INL 360 Notes

Theme 1.5.2 The various types of information resource centres

Since 1996 the centre approach was included in the following initiatives

- 1996 Telecommunication act was promoted to provide for the Universal Service Agency (USA).
    - USA was responsible for ensuring access to all South Africans by placing telecentre in developing communities.

The Universal Service and Access Agency of South Africa (USAASA) is a State Owned Entity of government established through the Electronic Communications Act, No 36 of 2005, to ensure that "every man, woman and child whether living in the remote areas of the Kalahari or in urban areas of Gauteng can be able to connect, speak, explore and study using ICT's.

- Department of Communities produced various documents outlining various projects for extending access to ICT's
    - **Public Information Terminals (PiT's)** were to be placed in post offices and internet labs in disadvantaged areas
- **Task Group on Government Communications (ComTask)** recommended to establish the **Government Communication and Information Services (GCIS)** in place of **South African Communication Services (SACS)** was accepted.
    - The GCIS had to focus on, among other things, on the establishment of **multi-purpose community centres (MPCCs)** to spread useful government information to South Africans
    - These centres were seen as tool to bridge the digital divide

1.5.3 The prerequisites necessary to implement IRCs successfully in a development context

information resource centre (IRC)

Lessons for those implementing access centres

1. Set a clear and simple initial goal that is based on a real local need and on which the centre can build

- Was often seen as an ambitious project.
- High expectations from these projects caused them to under deliver on these expectations.
- Local support is crucial for telecentres survival, often the support decreased and left staff demoralized.
- Starting with achievable small goals allows telecentres a lower risk of big disappointments, allowing local capacity to be built gradually.

2. Externally subsidized access strategies should be based on a full local market assessment that takes into account both current conditions and likely future developments.

- Outside agents often did not research the local market
- Often outside agents just assumed there was a short supply of ICTs and set up a centre to meet that need.
- Often local market would change quickly, not always in response to these centres, but these market changes had an influence on the need for these centres
- In Uganda Rural was referred to any place that wasn't the capital city, these centres were placed in these "rural" areas.
- Always better to support local efforts that already in place, more cost effective and supports the community internally.

3. There have been many stand-alone pilot projects and innovative activities, but the knowledge gained from these is fragmented and poorly shared. _localize decision making_

- Local markets change quickly in regard to ICT's, centres need to respond quickly and flexibly to these changes.
- Requires locally made decision making power and a capacity to make decisions.
- Most telecentres in Uganda was under control of local government authorities, and was expected to operate on a pre-planned budget, often these centre's ran into big operational problems.
- Structures like those didn't allow to respond to community needs.

4. It is generally not realistic to expect a centre to be profitable immediately after start-up.

- Financial viability over the short term is most likely where:
  - already existing need and willingness to pay.
  - a centre is able to rely on service of fair quality and reliability.
  - running costs are not high and profit margins are fair.
  - the access centre is either very simple or is an addition to an already functioning organization.
  - the access centre is in a highly visible place where people come regularly to shop and do business.

- User fees can be used to generate profit, insofar as willingness to pay is an indication of local relevance.
- Instilling fees puts up another barrier for people to gain access, there are already many barriers in place for many people.
- Must consider the impact the pricing structures will have on the service offered.

Lessons for those supporting access centres.

1. Civil society organizations need to act as watchdogs and place consumer issues related to telecommunications into public debate.

- Building telecommunications infrastructures requires a lot of capital (Money)
- National telecom services don't operate in true competition.

- Government created agencies to regulate the telecom sector.
- Telecom sector is very powerful, and regulators don't have a lot of political power to manage/regulate them.
- Basically, the telecom services have so much power they overcharge and set up barriers to keep the monopoly on the sector and the regulators who are meant to manage them don't have enough power to control them.
- There is a very limited choice on service providers in the sector, meaning consumer choice doesn't have a big effect on the cost or effective service output.

2. Small businesses and not-for-profit groups providing various forms of public ICT access often need support, especially in the form of capital, equipment, practical technical skills, and business management and marketing skills.

- Many enterprises that are trying to provide affordable access to ICT's and related services.
- capital, equipment, skills, and knowledge are major aspects for small businesses.
- These capacities vary between businesses but generally they will lack in one of the major aspects.
- Applying Small Medium and Micro Enterprise (SMME) support services to access centres has had fair amount of success in Asia.
- Organisations taking interest and supporting small businesses startups has had a positive impact on the ability of these enterprises to thrive.

3. There have been many stand-alone pilot projects and innovative activities, but the knowledge gained from these is fragmented and poorly shared

- Many standalone initiatives, either by local agencies or outsiders.
- Often these projects display innovative ideas which were not covered by research.
- Often these projects suffer from a lack of collaboration.
- Many of these agency's project don't share their innovative ideas and as a result only one agency will be performing these projects.
- Only one place that collects the knowledge gained and only one place that can share and work on it.
- Lack of collaboration makes knowledge sharing among these businesses very hard, this knowledge staying in one place does not allow for building on top of that knowledge store.

