# A Reflection on Cross Country Knowledge Sharing on Telecentre Sustainability and Business Plan Development

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In IICD's quest to build capacities of various partners groups, telecentres got some more spotlight in the second part of 2009. Community Information Centers (CICs), as they are called in Ghana were beneficiary to a one-week hands on experience on how to develop business plans alongside discussions and peer-assists in relation to telecentre sustainability. This was in August. In October, the members of the Tanzania Telecentre Network (TTN) went through a similar capacity building programme. Using the same facilitator for both events provided a platform for some comparison between the two audiences while promoting south-south knowledge sharing. This document is a summary of the reflections of the facilitator on specific areas of the event.

**Agenda**

The Ghana workshop lasted five working days just like the the Tanzania workshop. However, TTN, the Tanzanian audience took advantage of the meeting to discuss other relevant issues pertaining to the sustainability and further growth of the network. This took some time away from the training proper. Core content in relation to developing a business plan was not changed significantly but had to be rushed through in the case of the Tanzania audience. In both cases, the agenda included visits to other locations. In the case of the Bolgatanga workshop, the idea was for participants to visit, in two groups, potential/existing clients and other telecentres providing similar services as the CICs for interviews.



Members of CROMABU beneficiary communities admit significant progress in their way of life.

The motive was to find out how much customers are willing to pay for services vis-a-vis what is currently being offered by way of pricing. The collated prices and 'wish prices' would then be compared to the actual cost of producing such services. This would enable the CICs to set realistic and competitive prices.

In the case of Tanzania, the visit was to a beneficiary community of the activities of the CROMABU Telecentre. This was to showcase what telecentres can do to improve the communities in which they find themselves.




Participants held discussions in a U-shaped 'family meeting'

**What went really well?**

In the case of both Bolgatanga and Magu, the use of presentations was very limited especially with regards areas of theory such as SWOT analysis, marketing strategies etc. This allowed the facilitator to ask questions rather than 'lecture'. This worked very well in that it allowed the workshop to work at a pace dictated more by participants than by the agenda. This method would also work well because it has the potential to make participants have a higher feeling of 'ownership' of the content generated from the workshop.

In both cases, participants were pre-informed that they were not only coming to learn how to prepare business plans but would actually be required to have complete business plans by the end of the period. This was successfully done by all participants. What made this very workable was probably because a "template" was made available to all participating telecentre representatives. The template given to participants was not meant to be a sample but a series of titled and categorised questions that helped participants to 'fill in' their business plans.

**What didn't go so well**

The development of spreadsheets for use alongside the business plan; 1. What-if Analysis 2. Income and Expenditure Flow and 3. Break Even Analysis was about the first time a good number of participants were making use of any spreadsheet tool for intermediate to advanced purposes. Thus, facilitation included perhaps an unnecessarily high amount of skill building. So much time was spent developing these spreadsheets that very little time was available for participants to experiment with their 'products'. In the follow up to the participants in Bolgatanga training for example, it was clear that most participants still could not figure out what to do with their break even analysis spreadsheets for example.

Very significant too was the effectiveness of the use of the discussion methodology. The methodology did not go very well as initially thought in the case of the Telecentre Tanzania Network participants. At Magu, getting participants to open up and contribute to the discussions was slightly more tasking. Thus, the initial parts of the training centered mostly around the same people.

**What would be done differently next time**

Taking into consideration, the fact that a good number of participants had difficulties following through the reasoning behind the use of certain formulae in the development of those 'applications', in subsequent related trainings, I would suggest that such 'technical' spreadsheets and documents should be prepared in advance before the workshop by the facilitator. Participants would then only have to learn how to use the tools and not concern themselves too much with the behind-the-scenes details or technicalities.

**Unintended outcome - Use of OpenOffice**

One of IICDs interest areas is in the area of promotion of low cost alternatives including Free and Open Source Software. In the case of the Bolgatanga participants, they had earlier had a training on the use of OpenOffice particularly with refrence to Writer and Calc. However, in the writer's interaction with them, only a couple of them had installed and used OpenOffice in their CICs.

Some participants in Magu remarked that although they had heard of OpenOffice and indeed some of them had tried their hands on it, they did not realise how easy it was to use. A good number of the participants in the Bolgatanga workshop now OpenOffice in their work. Perhaps, the opportunity to use the package to solve an everyday problem made it more attractive.