

A future for telecentres

The Northern and Upper East Regions of Ghana are dry and dusty for most of the year. Away from the main tar road between Tamale and Bolgatanga the quality of other roads is poor. Travelling from one town to the next takes a lot of time. To drive the 160 km from Bimbilla to Tamale, for example, takes around four hours. The towns in the region are connected to grid electricity, but the supply is sometimes erratic. The people who live there are mainly subsistence and small-scale farmers. ICT could play a role to develop these rural areas.

In 2005, the Ghanaian government launched their Community Information Centre (CIC) initiative to introduce ICTs to 100 rural districts, in an effort to improve connections and increase

- serve as hub to access local and central government information
- create awareness of ICT in rural areas
- disseminate information to rural areas on health, agriculture, local government and education
- provide the opportunity for ICT training in rural communities
- support rural business activities, such as access to market information, extension services, etc.)

From 2008, those centres based in the Northern and Upper East Regions have received further support from the International Institute of Communication and Development (IICD), and coordinators from local organisations, Savana Signatures and Bold Steps Foundation. The advisors

CIC was yet to open after two faulty starts. Both had problems recruiting and retaining staff and management. Zebilla CIC was officially open to the public but bats in the ceiling of the building gave a good indication of how frequently it was used. Sandema centre was just beginning with a new manager and a supportive district assembly. And Bolgatanga CIC was expected to bring in revenue, but it was challenged with a poor relationship between staff and the municipal assembly.

By organising meetings and training sessions on subjects including business development, open source awareness and basic troubleshooting, CIC management and staff gradually gained their confidence, skills and

Support at the centre

In the years since they were first established, Ghana's community information centres have faced a wide range of challenges as they bring ICTs to rural communities. With the help of specialist advisers, many of those problems have been overcome.

development in the communities. Each CIC is a combination of not-for-profit community resource centre and for-profit telecentre. The first centres started with the physical building connected to the electricity grid, a local area network (LAN) with at least five computer workstations, one printer, one scanner and five uninterruptable power supply units. The idea was that the CICs should become sustainable after a couple of years under the ownership of the respective district assemblies.

The CICs were established with several objectives, to:

- offer rural communities technological opportunities seen in urban areas

provided technical advice to the district assembly on how to make the centres sustainable, and helped to develop the skills of CIC staff, and managers in particular, by giving hands-on training and mentoring, sharing information and organising meetings with related professionals and people in the districts.

Apart from offering the ICT skills and services to the community, the centres were intended to generate and keep relevant content that could be accessed by the community. The training courses, therefore, focused on developing business skills (making a business plan and marketing the centre), content development (video making, blog writing) and trainer of trainer sessions to enable the staff to train the community members in basic ICT skills.

Motivation

The five northern CICs faced a number of challenges in the beginning, according to Ken Kubuga, adviser of Bold Step Foundation. 'In 2008, the Navrongo centre closed, and the Bongo

knowledge and slowly started to turn around their centres.

For example, the Bolgatanga CIC, the only one of the five northern CICs located in a town, continued to serve an increasing number of visitors, and its focus was gradually shifted from being an internet café to being an information and training centre. The two staff members were soon joined by someone on national service duties, who came at no extra cost to the centre, and by a VSO volunteer who was attached to the municipal assembly.

Both volunteers championed the training sessions at the centre and developed new initiatives, such as a youth ICT camp during school holidays, but most of these never saw the light of day due to inadequate funds. Poor relationships with the district assemblies and the inability to sustain interest even in a self-initiated idea continued to stall the implementation of newer plans. Despite this, the CIC continues to be the preferred place for NGO staff, local government workers, civil servants and

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Pupils admitted they would never have had the opportunity to use the technology at home or in school

public school students to go for secretarial services and internet access.

When the Bongo CIC finally opened it quickly became the centre of ICT-supported services in the district. Nearby basic schools began to have their ICT lessons at the centre, with many pupils having their first experience with a computer there.

The centre in Zebilla, meanwhile, became an important facility for 14 basic schools, whose pupils came for weekly practical ICT lessons. Most of the pupils who attended admitted they would never have had the opportunity to use the technology at home or in school where there was no electricity. The centre increased its support role by organising a district-wide ICT quiz for

schools, and an open ICT forum similar to the monthly ICT4D discussion series found the cities of Tamale and Accra. Participants of the two programmes expressed hope that these events would become regular features.

But it was the centre in Sandema that became the star of the five northern CICs, by showing financial sustainability. A few months after the skills training activities, the centre was generating sufficient funds to pay staff, and was able to purchase equipment in order to expand the scope of services. The centre continues to be an example of a successful CIC despite the challenge of being located in a relatively remote area with low literacy levels.

In 2010, the northern CICs received a further boost after they were supplied with equipment, including photocopiers, LCD projectors, digital cameras and binding machines. While the extra equipment helped the centres to become more financially sustainable, the training on content development did not result in locally developed content, as expected.

