

Telecentres: knowledge sharing in rural Africa

Access to ICTs in Africa is increasingly associated with the presence of telecentres. They provide a haven for local private sector and technical skills development through a range of online and offline resource information and training services for the local people. The need for telecentre networks and their role in expanding knowledge-sharing opportunities is becoming more important in facilitating exchange of good practices and experiences

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are emerging to be key drivers in promoting local development in several rural African countries. The use of ICTs among rural communities in Africa is increasingly associated with the presence of telecentres (see also Box on page 9).

A telecentre provides the institutional platform through which local communities can communicate and access social and economic resources such as in agriculture, education, health and HIV/Aids, commerce, gender, local governance etc. They provide technical skills development through a range of online and offline resources as well as training services for the local people.

The local institutions have developed to incorporate a range of ICT tools and put communities in a position to cut across a variety of development services. As most rural African communities fall within low-income levels and generally lack access to

ICTs, telecentres enable local people to access ICTs at a low cost with shared services. The cost alone for access to the Internet in many African countries is higher than the costs in Europe (Telecentre Magazine 2007). Through the use of Internet and mobile technology services, the communities are able to access social and economic services that could have been difficult without their presence. Telecentres have developed and offer services through social enterprising models

Telecentre networks

Telecentre networks can be described as a collective group of telecentres within a geographical region that form a network for the purpose of sharing knowledge and information exchange. The telecentre networks exist depending on the environment in the country or region. For the last two decades or so, more countries have been getting connected to the telecentre movement (Africa, Middle-Eastern Europe, Asia, etc.) through telecentre networks.

that balance between social aspects of the communities therefore offering economic empowerment opportunities to the rural African population. Apart from many other areas, rural communities in Africa still depend on agriculture and small-scale trading for livelihoods.

Telecenters and farming systems

Through a telecentre, the community is able to access information resources on farming practices via

Telecentres offer communities access to the internet and are a good place for knowledge sharing.



Photo: Mulozi

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SATNET

The Southern African Telecentre Network (SATNET) was established in 2007, after the Benin Africa telecentre Leaders Conference as a new regional network in southern Africa. SATNET is a non-profit organisation aimed at promoting regional interaction, share knowledge and development experiences in the telecentre movement in the region. The network supports capacity development to national networks to contribute to overall integration of ICT4D processes. With its secretariat located in Lusaka, Zambia, SATNET shall provide opportunities among national telecentres for regional knowledge sharing, information exchange and networking among telecentres of southern African countries. The main objective is to scale up an institutional platform for telecentre interaction and collaboration amongst national networks and civil society ICT organisations.

SATNET promotes the ideals and principles of telecentres in the region. The network is also a repository of knowledge with various success stories, failures and lessons learned from community telecentres. Ultimately, this is expected to help in sustainability and up-scaling telecentres around the region. Through increased networking activities, SATNET will have a positive impact and opportunities for livelihoods, small businesses, employment, skills, communication and overall achievement of development.

The International workshop on sustainable telecentres in Africa held in Lusaka, Zambia, in June 2008 resolved to strengthen the development of SATNET as a regional network for telecentres for southern African countries, (www.share4D.org).

SATNET focuses on the following five key areas in programme development:

- Information sharing and interaction on increased use of community telecentres and rural energy infrastructure innovations in southern Africa to facilitate bridging of the digital divide and contribute to regional poverty reduction strategies;
- Sustainable use of ICTs, emphasising on aspects such as technical IT infrastructure, business management and models, and relevant content development in telecentres;
- The need for documentation of good practices, technology innovations, information sharing, and lessons learned in the region.
- The need for increased support to national ICT sector policy implementation and involvement of stakeholders – such as private sector and civil society.
- Increased support to establishment and capacity development of national telecentre networks to ensure sustainable development of telecentres and local community involvement to contribute to private sector development and achievement of poverty alleviation strategies.

the Internet or off-line through a telecentre data base. The information enables farmers to improve farm practices, increase production yields and farm incomes. A telecentre will also provide local farmers with the opportunity to link agricultural products to urban markets through online market information services. The farmers are able to compare prices and trade competitively and increase income levels. As in the case of Zambia, a local farmers' union conducts a commodity pricing system and enables farmers to access local price information through mobile SMS (Africonnect, June 2008, www.iconnect.zm). The system pro-

vides farming tips and marketing information services to small-scale farmers. Similar services are offered by telecentres in east Africa. They are thus used as a catalyst for improved agriculture practices, production and income levels among rural communities.

