GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2018

Community Networks

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This edition of GISWatch came into being alongside a brand new baby boy. Welcome to the world, Ronan Diga!

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BENIN

REACHING OUT: EXTENDING THE PARTICIPATORY FUNCTION OF COMMUNITY CENTRES IN BENIN

POPDEV Bénin
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Introduction

Access to information and communications technologies (ICTs) is still an issue in Benin, especially in rural areas where both fixed and mobile technology is limited. To improve accessibility and to address inequities, the government has developed several public policies and projects implemented by a dozen of its public agencies. Through the Universal Access to Information and Communication Technologies project, two state-owned companies, the Benin Agency for Universal Electronic Communication and Postal Services (ABSU-CEP)[1] and Benin Postal Company[2] joined forces to set up community centres in four localities with no or limited ICT access.

This report highlights the need for both a human rights and participatory governance approach to be taken in these centres – both prevalent approaches in the global community networks movement – in order to improve the benefit of the centres to the communities. It concludes by suggesting that government community centres offer a useful starting point for a community network that is run and maintained by the community. Given the proliferation of these centres across the developing world, it is useful to consider how they can be a bridge to low-cost, autonomous community access to the internet, with countries like India offering useful models for consideration.

Policy, economic and political background

In 2003, Benin's government developed a strategy for the revitalisation of ICTs in the country.[3] In 2016, a Declaration of the Digital Economy Sector Policy was developed and adopted during the weekly cabinet meeting by the newly elected president Patrice Talon.[4] The declaration highlights six core projects in the digital sector as part of Talon's four-year action plan for the country.[5] Following the development of the plan and the declaration, the Digital Law of the Republic of Benin[6] was promulgated in April 2018. It builds on domestic laws and on the African Union Convention on Cyber Security and Personal Data Protection.[7] Three categories are applicable to broadcasters and service provider activities: the licence regime (where a licence is needed to operate), the authorisation regime (where authorisation is needed from the regulator to act as a broadcaster or service provider), and a third category where no authorisation is necessary.

In principle, community networks do not need authorisation to operate, but there are some limitations. The law states that the establishment of any electronic communications network or the provision of any electronic communications service that does not fall under the licence or authorisation regimes is permitted if the service declares itself with the regulatory authority.[8] This service will also be subject to compliance with any legal and regulatory provisions that are in force. However, independent private networks and devices that have low power or offer short-range connections do not require any declaration.[9]

Benin's human rights status

In 2017 Benin committed to implement some 191 recommendations during the United Nations Universal Periodic Review (UPR).[10] Some of these recommendations relate to arbitrary detentions, extrajudicial executions, excessive use of force by the security forces, freedom of expression and of

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1   www.absucep.bj

2   laposte.bj

3   https://researchictafrica.net/countries/benin/Plan_%20TIC_%20Benin.pdf

4   www.fraternitebj.info/conseil-des-ministres/article/conseil-des-ministres-du-26-5484

5   www.cir-benin.com/images/Pdf/PAG_Portefeuille_des_Projets_par_Secteur.pdf

6   sgg.gouv.bj/doc/loi-2017-20/download

7   https://www.au.int/web/sites/default/files/treaties/29560-treaty-0048_-_african_union_convention_on_cyber_security_and_personal_data_protection_e.pdf

8   ARCEP, Autorité de regulation des communications électroniques et de la poste. https://arcep.bj

9   Where necessary, the regulatory authority sets emission and frequency bands used by low-power and short-range devices (Article 55 of the Digital Code). https://sgg.gouv.bj/documentheque/lois

10   https://www.upr-info.org/sites/default/files/document/benin/session_28_-_november_2017/responses_to_recommendations_upr28_benin.pdf

the media, and the arbitrary suspension of media outlets.[11] In 2018, *La Nouvelle Tribune,* a privately owned daily newspaper, was suspended by HAAC, the institution in charge of media regulation in Benin.[12] However, delegations participating in the dialogue under the Benin UPR indicated that the adoption of the Government Action Plan 2016-2021, the laws and policies to protect children, as well as measures taken to improve access to social services were likely to strengthen human rights in the country.[13]

State-owned centres for communities

The digital economy in Benin is subject to numerous challenges, including a lack of infrastructure and investment by electronic communications and business actors. In 2015, the ICT sector in the country represented about USD 300 million, and contributed 6% to Benin's gross domestic product.

The 2013 government strategy on ICTs[14] stated that there were 1.2 million inhabitants who still did not have access to ICT services. Marginalised groups included rural populations, women, youth and people with disabilities who did not have access because of their social, cultural and economic status, suggesting that the extension of universal service must take these factors into account. In May 2014, ABSU-CEP adopted the national strategy and shortly after that, together with the Benin Postal Company, launched the community telecentres in four municipalities: Glazoué and Malanville in 2015, and Azovè and Ouaké in 2016.

