Chapter 18

Uganda's Rural ICT Policy Framework:
Strengths and Disparities in Reaching the Last Mile

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ABSTRACT

This chapter investigates the Ugandan ICT policy approach to promoting access to and the empowerment of the poor majority, remote and "under-accessed" communities in Uganda. The chapter highlights the strengths of the policy framework while at the same time draws attention to it's weaknesses. For instance, while the chapter acknowledges the fact that the ICT policy framework recognises and has pursued strategic approaches to expanding access to remote areas, a closer scrutiny indicates disparities that may delimit its pragmatism. These disparities, it is argued, mainly emanate from the fact that the policy framework is not entirely holistic nor forwardlooking in its outlook, not only because the processes (of policy making) left out the rural users, it also fails to address the gender dynamics and most urgently, the media convergencies notably between broadcasting and telecommunication. In addition to divorcing itself from political and democratic aspects imperative for development, the policy framework seems shorthanded on sustainability fundamentals that are conjectured to restrict its propitiousness at the grassroots.

INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of the 1990s, Uganda has joined global trends towards liberalisation. In consonance with liberalizing the economy, the country has undertaken strategic steps to develop an Information and Communication Technology

(ICT) policy framework that can 'leap frog Uganda into the information economy' (ICT policy 2003). The Ugandan ICT policy has 'development' at the centre of its framework as it recognises the role of information, particularly ICTs, in enhancing economic development. The national ICT Policy framework also recognises that, although Uganda as a whole is underdeveloped with a high demand for ICT propagation, some parts (70%)

are more underdeveloped than others. As a result, a specific policy framework has been developed: the *Rural Communications Development Policy* (RCDP) supported by the *Rural Communications Development* Fund (RCDF) to target underserved rural areas. The aim of this chapter is to outline and interrogate the strengths and weaknesses of the RCDP/Fund and to make suggestions that can engender a more pragmatic policy framework by and for the people it's meant for - rural, impecunious and the marginalized special groups within these communities such as women and youth.

BACKGROUND

Africa, ICT Policy and Development

"With the physical boundaries that separated nations melting off due to the emergence of a boundryless Information Society, any people-group, nation or region that does not line up with the expectations of the New Economy – which is primarily driven by Information and Communication Technologies – will experience lonely moments on the island of insignificance" Dr. *Phillip Emeagwali*[1]

Africa's active participation in the Information Society started with the establishment of the African Information Society Initiative (AISI) later adopted by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) in Addis Ababa 1996 and the subsequent endorsement by high level Ministerial and Organizational of the then Organization of African Union (OAU), Heads of States and Governments' meeting including the 1997 G8 Summit. The role of AISI was to serve as a mechanism for achieving the Millennium Development Goals[2] in the AISI framework document[3] which also recommends the mainstreaming of Information and Communication Technologies. This informed the strong support that the AISI

gives to the development of National ICT policies and strategies through its National Information and Communication Infrastructure (NICI) plan, which helps nations link to national, regional and global development goals – including MDGs (Chiumbu, 2008; Sesan, 2004).

Although today, most African nations have developed a NICI informed ICT policy with national specific considerations, the AISI/NICI continental policy framework has come under heavy criticism for being driven more by foreign actors and ideas to the detriment of an local and grassroots participation and pragmatism (Chiumbu 2008; Dralega 2008). With an exception of a few countries (like Uganda and Kenya), who have adopted grassroots policies, several countries are still struggling to come to terms with the market driven strategies that tend to exclude marginalized and peripheral communities (Gillwald & Stork, 2008; Etta & Elder, 2005; Ogbo 2003) a matter I take up in this chapter.

National ICT Policy Ambitions and Advancements

In line with its policy of liberalisation, beginning in the early 1990s, the Ugandan government embarked on the liberalisation of its telecommunications sector and the pursuit of an ICT policy that would catalyze the role of information in strengthening the national development planning process (ICT Policy, 2003). Within this policy framework, ICTs were seen to support specific national development initiatives, including *Vision 2025*[4], a project that describes its national aspirations, and the 1997 *Poverty Eradication Action Plan (PEAP, 2000)*[5], revised in 2000 and which became Uganda's Comprehensive Development Framework. That is to say it is a national framework to guide detailed medium term sector plans, district plans and the budget process. Other similar frameworks embedded in the ICT policy ambition include: *The Uganda Information Infrastructure Agenda*, the *Plan for the Modernization*

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