Telecenters and rural businesses

A telecentre supports rural businesses through a variety of services. Local business uses shared ICT infrastructure to access and link with urban markets. Rural entrepreneurs utilise the services to communicate and

access business information resources to expand their businesses. They use a local centre as a communication platform for products and services. Through skills training services, telecentres help to build a skill base for local business. Traders place online business orders with urban suppliers.

Apart from other services, the Akshaya pilot project, implemented in a rural district of Kerala in India, disseminates information and opportunities for income enhancement/generation and provides a platform for e-Communication, e-Commerce, etc. The project provides for avenues for e-Marketing and e-Shopping (Akshaya Project, Kerala, India, Telecentre Magazine 2007). In other local environments, telecentres provide rural businesses to exist in franchising and advertising products on behalf of other organisations, offering opportunities for market access for rural businesses, and increase incomes and economic empowerment. For these and many more services, telecentres play a key role in facilitating local business development and improving livelihoods through ICTs at community level.

Telecentre networks and knowledge sharing

The increased existence of telecentres has encouraged promoters and practitioners around Africa for innovative interventions to increase interaction and find common solutions. Telecentre networks are being created to respond to pressing issues facing the telecentre movement.

No matter at what level, telecentre networks are becoming reliable platforms for sharing technological innovations, practices and experiences. This is important as many telecentres have collapsed due to lack of management and technological capacities to operate without external support. Through online support services and exchange of information resources,



Photo: J. Boethling

Telecentres offer a wide range of ICT services, besides internet access to telecommunications, market information networks and a database on agricultural issues.

National telecentre networks now exist in many developing countries including Africa. Some examples include telecentre networks in East Africa, and the latest regional network to be established is the Southern Africa Telecentre Network – SATNET (see Box).

It is therefore important to note that sustainable development of rural telecentres in Africa will mainly depend

on the existence of stronger and representative telecentre networks. Telecentre network structures serve as a platform to raise awareness about issues in ICT4D and disseminate experiences and practices, and for research, analysis, advocacy and the development of a stronger telecentre ecosystem.

a rural telecentre regularly receives technical assistance from a national telecentre helpdesk. A telecentre manager is able to download relevant content materials on how to manage a telecentre, usually posted to a network website.

Telecentre networks hold online d-group discussions, conferences and knowledge exchange as they communicate and share experiences. Networks therefore facilitate keeping the telecentre 'Helpnet' concept alive. They increase telecentre capacities through sharing knowledge and e-discussions, creating an impact to grassroots development. Knowledge exchange processes through networks involve mar-

ginalised communities to be included in the mainstream development.

With emerging technologies such as Web 2.0 and telecentre 2.0, telecentre networks go beyond the IT infrastructure and encompass access to knowledge, social transformation, opportunities and partnership building for collaboration, which provides value to the communities as they prepare to become part of the knowledge economy (Vignesh Sornomohan in Telecentre Magazine 2007). Technologies allow Internet users to create new individual realms within networks, and they can swap their knowledge and work together to create concepts and develop solutions.

More information

1. Tracking Telecentre transformation, Telecenter magazine: www.telecenter.org
2. East Africa Telecenter Forum: www.ugabytes.org
3. SATNET: www.share4D.org

Zusammenfassung

Die Nutzung von IKT in ländlichen Gemeinden Afrikas findet zunehmend in Verbindung mit Telezentren statt. Solche Netzwerke können zu Wissens- und Informationsaustausch und dadurch zur Gesamtentwicklung afrikanischer Regionen beitragen. Telezentren können die Entwicklung von ländlichen Gebieten Afrikas durch den Einsatz von IKT begünstigen. Der Artikel beschreibt einige der in den vergangenen fünf

Jahren aufgebauten Telezentren Netzwerke und wie diese die nationale und regionale Entwicklung positiv vorantreiben können.

Resumen

El uso de las TIC en las comunidades rurales de África se asocia crecientemente con la presencia de telecentros. Las redes de telecentros pueden ayudar a compartir conocimientos e intercambiar información, y con ello al desarrollo in-

tegral en las regiones africanas. La mejor manera en que los telecentros pueden contribuir a fomentar el desarrollo en las áreas rurales de África es a través de las TIC. El artículo describe algunas de las redes regionales de telecentros ya establecidas en las regiones africanas durante los últimos cinco años, y detalla la manera en que dichas plataformas de redes representan un aporte positivo al desarrollo nacional y regional en los países africanos.