4. Partnerships between national or regional not-for-profit organizations and local access centres require careful attention to the capacity requirements of partners, and may take time to develop as this capacity grows

- Partnerships between access centres and other organizations were often done for a necessary purpose and often did not last long.
- Was more common among not-for-profit access centres.
- Difficulty maintaining partnerships due to ongoing crises.

- o Some regional structure often found that access centres had a difficult time keep reliable communication.
- o Access centres often had a hard time contacting these organizations and they were unresponsive to their needs.
- Main lesson for 3rd party organizations to learn is that they should start small with concrete activities.
- Second, not-for-profit organisations are often considered prime candidates of partnerships, but small local businesses that already provide ICT's or related services can also be valid partners.
- Local small businesses could be a better partner that a Not-for-profit organization for access centres
- Supporting a small local business has to the potential to invest in the local economy whilst building on the existing capacity.

Ten Themes for Telecentre Sustainability

1. The power of a national commitment by policy-makers who recognise the value of connecting the people of the country through the modern tools of the Information Society, and follow that commitment with funding and organisational support for multi-year programmes.

national policy can give visibility and help mobilise resources for building the infrastructure and programmes that promote access and use of information and communication technologies.

2. The importance of partnerships in translating national policy into action through governmental and non-governmental bodies at the regional and local levels.

- Policies and funding does not mean there is centralised planning and operations
- Many organizations can build a partnership to build ICT's
- For example, the government can generate funding for these projects to help support them, but that does not mean the government is the entity at the top doing all of the planning. Non-government bodies (NGO's) can register by the government to gain support though funding, and from there on these organizations can manage themselves to create the ICT infrastructures.

3. The value of having local "champions" (innovators) who can mobilise others (early adopters, opinion leaders) to accept the vision of an ICT telecentre programme

- These champions are very dedicated to the vision of an ICT telecentre program.
- They usually innovate new ideas that suit what the community need.
- They are also known as innovators.

4. The significant value of community volunteers in operating telecentres

- Volunteers offer a variety of benefits to a program.
- The contribute to the day in and day out supervision of a facility.
- Many community-based communication centres cannot afford these personnel.
- Having volunteers allows the centres to operate as usual without the pressure of being able to afford the needed staff
- Many of these centres have methods for attracting volunteers, stuff like gaining credit at a local college, or offering a service, or offering access to ICT's and programs.
- These volunteers in turn offer their customers/clientele a person with whom they can identify and feel comfortable with.
- Telecentres should not just recruit volunteers but also training, retaining, and rewarding them.
- Called the "Gain, Train, Retain".

5. The advantages of clusters or networks of telecentres working together in a region to develop and share a variety of resources.

- Telecentres working together have enabled them to share information and resources and share a support system.
- They create support systems that allows them to seek out funding, develop initiatives, and carry out a variety of other management functions.

6. The importance of raising awareness about information and ICTs as a valuable resource for individuals, families, organisations and communities.

- These telecentres have enabled many people to gain access to important and sometimes life saving information.
- Without ICT's gaining this information would be almost impossible for most people.
- Governments should plan campaigns to demonstrate the daily use of information and how useful it can be

7. The role of research in creating a viable telecentre enterprise.

- Very little time and resources devoted to research in telecentres.
- These telecentre demonstration projects need to be led by research or else they are of little use.
- Telecentre personnel need tools in ongoing operations. Tools that":
  - 1. Help them discover and monitor the needs of the community.
  - 2. Get reliable demographic information of the area.
  - 3. Systematically monitor ongoing operations.
  - 4. Check systematically on consequences and outcomes.

8. Telecentres need long term sustainability and business plans that fit the culture of the community.

- Not-for-profit doesn't mean not-for-income.
- Many telecentres operate as not-for-profit.
- Producing income producing activities for telecentres are vital.
  - Membership fees
  - Services (games, blood pressure test, social service assistance)
  - Training.
- Telecentres should move to become independent with funding since government funding only last a set period.

9. Focusing on information services rather than on computers and the Internet alone to build a local institution more fully woven into the fabric of the community, with a larger base for generating income.

- Telecentres must provide an information service and be a communication business.
- Many centres assess the community's need and adapt to those needs.
- The community's information and communication need should determine the centre's approach to adapt to these needs.
- This helps community become more woven into the community.

10. Participation as an important goal that requires a strategic approach.

- Telecentres should participate in the community to build a type of trust among the people there.
- A lot of people who would benefit from the telecentre's services are usually intimidated to go to these centres.
- Reaching out to minorities, woman, children, and elderly is difficult without participation.
- Participation is often overlooked and undervalued.
- Participation is not spontaneous, it is a planned effort.