TAKING ICTs CLOSER TO RURAL PEOPLE IN GHANA
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Once upon a time, the only means of transport available to mankind were human feet.
There was no automobile, no locomotive, no sea-craft, let alone an air-craft. But then, King Hyena and King Tortoise had to embark upon a long journey to a common destination.

The two friends were to participate in a very crucial council of traditional rulers' meeting that was to adopt a resolution to transform all satellite kingdoms into one mighty kingdom with one supreme King. Of course, they had no choice but to make the trip on foot.   However, because King Hyena was faster than King Tortoise, he left him behind and rushed to the meeting. Eventually the two friends reached their destination and successfully accomplished their mission.

There is, therefore, this African proverb which reminds us that: "Wherever the Hyena will go, the Tortoise, too, can go; the only difference may be the time each of them will take to reach their destination."

Ghana, like Malaysia, Singapore and other technologically minded countries, is today gradually but steadily taking Information and Communication Technology (ICTs) to rural communities so as to bridge the digital divide between the urban dwellers and the rural folks in the country.

One strategy Ghana Government has adopted to achieve this feat is the establishment of Community Information Centres (CICs) in all 138 districts throughout the country. The ultimate goal is to establish the CICs in all the 230 constituencies in Ghana. In fact the beauty underlining this concept is to replicate miniature kinds of Ghana-India Kofi Annan Advanced Information Technology Centre of Excellence in all corners of the country.

No matter how long it will take the Government to accomplish this seemingly insurmountable task, the important fact is that the Government has taken the first step towards the realisation of this vision and mission. It must be borne in mind that those countries like Singapore and others who are leading in this field of endeavour, known as
E-Government started their journey almost 30 years ago. So Ghana, too, will get there.

In this context, E-Government simply stands for Electronic Government. And Electronic Government signifies Governments providing public services to their citizens electronically or online. In Singapore, the Government's slogan is: "Whatever services that can be provided electronically must be delivered electronically". Simple and short.

 ICT Policy
It is relevant to mention in passing that Ghana Government through the Ministry of Communications, in 2003 formulated an ICT policy dubbed, Information and Communication Technology for Accelerated Development (ICT4AD). This policy can be characterised as the foundation upon which Ghana's vision for the information age was built.

As a matter of fact the Ghana ICT4AD is the concrete evidence of the government's objective to ensure the availability of quality and affordable access to information and communication services to facilitate the transformation of Ghana into knowledge-based society and technological driven- economy as ratified by the country at the World Summit on Information Society in 2005 or so.

The formulation of the ICT4AD also takes into account the aspirations and the provisions of key socio-economic development framework documents such as Ghana's vision 2020 – the First Step;

the Ghana Poverty Reduction Strategy (GPRS) 2002 -2004; and the Co-ordinated Programme for Economic and Social Development of Ghana (2003 -2012).

This has been updated within the three-pronged Growth and Poverty Reduction Strategy (GPRS) II development strategy. The focus is to enable Ghana attain her developmental goals faster and more efficiently.

At the time of writing this piece, Ghana Government has drawn up comprehensive Development Action Plans out of the ICT for Development Policy. The implementation plans outlined specific areas of focus, dubbed Sub-plans. These include: the E-Government Sub-plan; the Accelerated Human Development Sub-plan; the E-education Sub-plan; the Private Sector Development Sub-plan and the E-Commerce Development Sub-plan.

Others are the E-Health Sub-plan; the ICT and Physical Infrastructure Development and Roll-out Sub-plan; the Legal, Regulatory, Institutional Provisions and Standards Sub-plan; the Industrial, Scientific Research Drive and   Promotion Sub-plan; Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) Drive in ICTs ; the E-Security Sub-plan and above all, the ICTs-in-Community Sub-plan; just to cite a few.

It is the ICTs-in-Community Sub-plan which is the special point of reference in this article. This plan is targeted at programmes and initiatives for facilitating rapid deployment of ICTs within the community especially in the rural zones to promote universal access to and the exploitation of ICTs and its resources in the population at large. And one of the concrete measures the Government has adopted in achieving this transfer of ICTs to the rural dwellers is the establishment of the Community Information Centres in various districts of the country.

CICs

 Ghana's Ministry of Communications since 2005 has embarked on infrastructure development of CICs at the Metropolitan, Municipal and District Assemblies throughout the country. So far, 71 CICs have been established in selected communities. The communities have been selected based on certain existing facilities such as electricity, telephones and so on in those communities.

