

**Community-driven ICT networks for local development in rural  
areas:**

**The potential and feasibility of this emerging policy option**

**Pro-poor community-driven networks seminar, August 17, 2006**

**Keynote address and opening**

**By**

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**Chairperson WOUGNET**  
**Honourable members of parliament**  
**Distinguished participants**  
**Members of the press**  
**Ladies and gentlemen**

I am delighted to be here this morning to, both welcome you and officiate at the opening of pro-poor community driven networks seminar. It is indeed a great pleasure for me to be here especially in my new capacity of being charged with being responsible for the ICT sector in this country.

Like other countries Uganda has recognized the potential and enabling element of information and communication technologies as a tool for social and economic development. The ultimate indication of this is the creation of the Ministry of ICT. Further, H.E the president decided to appoint a technical head for the ministry to allow for a quantum leap effect in the sector. I am greatly honored to have been selected as that person.

The impact of information and communication technology (ICT) on development has been amply charted in the last decade of the outgoing century as a multi-dimensional, multi-stakeholder and pervasive process. So significant is this impact to those that have the capacity to apply these technologies have witnessed “galloping” rates of development.

The government of Uganda appreciates the role of ICT in development through infusing these new technologies in its operations an ultimate service delivery to the public. However, infusion of these technologies requires clear and proper laid down strategies government wide. The process should be shared by both government and other stakeholders i.e. the private sector, civil society, donor community, regional inbreeding, etc.

I am delighted this morning we are witnessing an initiative led by the civil society, WOUGNET in tackling an important, yet, frequently overlooked dimension-the rural and less privileged section of society. The approach, which is being propounded, is a community based one. The question then arises, that since we are all stakeholders, what can we do both independently and jointly to address this noble and yet obligatory cause. When we talk about national development it should have no social, political or economic boundaries. We should, therefore, provide opportunities for all members of the society to benefit and contribute towards that development.

Our vision is “A knowledge based Uganda where national development and good governance are sustain ably enhanced and accelerated by timely and secure access to information and efficient application of ICT”

In contributing towards the vision and creation of the opportunities through ICT, our ministry has the following

- i) promote sustainable use of efficient and effective information and communication systems through the country and all spheres of life in support of national development.
- ii) Coordinate, promote, monitor ICT development and harness its potential to achieve national development.

Further our mission is to promote the development and effective utilization of ICT such that quantifiable impact is achieved throughout the country by 2010.

Since the early 1990s, there has been global considerable enthusiasm for the use of ICTs to foster local community activities and increasing general sociability with in a local area/community.

Certain questions have to be raised about how to define "local" and which 'communities' are being served by an initiative. Key issues include:

- definitions of community
- projects or initiatives?- framing of ICT developments within communities.
- Ownership- where control lies.
- Geographical reach – are there boundaries that define local initiatives?

Some famous scholars define communities based on criteria, such as

- community of locality: defined by where we live, our neighborhood
- community of attachment: a measure of the level of interaction with others and the sense of identity
- community of interest: a group of people with common interest

In our context, what should we define as a community or should it be a hybrid of, say, the above and others.

Other areas of consideration should be to address the 'digital divide or inequality'? Some believe that rather than a simple 'digital divide', there are multiple dimensions of digital inequality, all of which must be overcome to ensure meaningful ICT usage.

In overcoming these multiple dimensions, local ICT initiatives may directly impact upon quality of the indicators and improve social capital. Many times we strive to provide "access" as the main motivator and assume that achieving that is adequate. We should, however, ask ourselves the following:

- 1) Access for what purpose?
- 2) Access for whom?
- 3) Access to what?

Some lectures refer to what is termed as an "access rainbow". This provides layers of potential access, leading from physical governance. It is as follow:

- 1) Carriage- the infrastructure for transporting the data.
- 2) Devices- the computers and other devices used by the individual.
- 3) Software tools- the browser, email client and other soft ware needed to use the internet
- 4) Content/services- on line database and website repositories of information; email and e-commerce services.
- 5) Service/access provision- local ISPs and community access points.
- 6) Literacy/social facilitation- text and computer literacy; training and support services
- 7) Governance – public consultation on policy issues; social impact assessments

In looking at the objectives of this seminar, I am sure that these and others are some of the questions you shall be deliberating on and finding answers to.

Community-driven ICT networks offer a potential solution for addressing rural connectivity taking advantage of new wireless and other technologies (such as voice over IP-VOIP) that enable cost-effective mechanisms for reaching out in areas with limited infrastructure. However, physical access alone is meaningless if a community cannot use the technology or is not in position to exploit the information accessible via the network.. the type of information accessible via the network as well as the ICT skill set required are important elements to consider for community-driven networks.

The sustainability of such networks is tied into the level of engagement and commitment that members of the community place on ensuring the success of the network. Such levels of engagement and commitment will be directly related to the perceived level of benefit from such a cooperative.

In general, community facilities are embraced when they are considered to be available, relevant and affordable. From government perspective together with moving towards government, such networks as WOUGNET provide important partners with which to work in our quest for provision of better and more efficient services to the community.

On behalf of the government and the ministry, we shall support all your initiatives and shall work hand in hand to promote the wide spread proliferation of ICT in development to enable us achieve our vision towards a “knowledge society”.

It is with great pleasure that I now declare the seminar officially opened.

Thank you.