



WOMEN OF UGANDA NETWORK

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Uganda Country-based Research, Policy Support and Advocacy Partnerships for Pro-Poor ICT

1. Introduction

Information and communication technology (ICT) is emerging as an important medium for communication and exchange as well as a tool for development, including at the local and community levels. However, this potential is yet to be effectively leveraged. In part this is the result of an ICTD “affordable infrastructure and related service delivery and capacity deficit” that many rural and peri-urban areas continue to experience and in part because of the “development-policy and experience divide” that hinders the effective mainstreaming of ICT in development (ICTD) interventions.

Through a combination of research, policy support, advocacy partnerships, networking and capacity building, this programme component of UNDP’s *making ICT work for the poor* service line aims to contribute to enlarging the policy options for enhancing pro-poor access to communication tools, development information and services and exploring the potential for strengthening community and local development through the use of ICT.

Uganda is one of the four countries selected for the UNDP research, following the January 2006 visit by Mr. Seán Ó Siochrú, a senior consultant with the UNDP. This visit was to assess the possibilities of conducting a Uganda country study on the subject of “Pro-poor access options & community development models”. The January visit included making an assessment about fibre optics (for Open Access possibilities), about the possibilities for local driven networks, about policy developments, about the advocacy activities, and about UNDP intentions and interests. The other countries participating in the study are Kenya, Tanzania and Rwanda.

The UNDP ICTD four-country project will build on insights from the research and explore the concrete potential of a few emerging policy and implementation options that might be effectively deployed to address some of the current network and access gaps depending upon the particular national and institutional contexts. These include:

- *Open access approaches for building and financing infrastructure* that could be used to address gaps in network infrastructure and leverage new business and development models to reduce costs at the regional, national and sub-national levels;ⁱ
- *New models of network ownership and management at the community level* e.g. community-driven infrastructure that can expand access and contribute to network infrastructure development from the ground-up as well as strengthen local development and scaling-up of community-driven initiatives;ⁱⁱ

2. Uganda Country-based Research

The Uganda Country-based research aims to contribute to the identification and codification of evidence-based ICTD policy options and to strengthen advocacy and capacities for policy change to leverage such options. The project will seek to leverage selected infrastructure, access and ICT-enabled development models in Uganda on issues relating to pro-poor access. More specifically, it will:

1. Support action-oriented research and codification of policy and implementation options on pro-poor infrastructure as well as on community driven networks and services
2. Identify and reinforce efforts and partnerships for national level advocacy and policy support in these areas.ⁱⁱⁱ
3. Identify and support capacity development and networking in these themes, nationally, regionally and internationally with regard to fostering adoption of evidence-based policy, learning and innovation.^{iv}

In the context of the country project, expected outputs will comprise:

1. An action-oriented research report on the following themes:
 - *Pro-poor infrastructure options*: to enhance bandwidth and ICT availability in rural areas with a view to enhancing the delivery of services, empowering local communities, and strengthening local development opportunities. In the East African context, this will involve an assessment of the existing approaches to infrastructure development, an identification of the components of a Pro-Poor Open Access and development-enhancing approach for national implementation of the national backbone, as well as with regard to the backhaul links to the EASSy cable;
 - *Community driven networks and services*: assessment of the case for and the potential of community-driven local ICT networks and services, using innovative models and technologies and focusing on supporting community empowerment to overcome some of the challenges being faced by current ICTD implementation in providing access and contributing to local development;
 - *Assessment of development linkages and impact of increased ICT provision*: taking into account the current state of development and configuration of broad development and ICT-related policy and strategies, of existing and planned ICT networks and services. For example, are the effectiveness, responsiveness and range of services that can be offered by subcounties/local government and community development initiatives and the potential for policy change and partnerships increased through the deployment of ICT?
2. Formation and/or reinforcing of advocacy partnerships, and influencing policy in directions indicated by the research;
3. Capacity building in the themes identified, and cross-country exchanges and networks in the pilot countries (Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania and Rwanda) and to wider networks of relevance.

Following the selection of Uganda for the project, the focus of activities since has been on generating the action-oriented research report. The next step is to form and/or reinforce advocacy partnerships across a broad range of stakeholders from government, private sector and civil society.

3. The case for pro-poor community networks

In Uganda, policy and regulatory measures were developed from the paradigm that improving service delivery largely depends on reducing the market efficiency gaps. Consequently, measures were undertaken to reduce such gaps including:

- Competition in the telecommunications sector was invited even before the incumbent national operator, Uganda Posts and Telecommunications Corporation, was privatised.
- A stable regulatory regime, with independence guaranteed by law, was created.
- Clear national universal access targets were set for the two main operators' licenses with respect to rural sub-counties.
- Operators were allowed tariff flexibility in that they were not required to set mobile tariffs to match fixed line tariffs. Operators were encouraged to expand according to their own network economies. They were even allowed to utilise public payphone and 'resale' franchise operators for public access. These operators can charge up to 50% more in rural areas than prevailing urban rates.

