

CHALLENGES IN PROMOTION OF UNIVERSAL ICT ACCESS AND SERVICES IN RURAL MALAWI

Promotion of Universal Access and Service (UAS) in Africa has recently focussed on bridging the digital divide for the underserved, most of whom reside in the rural areas. Evidence from research work conducted by International Telecommunication Union (ITU) show that Least Developed Countries (LDCs), of which Malawi is a part of, have a lower adoption of ICT than developed countries due to their poverty status. It further indicates that if such countries improve their economic status and graduate from LDCs, i.e. Botswana, this result into improvement in ICT development. These poverty trends are more prevalent in the rural areas, where policymakers are targeting their policies on. This policy brief therefore recommends to policymakers that UAS policies should integrate economic development with Millennium Development Goal (MDG 1) in addressing extreme poverty and hunger in order for communities to have disposable income to invest in ICT.

CRITICAL ISSUES FOR POLICYMAKERS

MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS AND ICT

ITU, United Nations, World Bank, amongst others, all recognise the importance of integrating poverty reduction strategies with ICT development, but the UAS policy as noted from the Universal Access Fund (USF), has no clear strategy of linking the two apart from financing local businesses and small medium and micro enterprises (SMMEs), which leaves out the chronically poor individuals.

DEPLOYMENT OF REGIONAL BROADBAND INFRASTRUCTURE

The deployment of a regional backbone for broadband, in countries like Malawi, while beneficial, does not make internet more accessible to the poor, contrary to what the policies suggest. The cost of internet still remains unaffordable. It also remains not a priority for the intended beneficiaries.

LEAST DEVELOPED COUNTRIES AND ICT

Countries like Botswana, that have graduated from LDCs have had a remarkable success in ICT development. This, however, has not automatically resulted in improved internet access and service in the rural areas, because of lack of pro poor strategy for individuals faced with extreme poverty. They are still governed by the same regional weak policy on USF.

USE OF TELECENTRES IN RURAL AREAS

Evidence from Malawi indicate that establishing telecentres has done very little in terms of promoting internet use in rural and underserved areas. Apart from literate young men and women, almost all other groups are digitally excluded.

FUTURE HARMONISED POLICIES

Bodies like ITU, Southern Africa Development Cooperation (SADC), Common Market for East and Southern Africa (COMESA), all support harmonisation of ICT policies with MDGs. The future of these harmonised policies should have a clear strategy on how ICT will be integrated in MDGs for the benefit of the poor people that are digitally excluded. A new model that integrates economic growth with ICT development has been proposed.

PRIORITISING UAS FOR DEVELOPMENT

The majority of the people that UAS is targeting, care about their basic needs like food, shelter, health as of primary importance. Things like ICT use, come secondary. In order to make it a priority, it therefore has to be integrated in the things that poor people care about in their day to day lives.

MULTI STAKEHOLDER APPROACH

There are critical stakeholders at grassroots level that are working on key areas of rural livelihood and sustainable development. These include NGOs, academia, donors, government, that could work with ICT regulators and stakeholders in ICT development, in order to integrate ICT development into MDG 1 for now and for the post 2015 agenda on sustainable development.

BENEFITS OF UAS FOR DEVELOPMENT

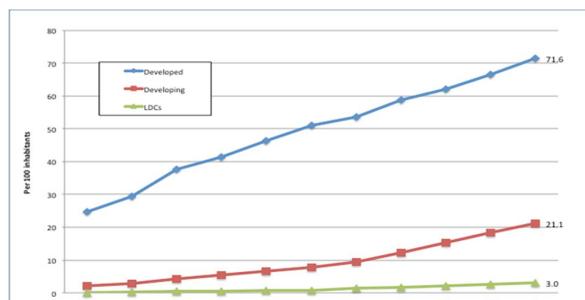
If they can begin to experience for themselves that UAS to ICT will bring them food security, improve their health, improve their education, they can begin to embrace it wholeheartedly. That can only happen when it is integrated in the world they understand and exist in, where basic needs take precedence.

CURRENT SITUATION ON UAS TO BRIDGE THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

Introduction

Evidence derived from ITU show that LDCs lag behind in ICT development as compared to developed countries. Internet use per 100 inhabitants from 2000 to 2010 data as indicated in Figure 1, indicate that LDCs registered 3.0%, developing countries, 21.1% and developed countries at 71.6%.

Figure 1: Internet users per 100 inhabitants, 2000-2010



Source: ITU World Telecommunication/ICT Indicators database.