There is no internet or mobile service in Glazoué, Malanville, Azovè and Ouaké. The municipalities also have poor connection to the electricity grid, with many areas suffering frequent power outages.

The centres were expected to impact on about 411,000 people, offering them access to the internet and multimedia services, technology-based financial and postal services, and e-governance services,

while also introducing them to the use and potential of ICTs in general.[15]

While the postal company provided space for the centres, ABSU-CEP recruited a local manager for each centre and equipped each of the centres with a solar power system to run 15 computers, one multifunction printer (used to print, scan and photocopy), and satellite internet connectivity. The centres are now under the responsibility of the respective municipalities with technical support provided by ABSU-CEP and the postal company.

The centres also offer services such as training for women, students and community groups, and training on document scanning, computer usage, photocopying and web-based research. They provide basic financial services to the population through a quick and cheaper money transfer service in collaboration with the postal service and e-banking, as well as access to basic energy services through their solar power system, such as recharging mobile phones or flashlights.

Most training is offered free of charge but users pay for services: printing is USD 0.045 and access to the internet about USD 1 for two hours. These fees contribute to covering the cost of running the centres.

In March 2016, ABSU-CEP adopted the National Programme for Universal Electronic Communication and Postal Services,[16] which continues to support the idea of the community centres for local-level access.

Limitations of the state-run model

While the state-run model for community access clearly has benefits for the community, there are two key areas where it is limited: the lack of participation in the initiatives by the community, especially the most marginalised; and a lack of a clear human rights-based approach to the access initiative, which means it is not necessarily used to its fullest potential to enable the rights of the community.

Need for an inclusive governance and management approach

According to the 2016 National Programme for Universal Electronic Communication and Postal Services, the purpose of community centres is to empower marginalised rural communities that

11   www.lanationbenin.info/index.php/societe-2/146-societe/16630-3e-rapport-sur-l-examen-periodique-universel-du-benin-la-societe-civile-s-impregne-des-recommandations

12   www.agenceecofin.com/regulation/2907-58938-benin-le-site-de-la-nouvelle-tribune-egalement-suspendu; www.rfi.fr/afrique/20180525-benin-le-quotidien-nouvelle-tribune-suspendu-autorites

13   www.bj.undp.org/content/benin/fr/home/presscenter/articles/2017/03/20/de-l-eau-potable-pour-les-m-nages-ruraux-au-b-nin.html; www.africanchildforum.org/clr/Legislation%20Per%20Country/benin/benin_children_2007_fr.pdf

14   MCTIC. (2013). *Etude pour la définition de la stratégie d' accès universel télécom et tic et du plan d' actions pour la mise en œuvre de projets pilotes en république du Bénin*. Cotonou: MCTIC. www.absucep.bj/fichiers/telechargeables/rapportFinal_SU_Volume1.pdf

15   For population data see www.insae-bj.org/12_departements.html?file=files/enquetes-recensements/rgph/RGPH4; ABSU-CEP (2016). *Rapport annuel d' activités*. Cotonou: ABSUCEP. www.absucep.bj/fichiers/publications/94wlua_absu-ceprapport2015publicversion.pdf

16   The programme covers 2016-2019, available at www.absucep.bj/images/projets/PNSU.pdf

do not have access to ICTs: young people, rural women, many of whom are unfamiliar with new technologies, and people living with disabilities, who encounter practical difficulties to access them.

The strategy aimed to address their needs specifically – needs that have not been taken into account by commercial service providers. Yet one has to ask how this is possible if these groups are not involved in the governance and day-to-day management of the centres?

With regards to women, the 2016 programme draws on the National Gender Promotion Policy (PNPG),[17] which is in line with the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).[18] The PNPG is mentioned in the programme as a way to enable women's access to ICTs. Although the PNPG does not explicitly mention women's access to ICTs, some of its five strategic axes include women's effective access to education, literacy and decision-making structures in all spheres. It also ensures the empowerment of women and mainstreaming of women's issues in municipal plans. Adapting the strategy of the PNPG to ICTs and putting women at the centre of community initiatives is therefore in line with state plans. Learning from successful projects that have trained groups of women with low literacy levels in their native languages using ICTs can be helpful and make centres more open and interactive.[19]

It is the perspective of this report that including vulnerable groups in the governance of the centres will further improve the centres' value to the communities. The problem with the current structure is that they are managed by local staff under the supervision of municipalities and the postal company. While access to services is equal for everybody, involving vulnerable groups such as women's organisations, young people and people living with disabilities can increase their interest and participation.

On the occasion of International Girls in ICT Day, Aurélie Adam Soulé, the minister of the digital economy and communication in Benin, argued that the low representation of women in ICTs comes from the fact that the sector is wrongly considered as a domain for men. For her, initiatives to promote women's involvement in ICTs therefore need to be encouraged and women's groups need to be empowered so as to enable equality of access.[20] This could be done, among other strategies, by using affirmative action schemes in telecentres.

