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Protecting the environment in Senegal? There's an app for that



By **Emmanuelle Landais**

DAKAR, Aug 22 (Thomson Reuters Foundation) - Hunched over her laptop, eyes locked on the screen, Marième Seye listens to the step-by-step instructions given by her teacher.

The 18-year-old isn't studying math or history, however. With 24 other Senegalese students, she is learning to develop a mobile app to raise awareness about the environment.

In small groups, the students develop apps focusing on environmental issues, in the format of their choice - such as a game, quiz or a platform to look up potentially unfamiliar terms, such as "endangered species".

Seye has called her app "Weer Weeldé", which means "a healthy planet for a healthy life" in Wolof.

Users must choose which between four pictures - for example, a person drinking dirty water, another smoking, industrial fumes and people planting trees - to pick what represents the most positive contribution to the planet.

Choosing the correct image - in this case, tree planting - rewards the user with points, before all pictures appear with a caption explaining the dangers or benefits linked to the activities.

"I'm interested in developing a phone app because I use them all the time," Seye told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

The three-day workshop, organised by the Goethe Institute and mJangale, a Senegalese after-school programme, aims to improve students' literacy, numeracy, and foreign language skills.

Christelle Scharff, co-founder of mJangale and professor of computer science at Pace University in New York, teaches participants to use MIT App Inventor - a drag-and-drop tool allowing users to create a basic phone app.

The students follow her every click on a computer screen projected on the wall.

"The goal is to introduce young people to computing, as well as to make them more knowledgeable about the environment," Scharff explained, walking between the groups to check their progress.

"So it's applying computing to something. We didn't want kids to just develop an app, but also to gain knowledge in another area."

The Android apps will be made available on Google Play, where they can be downloaded for free.

Idriss Sall Diop, 18, just passed his baccalaureate. "This is totally new to me, I've never studied IT and just started using computers," he admitted from his front-row seat.

"Young people are interested in social media but not necessarily in the environment," he added. "I think these apps are a way around that - we're always keen to learn about new things."

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Adja Aissatou Sy, communications manager at Senegal's Ministry of Environment, said at the workshop that teenagers have limited awareness when it comes to environmental issues.

"Mobile apps are a good way to share information and broaden young people's knowledge on this topic," she explained.

The African continent has been slow to adopt digital technologies in education, according to Thierry Zomahoun, chairperson of the Next Einstein Forum, a conference to advance science innovation in Africa. The first conference was held in Dakar in March.

He believes more advanced equipment in schools - from computers to scientific laboratories - will broaden students' horizon and better prepare them for the job market.

"We can't just stand idle while there are more African engineers in the U.S. than there are on the African continent - we need to reverse that trend," he said at the conference.

Scharff added that "as big consumers of technology, Facebook and all these tools, young people can also contribute to tons of solutions here in Senegal."

According to Senegal's Telecoms Regulation Authority report released in March, the country's mobile phone penetration rate reached 113.7 percent in the first quarter of 2016 - which can be explained by the fact that some mobile users hold several SIM cards.

Sy agrees that youth need a context in which to create a link with the environment.

"For example, there doesn't exist, as far as I know, an app that focuses on biodiversity in Senegal," she said.

"I would like to see a game on identifying our endangered species - like chimpanzees or panthers - and asking questions that would empower young people to protect their environment." (Reporting by Emmanuelle Landais, editing by Zoe Tabary and Laurie Goering. Please credit the Thomson Reuters Foundation, the charitable arm of Thomson Reuters, that covers humanitarian news, women's rights, trafficking, property rights and climate change. Visit news.trust.org)

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