While these measures did address some of the market gaps, many rural communities and conflict-affected communities in Northern and North Eastern Uganda remain largely without service. Also, in Uganda as elsewhere, Internet Service Providers (ISPs) are more likely to require subsidies than telephony providers – even to reach some district centres.

Furthermore, the decentralized government structure in Uganda, including the wide spread of district headquarters, encourages a broad but superficial distribution of ICTs across the country. This has been further encouraged by the relatively high level of liberalization and by explicit Uganda Communications Commission (UCC) policies that set reach targets by district and sub-county. Despite this spread, there is a big gap between towns and even the closest surrounding villages in terms of awareness and use of ICT. This gap has not been bridged, although in a few places, people are making bona fide efforts to tackle the gap. School-based telecentres, often located on town outskirts, also increase accessibility for the neighbouring populations.

Providing access in rural areas is a big challenge. On the supply side, limiting factors include infrastructure, maintenance, equipment supplies, staff capacity and transport. On the demand side, several things are lacking: money, awareness, client transportation to the centres, and clarity/focus (sometimes on the part of the centre itself) about how the services can be used to improve livelihoods. The experiences of access centres in this study suggest that user fees are major barriers in popularising services. In past response patterns to ICT in poor and disadvantaged communities, it has been observed that:

- Most use of ICTs is primarily for social reasons although in many instances economic factors come into play (like when contact with a relative working outside the rural locality results in economic assistance).
- Participation in local governance processes increases through information sharing and engaging in debate of topical issues.
- Community facilities are embraced when available, relevant and affordable.
- Enthusiasm for ICT education and/or enhancing education is enhanced through use of ICT because children education is close to most parents' heart so parents usually support it. Another reason this gets good response is its community-based nature which makes it more affordable.

In the current regulatory environment, there are very few situations of infrastructure sharing and there is no definite regulatory requirement for infrastructure sharing or open access. It is generally acknowledged that one way of lowering the risks of providing universal service access is through

collective, community or cooperative ownership. Experiences of community ownership in ICT have mostly occurred in three forms^v:

- (i) Service and content disseminated via telecentres;
- (ii) Local infrastructure (mostly in developed and emerging economies in order to serve both rural and urban underserved areas);
- (iii) Hybrid forms (community ownership that involves commercial and public interests).

For the country study, a participatory gender-sensitive approach was used to assess the case for and the potential of community-driven local ICT networks and services. Questionnaires were developed and a features workshop conducted. These targeted people playing community leadership roles that focused on social and development issues as well as people who were either access centre staff or technical stakeholders and were focused on technical and business model issues. The study selected three study areas in the districts of Nakaseke, Apac and Mbale. The primary factors in distinguishing the feasibility of a community wireless model in the three areas were found to be:

- Cost of establishing the network infrastructure
- Ability to assimilate the community ownership concept
- Ease with which such a network would be linked to the national backbone

With its strong history and experience of a healthy cooperative movement, relatively rich communication infrastructure and opportunities to link to the national backbone, as well as greater dynamic range within the economy, Mbale was selected as the site for further investigation and consideration as the pilot site for a community-owned and networked telecentre model for pro-poor access to ICTD.

3.1 Emerging gender dimensions for pro-poor community-driven networks

It has been widely shown that poverty is highly feminised implying that the females form a dominant section of the poor. Similarly, any initiative that is pro-poor has to necessarily target women as key in addressing poverty. In relation to ICTs, there is a wide range of literature that articulates gender issues which have to be addressed if ICT initiatives are to reduce and not worsen gender gaps^{vi,vii}.

Uganda has a national ICT policy framework which recognises gender mainstreaming as integral to a delivery mechanism that addresses the needs of women and men. The policy rationale emphasises the need to “stimulate industrial growth, commerce, infrastructure and linkage of rural and urban communities as well as uplifting of disadvantaged groups, while taking care of gender balance” (Section 2.3). Policy objective 4.2(x) aims “to ensure gender mainstreaming in information and communication programmes and in ICT development.” Furthermore, the policy pledges to “ensure that facilities for communication are provided at levels of cost, which match the ability of their users to pay, so as to reduce gender and spatial disparities in information access.”

Some of the salient issues emerging from the Uganda study are:

- A contributory factor to high infrastructural costs is the failure of private companies to share certain common infrastructure raising the concern that a pro-poor community-driven model may not be feasible.
- Many of the current ICT initiatives have not focused on how the services can catalyse social transformation and change gender relations to achieve equality. Often men and women’s specific needs are not taken into account in the design of policies such as the RCDF or specific ICT projects.