Assessment

In 2008 and in 2010, visitors to the centres were asked to complete a questionnaire to evaluate the perceived impact of the project. The most interesting results came in from their views on the perceived impact of the centres. 65% of the participants became

Finding the balance between serving the community and providing profit-making services can be a challenge for rural information centres.

CIC Salaga

Salaga, in rural Ghana, has a population of 27,000, serving a wide range of potential users, from students, teachers, farmers, health workers and business people. The main group that visits is students, often between 20 and 50 a day. Most schools in Salaga don't have computers, but ICT is a compulsory subject. They can now use the CIC as a computer lab. But this interferes with the centre's internet cafe services since it only has 13 computers. Other key services are wireless internet for those who can bring their own laptop, ICT training in the form of basic ICT skills, maintenance, and content development, such as blogging and video production. The centre also provides secretarial services and some content development, mainly video coverage of local events. The community did not choose the location of the centre, otherwise it would have been closer to the town centre.

Bimbilla CIC

The CIC in Bimbilla is situated close to the district assembly buildings, around 2 km out of town. The town has a population of around 20,000 people, mainly farmers, and it is the district capital of Nanumba North District. The CIC mainly targets the many schools in the area.

The town has 101 basic schools, 27 junior high schools and two senior high schools. Many of them use the CIC for their ICT practical lessons. The CIC currently has 20 computers, two printers, a photocopier, two scanners and a laminator. As well as internet access, the centre offers business services, such as typing, printing and copying, although they now have competition since two internet cafes opened in the centre of town.

The business services still do not provide enough income for the centre to be financially independent. The district assembly covers most of the costs, including the salary for the CIC manager and the two assistants.

more aware of the possibilities of ICT through the CIC. 55% felt more empowered, and around 50% felt a positive economic impact due to the use of the CIC. The CICs had a less positive impact on gender, with only around 20% of participants noticing any positive gender impact as a result of the CIC, but they gave no reasons for this.

Looking backward after four years of support, it is difficult to say whether the CICs have achieved the initial objectives set by the Ghanaian government. For a start, there were probably too many objectives to be able to fully meet all of them given the investments made by the government, customers and IICD.

'The CICs so far have done very well in providing training to target groups,'



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says project adviser, Stephen Agbenyo, of Savana Signatures, 'particularly to students, and also in offering ICT services such as printing, internet access, ICT training and photocopying. The missing link, however, is content. There is no locally relevant content at the CICs, and very little effort is being made to change this.'

Assurance

Ken Kubuga: 'After two years of coordinating the activities of CICs, and indirectly studying the dynamics, I have come to the opinion that the key factors needed for the centres to provide the services to the community are: a good relationship between CIC and district / municipal assembly; intrinsic motivation of staff; and regular technical updating opportunities for CIC staff and management.'

'District and municipal assemblies need to show that they have confidence and trust in the people they have appointed to work at the centres, while staff and management need to work to earn such trust. In instances where the assembly is not prepared to pay full salaries to the CIC staff, the assembly should consider the option of entering into a public-private partnership with a local entrepreneur. This worked satisfactorily in Bongo when staff turnover became a headache for the assembly.'

'In my opinion,' adds Martine Koopman, country manager for Ghana at IICD, 'the dilemma still lies in the model of mixing the not-for-profit

community resource centre with the for-profit telecentre. The hybrid model makes it difficult to focus. Do you market the centre as an internet café with business services, or do you focus the attention on serving the community? If the centre is used most of the day to offer young Ghanaians the opportunity to learn about computers, its earning capacity from business services suffers, but the community is probably better serviced.'

'I think the CIC should have the business services as an additional service, not as their main service. They should focus on the needs of the community in terms of skills building and, most importantly, offer content relevant to the local situation, which can be done in collaboration with local government, businesses, schools, health clinics and NGOs. This could be partly paid by the community, either directly or through services or indirectly through taxation. The commercial business part of the CIC could then be offered by local entrepreneurs who could have received their initial ICT training at that same CIC.'

The CICs clearly raised the ICT awareness and brought the opportunity of ICT training and access to information to the rural communities. But do they bridge the so-called 'digital divide'? Probably not, but they might have narrowed the gap. Urban areas, like Accra, will always develop much faster than the rural areas, but at least the CICs do provide the rural communities with new opportunities. ◀

Navrongo CIC

The centre in Navrongo employed Regina, a woman with no previous work experience and very little background in ICT. She held a college diploma in accountancy, and oozed confidence. She built a strong community of volunteers around herself, and started to generate revenue for the centre from ICT training and providing secretarial services. It was not long before this confidence was extended to the provision of customised ICT training for women teachers, women traders and women working in the media. In an attempt to expand the initiative further, the CIC staff, with the support of the IICD-CIC project coordinator, documented their ideas and developed them to produce funding proposals. The initiative was supported by a US\$15,000 grant from GenARDISs. Navrongo CIC's proposal was one of 15 selected from over a 1,000 entries.