

Kenya: Debates from the Hansards now digitised

NAIROBI: Kenyans now have free online access to debates from the Hansards, a collection of debates that date back to the pre-independence Legislative Council. The earliest edition of the Hansard indexed is the Report of the Fourth Session of the Debates of the Legislative Council, dated November 24, 1959.

Until now, these records have only been available to the public in hard copy as part of the public records of the Kenya National Assembly and the Kenya National Archives. Now, anyone around the world can browse the Hansard online. Over 1750 editions can now be accessed and perused by the public, including historians and students.

Free public access

"The initiative will enhance the capacity of the National Council for Law Reporting to manage and distribute public legal information, and to provide free public access to legacy legal information on a user-friendly interface," said Michael Murungi, CEO and editor of the National Council for Law Reporting.

"It will help us develop and implement an open, technology-neutral standard for the management of current and future public legal information."

Denis Gikunda, Google localisation manager for Africa explained: "Not only are the records of great historical value, but they are also a rich research resource, providing insight into, for example, how an issue like majimbo has been addressed through time, or to verify a particular member of Parliament's position on an issue. The initiative to digitise the Hansards is part of our continuing partnership with the National Council for Law Reporting and the Kenya government. We welcome interest from other government departments in the region who are similarly keen to make government content more accessible to their citizens."

The debates that Kenyans will be able to access include:

- Records of the Fourth Parliament debate on 9 June 1982 preceding the constitutional amendment making Kenya a de jure one party state.
- The first recorded contribution by the first female MP to be elected to Parliament - Grace Onyango.
- Debates about the compensation (or lack thereof) of freedom fighters that started as far back as the 1970s and continue today.
- Records about the Nyayo Pioneer - Kenya government's attempt at manufacturing a car locally.
- Information on who composed the song Tawala Kenya.
- The original debate around Ouko's death in 1990, and the Ouko Commission report finally tabled in Parliament 10 years later.
- Information about who exactly the ngorokos were.
- Kenyans will also be able to confirm whether their MPs have spoken in Parliament about issues directly affecting them.

Since 2007, the Kenya National Assembly has been digitising its proceedings and providing free access to them through its website www.parliament.go.ke. The National Council for Law Reporting, in conjunction with the Kenya National Assembly, converted all pre-2007 records into digital documents and used Google's

unique indexing and search engine technology to provide access to the platform, making it easy to search and browse, while retaining the record's original look and feel.

This initiative, Open Access to Public Legal Information, is aimed at improving access to public information. While Article 35 of the Constitution of Kenya 2010 establishes the citizen's right of access to public information, actual access remains limited. The records of the Hansard and the Gazette can be accessed online at: www.kenyalaw.org, www.parliament.go.ke and www.google.co.ke.

This announcement comes after the digitisation of over 100 years of the Kenya Gazette in April 2011, with historical copies dating back to 1906, for free, via Google Books. Other recent examples of Google's ongoing global efforts to bring historical and cultural heritage online include partnerships with Yad Vashem the Jerusalem-based archive of Holocaust materials, with 17 of the world's most famous art museums, through the Google Art Project, and with many libraries that hold rare collections. In March this year, Google also announced a grant of US\$2.5million to digitise Nelson Mandela's and Desmond Tutu's archives.

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