Participatory governance of community centres, although often complicated, can improve the use and usefulness of community services offered, make the centres more relevant to the needs of the local community, and even contribute towards their financial sustainability in the long term.

Involving the community as rights holders

At the same time, the community centres should be framed within human rights discourse. A human rights-based approach to their governance will help promote the development and dissemination of local knowledge, and increase community dialogue and action.[21] A human rights approach can be understood to foreground participatory approaches to decision making, while focusing on empowering communities in a non-discriminatory way. A human rights approach also places an emphasis on the economic, social and cultural rights of the community, and emphasises the well-being and dignity of rights holders as individuals. Through a participatory approach, the centres would empower women, young people and people with disabilities to advocate for policy reform, and to lobby duty bearers to meet their obligations.

Conclusion: Democratising access infrastructure at the local level

The aim of setting up the community ICT telecentres was to increase access to the internet and its services for marginalised groups such as women, young people and people living with disabilities. Since then, they have been helpful to many people. Among other things, the centres help people with low literacy levels edit and print their documents, and communicate with each other via Skype – introducing valuable new ways of engaging with the world to the communities. Local schools also use the community spaces for field work and other school exercises. As public infrastructures, they are managed as common goods and are community oriented. As all municipal infrastructures, their implementation and management details are accessible to everyone. They are under the supervision of the local government representatives,

17 http://www.inpf.bj/IMG/pdf/politique_nationale_promo_genrebenin.pdf

18 https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/ProfessionalInterest/cedaw.pdf

19 One example is the ICT training for women's groups through a partnership between the local NGO APHEDD and Boite A Innovations. www.bai.alphaomedia.org/gal_news18.php

20 https://www.lanationbenin.info/index.php/actus/159-actualites/16075-journee-internationale-des-jeunes-filles-dans-les-tic-encourager-la-cible-a-evoluer-dans-le-secteur

21 Figueroa, M. E., et al. (2002). *Communication for Social Change: An Integrated Model for Measuring the Process and Its Outcome*. omec.uab.cat/documentos/com_desenvolupament/0154.pdf

all elected by the community for a period of four years.

But to what extent can they be considered communal while their governance and management do not involve the most vulnerable groups in the community? How accessible are these centres if the infrastructure is not used for functional literacy, for example? All people regardless of their cultural, political or social status are part of the community and should be empowered to play a role as part of the social ecology of that system.

Democratising community ICT centres can contribute to their development. This also extends beyond governance to the democratisation of the infrastructure. The people's contribution to extending their internet access through mesh networks, and consequently to their geographical, economic and physical accessibility, can make them truly *community* networks. There are examples in other parts of the world – such as Community Service Centres in India – where government centres are used to bridge the digital divide along with community network roll-out. Given the proliferation of government e-centres across the world, they present an opportunity to leap-frog the digital divide; they can be a useful starting point for community networks, which do not always have to break the soil first.

In law, community networks can be implemented without any authorisation. However, their implementation in rural areas, especially in remote regions, means that solar power will need to be used, making the overall set-up costs, including the ICT hardware, costly. The setting up of such a network can also face many other challenges, such as the sustainability of its management structure, the openness of its governance structure, and local dynamics that emerge when collective projects are set up. These challenges, however, do not detract from the potential of community centres that may be the unique way to bridge the digital divide for vulnerable people, and may already have started to deal with some of the challenges that community networks will face on the ground.

Action steps

To be more open, community access initiatives need to learn from the global community network movement and:

- Adopt a human rights-based approach to their roll-out plans and strategies. The community should be involved in all aspects of access initiatives, which should be accountable and transparent.

- Create open and inclusive steering committees that include right holders so that they participate in decision-making processes. In particular, women, young people and people with disabilities should be included in governance processes.

- Use local access networks as an opportunity to foster interaction on local development at the local level, and to boost community dialogue and action.

In addition, local internet access initiatives should:

- Train facilitators at the ICT centres in local languages to encourage participation of people with low literacy levels.

- Involve community-based organisations in the design and implementation of any access networks, including government projects, so that the development potential of the access initiative is maximised.

- Consider extending internet access in the community through implementing a Wi-Fi mesh network or using any other suitable networking technology.

Community Networks

THE 43 COUNTRY REPORTS included in this year's Global Information Society Watch (GISWatch) capture the different experiences and approaches in setting up community networks across the globe. They show that key ideas, such as participatory governance systems, community ownership and skills transfer, as well as the "do-it-yourself" spirit that drives community networks in many different contexts, are characteristics that lend them a shared purpose and approach.

The country reports are framed by eight thematic reports that deal with critical issues such as the regulatory framework necessary to support community networks, sustainability, local content, feminist infrastructure and community networks, and the importance of being aware of "community stories" and the power structures embedded in those stories.

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