology in hard-to-reach communities*

SEATTLE – The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation today presented its 2011 Access to Learning Award of \$1 million to the Arid Lands Information Network (ALIN), which provides knowledge and information through a variety of innovative channels in remote communities throughout Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania. Members of these communities use the technology and other tools at ALIN's Knowledge Centers to gain information to improve their health, increase their incomes, and better their lives. Microsoft, a partner of the foundation in its efforts to help public libraries connect people with relevant technology and skills, will provide ALIN with a donation of over US\$270,000 worth of software and technology training curriculum to help the organization serve the local community.

ALIN's 12 Knowledge Centers—known as Maarifa Centers—focus on providing practical information, particularly in the area of agricultural development. The vast majority of people in these regions are small-scale farmers who need information about issues such as drought, pests, and finding markets for their crops. The centers offer information geared toward the communities' specific needs.

"We understand that each community we serve is different, and each individual we serve is different," said James Nguo, director of ALIN. "Some communities need information about water harvesting, while others are dealing with a particular kind of pest. We've also found that while some people have taken to the computers and technology, others prefer live demonstrations or lectures in their native language."

In addition to providing agricultural information to farmers, Maarifa Centers address health issues such as HIV/AIDS and malaria, ways to improve people's daily lives such as how to create an energy efficient biogas stove, and administrative requirements such as applying for an official identity card or getting tax exempt status. Some people have used the centers to create groups for the disabled, earn advanced degrees online, or create thriving small businesses.

"Thousands of people in these remote communities of Eastern Africa are improving their lives through the information available at these centers," said Deborah Jacobs, director of the Global Libraries initiative for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, at an award ceremony in San Juan,

Puerto Rico. “All knowledge workers can learn from this inventive model of delivering targeted, customized information.”

All Maarifa Centers offer free access to computers and the Internet and provide free training in how to use them. Because there is only one paid staff member at each center, ALIN relies on volunteer facilitators to help provide core services. These volunteers receive training in a variety of key areas, including computer skills, good farming practices, treatment of medical conditions, and communications skills, which they use to educate others in their communities.

For example, ALIN and the staff of the Kyuso Maarifa Center formed a group of seven farmers to participate in a pilot project that sent them to other parts of the country where they could learn techniques to deal with their extremely dry, arid climate. When the farmers returned to Kyuso, they implemented those techniques and were able to significantly improve their yields. The farmers worked with the staff of the Maarifa Center to pass these innovations on to others, through demonstrations, field days, videos, podcasts, and articles in ALIN’s Baobab magazine. One community pastor even preached about the new techniques in church.

“From Baobab and from the information here in our Maarifa Center, I got to know about water harvesting. I came to know more about good agricultural practices from other areas,” said Ali Hassan Mulei, one of the seven farmers who participated in the pilot project. “During the dry seasons you get nothing from the farm. But I prepare the land during the dry season. I get some cash from my business, go to the farm, make terraces, make structures for water harvesting, and I wait for the rainy season to come.”

The foundation’s annual Access to Learning Award recognizes the innovative efforts of libraries and similar organizations outside the United States in providing free access to computers and the Internet. It is awarded by the foundation’s Global Libraries initiative, which works to open the world of knowledge, information, and opportunity to help improve the lives of millions of people.

ALIN will use its award to expand its network of Knowledge Centers, upgrade its hardware and software, increase the number of computers available to its users, and expand on the training and education provided to its community knowledge facilitators. ALIN also hopes to create an innovation center to advance ideas in information and communication technology.

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Guided by the belief that every life has equal value, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation works to help all people lead healthy, productive lives. In developing countries, it focuses on improving people’s health and giving them the chance to lift themselves out of hunger and extreme poverty. In the United States, it seeks to ensure that all people—especially those with the fewest resources—have access to the opportunities they need to succeed in school and life. Based in Seattle, Washington, the foundation is led by CEO Jeff Raikes and Co-chair William H. Gates Sr., under the direction of Bill and Melinda Gates and Warren Buffett. Learn more at www.gatesfoundation.org or join the conversation at [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).