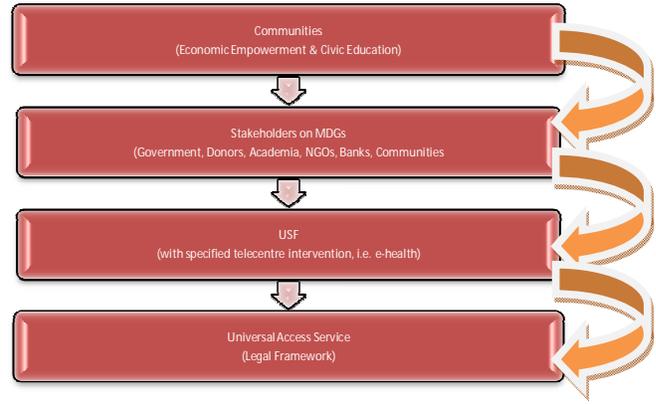
This is largely due to their low economic status. Countries that improved their economic situation and were graduated from LDCs, were noted to have improved in their ICT development. This is a clear indication that economic growth has a huge bearing on ICT development, for LDCs like Malawi. Most individuals languishing in extreme poverty in LDCs, are those living in the rural areas. It is recommended therefore that ICT development should be integrated with poverty reduction strategies like MDGs, with a specific reference to MDG 1. This economic growth should target the extreme poor individuals so that they can have extra income to spend on ICT development. It should also taken a bottom-up strategy and incorporate all relevant stakeholders working in poverty reduction and ICT development.

Malawi Case Study

UAS in Malawi is being promoted through deployment of broadband by connecting the country to a second submarine cable EASSy (East Africa Submarine Cable system) through Tanzania, with a Virtual Landing Point (VLP) in the country's capital city, Lilongwe. Malawi is currently connected to Seacom through Mozambique and provided solely by operator Malawi Telecommunications Limited (MTL), monopolising the market. It is therefore envisaged that the second submarine cable will offer an alternative and promote competition, making the internet more affordable to the underserved. Apart from this exercise, Malawi is promoting Multipurpose Community Telecentres (MCTs) in the rural areas as part of UAS. Unfortunately, most of these telecentres are barely used for internet due to poor policy environment. The majority of the local people cannot afford the price of browsing the internet because of their poverty. Due to poverty, most find themselves illiterate, uneducated, unemployed hence cannot access internet both at public and individual level.

The USF Model has placed an emphasis on funding community and local businesses, neglecting individuals that are in dire poverty. The implication of the model, is that it will produce service providers that will have to provide services to people that cannot afford such services. It therefore does little to bridge the digital divide and only manages to create a further divide amongst the haves (community and local businesses) and have nots (individual poor) in the communities. A new model, that integrates economic growth for the extreme poor with ICT development has been proposed for policymakers. The model will take a bottom-top strategy. It will compose of all the relevant stakeholders that are involved in poverty eradication projects and ICT development projects. The communities will be directly targeted with civic education to empower them economically and raise awareness on UAS and related policies. In order to ensure ownership and sustainability, they will be involved in all the discussions at every level, be it local, district, national, regional and global deliberations, so that their participation can guide policies concerning them since they are the ones mostly affected by such policies, and yet their contribution is usually minimal, resulting in policies that do not work for them or benefit them in any significant way.

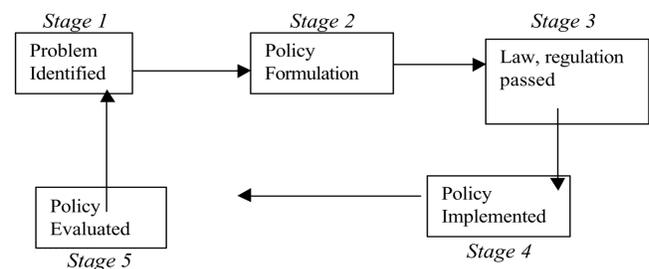
Figure 2 : Proposed New Model



Conclusion

Progress has already been made in terms of identifying critical issues for improving UAS in LDCs. What remains is for policymakers to harmonise all the findings when formulating policies, which should be as participatory of the local people as possible. A lot of research has already been conducted on the importance of MDGs to ICT development, and the importance of a multi pronged approach to dealing with issues of UAS. What is now required is to have policies that are implementable at grassroots level and proper funding of those initiatives for chronically poor people that do not have any disposable income to spend on ICT. Unless that is achieved, promoting ICT in the rural areas, will still remain a challenge. Malawi Communications Regulatory Authority (MACRA), together with the Public Private Commission (PPC), have promoted Multipurpose Community Telecentres (MCTs), which have had little success in improving use of internet in Malawi. It is recommended that policymakers develop policies that target the grassroots in a holistic manner by involving all key stakeholders who promote economic growth at household level and those that promote ICT development. Likewise, the policies should be harmonised accordingly and appropriate monitoring and evaluation measures be put in place to measure the successes and challenges of the new model. It is also quite critical that the poor and underserved be involved at every stage of the policy process, for instance, problem identification, policy formulation, regulation passing, policy implementation and policy evaluation.

Figure 3 : Policy Process Involvement at grassroots



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