Chapter 6
Context for ICT's Role in South African Development

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses that information and communication technologies (ICTs) can (and should) be used to disseminate information and participation to disadvantaged communities in order to foster socio-economic development in South Africa. The objective of this chapter is twofold: (1) how should ICT policies and frameworks in South Africa be implemented (e.g. by a "top-down", "bottom-up" or "mixed approach" paradigm) in order for the South African government to achieve its socio-economic goals?; and (2) can socio-economic development in South Africa be effectively assisted by the use of ICT? A discussion of these points may assist in the formulation of national ICT policies in South Africa and thereby spawn the setting up of social appropriation of ICT advancement programs. Such programs are particularly relevant to the digital divide, for fostering socio-economic development and in promoting an inclusive information society in South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

South Africa's liberation struggle was led by the African National Congress (ANC) and in 1994 the first democratically elected State President was Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela. Since the earliest days of the post-apartheid era, the ANC-led government has adopted a position that information and communication technologies (ICTs) can (and should) be used to disseminate information and participation to disadvantaged communities in order to foster socio-economic development. Socio-economic development "refers to continuous improvement in the well-being and in the standard of living of the people" (see www.nepad.org).

The impact of this development focus is evidenced by the fact that South African government officials (e.g. South Africa's Minister of Communications) accept that ICT can play an

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important role in accelerating development in rural areas (Snyman & Snyman, 2003). Furthermore, the South African government actively supports the promotion and realisation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) through the use of ICT (UnitedNations, 2003). As part of its strategy to promote economic growth, the South African government has implemented a plan to promote the adoption of ICT, especially Internet technology (South Africa, 2005). However, the high cost of broadband access in South Africa and the limited access of this technology to all South Africa citizens, remains a problem (Masango, 2007). Micrososft South Africa (MSA) and Universal Services Agency in South Africa) (USASA), an ICT parastatal, announced plans for a partnership to spread access to technology to an increased number of people in South Africa (Masango, 2005). However, the mechanism, if any, by which increasing access to technology promotes socio-economic development was left open. The question thus arises whether a policy framework should be formulated which will guide future research in this regard.

The implications for socio-economic development policy and implementation from the South African context discussed in this chapter are:

- How should ICT policies and frameworks in South Africa be implemented (e.g. by a "top-down", "bottom-up" or "mixed approach" paradigm) in order for the South African government to achieve its socio-economic goals?; and
- Can socio-economic development in South Africa be effectively assisted by the use of ICT?

Discussion of these points may assist in the formulation of national (and provincial) ICT policies in South Africa and thereby spawn the setting up of social appropriation of ICT advancement programs. Such programs are particularly relevant to the digital divide, and the emergence of the multi-disciplinary field of Community Informatics (CI) supporting and promoting an inclusive information society in South Africa. CI seeks to realize the social appropriation of ICT for local benefit. Participation in an inclusive information society is a current aim of the South African government, enabled by ICT and via the national Department of Communications (DOC), and reflected in national government structures and frameworks such as the Meraka e-Skills Institute, and the related National e-Skills Dialogue Initiative (Ne-SDI) (DOC, 2009; ITWeb, 2009).

The objectives of this paper are to set out the context in which a developing country such as South Africa is attempting to include all sectors of society in an inclusive information society, to position this within the overall activity for *socio*- as well as economic development, and to explore the relevance of mechanisms by which this can be achieved, potentially by a series of initiatives, both "top-down" from government, "bottom-up" from civil society, and "mixed".

BACKGROUND

With the democratisation of South Africa in 1994, coupled with its current level of technological development, the country is a beacon of technological hope for the rest of Africa. As declared by a previous South African Minister of Communications, Dr Ivy Matsepe-Casaburi, ICTs present Africans with an opportunity to leapfrog decades of development into becoming information societies. Government policies in South Africa (ICT Charter) are being established which attempt to ensure that all citizens have the opportunity to access and effectively use ICT in order to enable them to participate fully in educational, social and economic activities and democratic processes (Cullen, 2002). In this regard, Ne-SDI is an initiative to grow thought leadership and intellectual discourse among and between major sectors of society, namely Higher