

Are IDNs (Internationalized Domain Names) the answer to a Multi-lingual Internet? ^[0]



Market scene in Tanzania. Image rights: cc0 public domain by [Rudy Gort / Pixabay](#)^[1]

Recently, Tanzania hit the headlines with its announcement that it was ditching English and adopting Swahili as the sole language of instruction at both primary and secondary school level. This move elicited mixed reactions from various quarters, with some hailing the move as bold and necessary, while others critiqued it as a dangerous move that is set to isolate the East African country from the outside world.

From an Internet Governance perspective, imagine if, every time students wanted to visit a website, they were expected to type in letters from a language they did not speak. Well, that's perhaps one immediate challenge Tanzania may have to deal with considering most of the content available online is in English.

By design, the Internet is one global network. However, it was not designed to be multi-lingual. For years, this has been a limitation considering the Internet only permitted a limited set of Latin characters.

ICANN and Internationalized Domain Names (IDNs)

Internationalized Domain Names or simply IDNs are domain names that include characters other than the letters of the basic Latin alphabet (the 26 letters "a-z"), numbers 0-9, and hyphen "-". Such domain names could contain characters with diacritical marks as required by many European languages, or characters from non-Latin scripts, such as Arabic or Chinese. Ideally, before IDNs were rolled out on a large scale, non-Latin characters could only be seen at the second, third or even fourth level of a URL.

IDNs were first introduced into the Root Zone in 2010, as countries began supporting IDN country code top-level domains (IDN ccTLDs).

Over the past decade, ICANN and community stakeholder groups have been working to support internationalized domain names (IDNs) in the quest to enable a multi-lingual web addresses.

As of today, there are over 30 IDN ccTLDs that have been delegated, for instance: Russian Federation (ru): рф

Technically, this means that Russians are no longer restricted to registering domains using the Latin (.ru) country code, and may instead use the Cyrillic equivalent .рф.

In Africa, there are continuing efforts to localize and support African languages and scripts. Prior to the AFRINIC 23 meeting in Point Noire – Congo, ICANN held a two day pre-event workshop on Internationalized Domain Names and African Languages.

The workshop focused on Languages and Scripts in Africa, and the need of African community to participate in IDN panels.

The two day session was headed by ICANN VP (Africa) Pierre Dandjinou, ICANN Africa Stakeholder Engagement and Operations Manager Mr. Yaovi Atohou, and the ICANN Stakeholder Engagement Manager Mr. Bob Ochieng’.

This event drew together African languages and scripts experts from around the continent. After the successful event, ICANN formed an IDN Africa strategic group, with the experts being invited to volunteer on panels in respective languages of their interest.

At the time of publishing this post, ICANN had already announced the formation of the Generation Panel to develop Root Zone Label Generation Rules (LGR) for the Ethiopic script.

IDNs and the next billion Internet users

Today, the number of Internet users stands at about 3 billion users, the majority of whom depend on non Latin scripts. As the world looks forth to connecting the next billion of Internet users, the big question is: could IDNs be the answer to universal access to Internet for all?

The reply is an affirmative Yes; IDNs may just be the key to preserving national identity, culture and multi-lingualism. Besides, IDNs could create equal opportunities for all; thus drawing us closer to achieving the idea of universal access. This will eventually empower more people to use the Internet. Therefore, as IDNs begin to take root on the Internet, the world is expected to continue shifting towards a more linguistically user friendly Internet, in which netizens around the globe will be able to surf the Internet entirely in their native languages.

Conclusion

In the last analysis, Tanzania may just be on the right track in their move to switch entirely from English to Swahili – now perhaps what they need to do is pool together a team of Swahili language and script experts to form a Generation panel that will closely work with ICANN IDN Africa team.

This will indeed do a lot of justice to students in Tanzania and the Swahili Language as a whole. After all, Swahili is the second most spoken language in Africa after Arabic; and East Africa may eventually be the biggest beneficiary in the long run.

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Shorturl: goo.gl/APjz7V^[5]

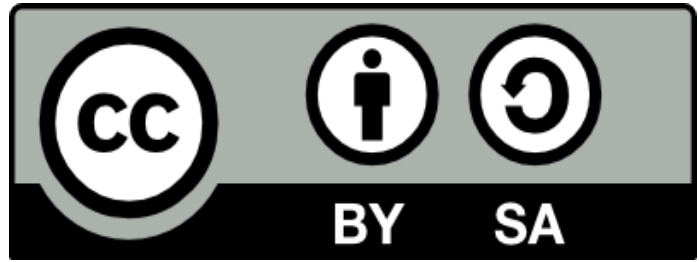
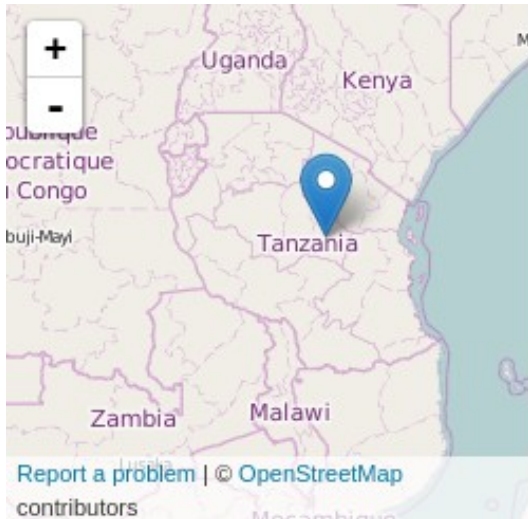
Hashtag: #IDN

Fork / improve: [on Github](#)^[6]

Extras: [Author's Blog](#)^[7], [original article](#)^[8]

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Location: [-6.2131, 35.7924](#)^[10]



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He works as an e-learning tutor, consultant in technology and Policy areas of Internet Governance.

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technical terms explained by Wikipedia:

IDNs^[12]: The [DNS \(Domain Name System\)](#)^[13], which performs a lookup service to translate user-friendly names into network addresses for locating Internet resources, is restricted in practice to the use of [ASCII characters](#)^[14], a practical limitation that initially set the standard for acceptable domain names. The internationalization of domain names is a technical solution to translate names written in language-native scripts into an ASCII text representation that is compatible with the Domain Name System. Internationalized domain names can only be used with applications that are specifically designed for such use; they require no changes in the infrastructure of the Internet.



Swahili^[15]:

Swahili speakers [Wikipedia](#)^[16] [CC BY-SA 3.0](#)^[17]

Swahili, also known as Kiswahili, is a Bantu language and the first language of the Swahili people. It is a lingua franca of the African Great Lakes region and other parts of Southeast Africa, including [Tanzania](#)^[18],

Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Mozambique, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The closely related Comorian language, spoken in the Comoros Islands, is sometimes considered a dialect. Although only around five to fifteen million people speak Swahili as their first language, it is used as a lingua franca in much of Southeast Africa. Estimates of the total number of Swahili speakers vary widely, from 60 million to over 150 million. Swahili serves as a national language of four nations: Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Shikomor, the official language in Comoros and also spoken in Mayotte (Shimaore), is related to Swahili. Swahili is also one of the working languages of the African Union and one of the official languages of the East African Community. A significant fraction of Swahili vocabulary is derived from Arabic through contact with Arabic-speaking Muslim inhabitants of the Swahili Coast. It has also incorporated German, Portuguese, English, Hindustani, and French words into its vocabulary through contact with empire builders, traders, and slavers during the past five centuries.

Hyperlinks

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- [11] <http://www.paypal.com/>
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