It is important to underline the fact that the CICs are at various state of development. In other words, not all the established 71 CICs are in full operation yet. According to the survey and evaluation mission conducted by the office of the UNDP in Accra in April, 2007, various CICs are at various operational and functional levels. For example, out of the total number of 71, five have been commissioned (C); eight have been classified as fully operationalised and functional (OF); two are described as operationalised (O); 11 of them are categorised as pending operationalisation (PO) and another 11 referred to as ready, while 34 are placed on status of Civil Works (CW). It must be noted that some of the terms used here to describe the status of the CICs are more or less technical and can best be interpreted by the technical experts.

This year (2007) the Government is determined to establish at least two CICs with full operational capacity in each of the ten regions of the country before the end of the year. And when we talk of CIC with full operational capacity, we mean a Centre that is fully equipped not only with machines but with the staff with ICT skills and managerial know how, who will operate the equipment and manage the Centre as well.   In this regard, a fully operationalised and functional level CIC must have the following:

The physical building itself with electricity and telephone facilities; the Local Area Network (LAN); at least five (5) workstations, that is computers; one Server; one Switch; one Printer; one Scanner and five (5) UPSs.

One may ask what are some of the services that a CIC is supposed to render to the community. And I will further probe to know the targeted beneficiaries of CICs in a typical deprived community.

Basically a CIC has a responsibility to provide not only an Internet cyber café services to the community, which is so far the focus of most CICs visited in April this year. But the CICs are mandated to provide ICT training opportunity to the rural brothers and sisters in the area of basic computer literacy so that they will not see a computer as some ferocious creature ready to devour them whenever they touch it.

Furthermore, the CICs are to support business activities in rural communities by providing marketing information on improved agricultural production and extension services. More importantly, the CICs are strategically positioned to disseminate and educate rural folks on government policies, programmes and projects, especially in the areas of health, education, agriculture, environment, local government by-laws, tourism potentials and investment opportunities in their own localities and how they can tap those using ICT tools.

The main beneficiaries of CICs among others are the general community members, school children, youth out of school, women and women groups, private business entities, Non-governmental organisations, local government authorities and of course our most traditional authorities.

Stakeholders
There are several stake holders or collaborators including the Ministry of Communications, the District Assemblies themselves, the UNDP, the Ghana Investment Fund for Telecommunications (GIFTEL)and the Ministry of Information and National Orientation (MINO), who are putting their expertise at the disposal of the CICs to make them really productive and to live up to expectation. There are other indirect development partners, playing crucial roles behind the scene such as the World Bank, the International Institute for Communication Development (IICD) and others.

MINO for instance, is responsible for the content management of the CICs. In other words, it is the Ministry of Information and National Orientation through the Information Services Department that has the mandate to employ its experience in the communication and dissemination of public information and the technical know how in editorial matters of information gathering, processing, packaging and disseminating to the grassroots people in the rural zones through the famous ISD Cinema Vans. Information Services Department also has offices doted in most districts with officers who have the technical know how of sending feed-back to government to assess the impact of its policies on ordinary people in the street.

With the coming into being of the CICs it has become imperative for these Information Officers to acquire relevant ICT skills in order to support the CICs in content management strategies. This is where, UNDP deserves tons of commendation for teaming up with the Ghana Government by providing technical and financial support in the area of capacity building for MINO in training Information Officers to enable them upgrade themselves so as to add modern techniques of information dissemination using ICT tools in addition to their traditional know-how.

Capacity Building
During the first and second weeks of June, 2007, UNDP organised a "Train-the-Trainer"
Course in ICTs for selected 22 Information Officers including some District Information Officers
at the Ghana Multi-media Information Centre (GMIC) in Accra.
At the closing session of that capacity building programme, Ghana's Minister for Information and
Orientation, Hon.Kwamena Bartels (MP), was full of praise to the UNDP for their commitment to
supporting the Government in achieving its ICT 4 AD goals in the country.

The Minister disclosed that his Ministry had just embarked on a nation-wide recruitment exercise
and over 116 additional District Information Officers are expected to be appointed to fill
vacancies in the remaining districts where officers are not currently available. He pointed out that
the CICs have come to stay and are to contribute to get the people at the grassroots to "be
informed and enlightened to enable them make informed choices."

Honourable Bartels stated that a series of ICT capacity building programmes would be lined up
for all new Information Officers to be engaged to acquire the requisite skills in content
management to enable them discharge their duties effectively and efficiently at the CICs where
they would be posted to. He, therefore, placed UNDP on "red-alert" to stand by. As he put it,
"Oliver Twist…"

Mr Fredrick Ampiah, Partnership Advisor and Head of Partnership Unit at the UNDP who
represented the UNDP Country Director in Ghana was of the view that the entire country was
strategically positioned to achieve the time-bound Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by
the year 2015. He noted that, "the initiative of developing ICT capacity within the Information
Services Department will not only serve as the foundation for the full utilisation of the CIC
concept, but will also go a long way to improve the creation of knowledge based societies in the
rural areas where the majority of Ghanaians live."