- While available data shows significant gains in universal access for Uganda, such access has not been pursued within a gender sensitive framework nor is there a gender sensitive monitoring evaluation framework. There is need to include gender targets and monitoring and evaluation indicators in any pro-poor ICT initiatives.
- A community ownership model has the potential for more social exclusion, especially if not informed by gender considerations in the design of especially the “human” based networks.
- In-depth field assessments in Mbale indicated that women have development information needs that are similar to but different from those of men. Thus if ICT initiatives have to be implemented in a gender sensitive manner, it is important to take into account the different needs of men and women as well as the social-cultural context.
- Women play a significant role in existing community networks especially the civil society organisations (CSOs). This provides a useful potential to build on. Women are also critical in the informal business sector. There is need to ensure participation of women’s organisations and the informal sector in rural and peri-urban areas.

4. What strategy for Uganda?

A clear question that emerges for Uganda is ‘Are there ways to reduce the cost of providing access to rural communities while enhancing both the ability of communities to pay by mobilizing unused community resources and the willingness to pay by more correctly matching the services offered with the community’s real needs thus increasing the development rewards?’. This calls for national level advocacy and policy support incorporating the directions indicated by this research. There is need to develop strategies and to generate best-case studies for the integration of the community driven model into national pro-poor gender-sensitive access strategies. This will necessarily require exploration of synergies with initiatives addressing ‘first inch’, ‘last mile’, ‘low cost’ objectives within the country. Last but not least, there is need for stakeholder capacity building – which, in the first place, comprises the research and advocacy activities themselves.

References

ⁱ E.g., This research builds on the path-breaking work initiated by InfoDev. See InfoDev 2005 "Leveraging New Technologies and Open Access models" http://www.infodev.org/section/programs/enabling_access/open_access & (upcoming) "Municipal Broadband Networks: A Study and Toolkit" http://www.infodev.org/files/2860_file_Broadband_Toolkit.pdf http://www.infodev.org/files/2181_file_EoI_Municipal_Broadband_Networksf.pdf SIDA & UN ICT Task Force (2005) Open Access Workshops: 3rd International Workshop held on 10-11 May 2005 in Maputo. <http://www.openaccess.uem.mz/program.html>. As the Infodev (2005) study points out: different regulatory circumstances in the developed world account for several of the main differences in the way the term is used. In the USA, the expression "Open Access" has been very much tied in a fairly narrow way to the debate about the role of Regional Bell Operating Companies (RBOCs). In Europe the term has been used to address wider issues around access to the network and how the network might be financed and operated... However, the ideas are not just limited to the local network. Some nationwide power companies and other utilities have built substantial networks too within this framework of ideas.

ⁱⁱ See for example, World Dialogue on Regulation's research stream and related resources on: Innovative Models of Financing, Ownership and Management <http://www.regulateonline.org/content/view/365/31/> focus on micro-telcos in the context of USAID's Last Mile Initiative http://www.usaid.gov/our_work/economic_growth_and_trade/info_technology/bulletin5_Feb2005.pdf; IDRC's pro-poor pro-market policy and regulation approach http://www.idrc.ca/en/ev-73385-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html. In *Community-based Networks and Innovative Technologies: New models to serve and empower the poor*, a report written for UNDP, Sean O Siochru and Bruce Girard (2005) point to three identified variations of a community driven approach. These are the user/community owned cooperative, the local authority/municipality owned network, and the hybrid entrepreneurial/ community-driven model. Each might suit different circumstances (Girard and O Siochru, 2005).

ⁱⁱⁱ E.g. with APC/CATIA support to KictaNet in Kenya and WOUGNET, CIPESA, I-Network, Inter-Agency e-Government/ICT National Planning Taskforce, UISPA in Uganda

^{iv} E.g. collaboration with InfoDev to further explore and assess the concrete potential, feasibility and application of the open access approach and support capacity development; and potentially with IDRC to strengthen synergies between the respective programmes relating to pro-poor ICT research, advocacy and policy support in the selected countries.

^v *Community-based Networks and Innovative Technologies: New models to serve and empower the poor*, a report written for UNDP, Sean O Siochru and Bruce Girard (2005).

^{vi} *Gender Issues in ICT Policy in Developing Countries: An Overview*, Hafkin, N. (2002). United Nations Division for Advancement of Women (DAW) Expert Group Meeting, Seoul, Korea, 11-14 November 2002.

^{vii} *Gender Issues and Concerns in ICT Policies*, Madanda, A. (2006). Women of Uganda Network (WOUGNET) Public Forum: "Uganda's ICT Policy: Does it address the Gender Digital Divide?", Kampala, Uganda, 7 March 2006.