

Rural communication: Is there still a need for telecentres now that there are mobile phones?

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Connecting

rural

Tanzania

Following the initial rush of Information and communication technologies for development (ICT4D) projects in rural Africa, many did not yield the anticipated outcomes, and interest has been dying down. People then began talking about “sustainable ICT” projects, in which it was understood that projects would become self-sufficient after their initial donor-led investment and set-up period. But with the use of mobile phones gaining in popularity, popular rhetoric has begun to question the need of ICTs beyond the mobile phone. While mobile phones certainly have had a great impact in rural areas, a [new study by Ian Howard](#) commissioned by APC, through the analysis of two case studies, he argues that the need for telecentres and affordable internet connections exists, as such centres cater to rural and niche markets the way larger companies cannot.

What is sustainable ICT?

Beginning in the late 1990s, the use of ICTs in international development work expanded greatly. In part this expansion was due to the increased availability and affordability of ICT equipment, the simplification of use and support of equipment, improved access to

electricity, more affordable internet and the growing use of ICTs by donors and NGOs themselves. A number of studies by the World Bank and other organisations also affirmed the importance of access to information for improved health and social well-being, and the role of communications in economic development. By 2004 almost all donors and NGOs were involved in some sort of ICT4D initiative.

Unfortunately, this interest has since subsided because too many projects were ill executed for various reasons: limited local buy-in, flawed economic models, inadequate training, and/or the use of inappropriate equipment. From the donor perspective, the most important failure of ICT4D initiatives was the inability of these centres to persist without the continued intervention and financial support of donor organisations. In other words, they were unsustainable.

In terms of ICT for rural development, the term sustainability as used by the international development sector, is most often described as the ability to maintain implementation beyond the intervention period. It is measured principally by the ability to remain economically viable, while delivering a social benefit; therefore, an ideal sustainable ICT initiative requires short-term incubation, but is then able to maintain its operations by local parties.

Unfortunately, such short-term interventions are not well suited for ICT-based initiatives that require continued operational support, both in terms of technical advice and funds. Consequently, as the many ICT4D projects have reached the end of their funding, earlier presumptions that local communities would take over ownership and responsibility of the initiatives have proved to be wrong. There are numerous telecentres and rural “micro-telcos” that no longer exist, or that only provide a fraction of the services they once did

Internet vs. mobile phones: Are rural ICTs sustainable?



mobiles vs. wireless

While many rural ICT4D initiatives have not yielded the anticipated outcomes, the mobile phone on the other hand, has been circling above as a beacon of success, particularly on the African continent. Many places that lack telecom infrastructure, such as rural areas of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, now have thriving mobile phone networks. This success has come as a result of changes in policy and new adaptive technologies.

Popular rhetoric now suggests that there is no need for rural ICT efforts beyond mobile phones. As many rural internet projects have failed and mobile phone networks continue to flourish, many donors have abandoned their efforts in rural ICT4D, leaving the development of ICTs largely to mobile phone carriers. While there is some merit to this decision, it is somewhat naive. The failures of rural ICT4D projects were, as noted above, not because they lacked utility, but rather because they were poorly designed and implemented. It can therefore be argued that there is still a need for rural ICT development beyond mobile phones, but that the challenge is in making such development self-perpetuating.

While mobile phones can have a great impact on the lives of rural people in least developed countries (LDCs) especially grassroots ICT initiatives can fill the void that large mobile phone companies cannot. These new mobile-phone infrastructures are largely poised as oligopolies, protected from the threat of new entrants by high licensing fees and reserved frequency allotments. While they serve a large segment of the population and provide a great basis for ICTs, they are highly centralised and hierarchical and thus unlikely likely to serve smaller segments, remote areas or non-mainstream interests; nor can they provide specific local and rural solutions. This gap therefore opens up a multitude of opportunities in ICT4D, particularly in smaller rural markets.

Although mobile phones provide an effective tool for basic communication and information exchange, the need for grassroots ICT development remains. Mobile phone solutions are top-down, in comparison to bottom up internet ICTs, which can effectively serve smaller and niche markets. Thus, the need for continued intervention in ICT4D is perhaps even stronger than before. However, the question remains: Are rural ICT initiatives sustainable?

Is there still a need for wireless?



Getting connected with wireless

In many ways, wireless networks were hoped to be the disruptive innovation that would unseat incumbents. This has not happened to the degree that was hoped, but in countries where wireless bands are permitted, they have driven demand and have persuaded incumbents to respond.

As internet-capable phones increasingly become mainstream, so will the demand for phone-based internet access and other internet appliances. This will be slow to develop in these smaller markets, particularly where incumbents have little incentive to provide these less lucrative services. Thus, the development of autonomous infrastructure is still required in order to meet the needs of rural communities. Moreover, there must also be the development of networks that tie together data and information that is local, regional and national. This will assure greater, cheaper and easier access to information and data that is most important to people in these areas. For this data and information to be available, however, it must be generated – hence the importance of telecentres.

The role of NGOs and donors, from a free-market perspective, is to intervene where there are market failures. As the development of this more local information and data is likely to be largely non-commercial, it will require support in order to avoid falling victim to market failures.

In his report “Observations on sustaining rural connectivity initiatives in lesser developed markets” Ian Howard examines the case of two rural communities in Tanzania that exemplify sustainable ICT and justify the need for wireless connectivity in these remote areas. The report provides insight into how to build more sustainable rural ICT and gather observations and recommendations for implementers and donors.

This article was adapted from [Unbounded possibilities: Observations on sustaining rural ICTs in Africa](#) by Ian Howard for APC.

Photos: all photos by Ian Howard

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Website Link: <http://www.apc.org/en/news/wireless/all/rural-communication-there-still-need-telecentres-n>