Chapter 30
Public Access ICT in South Africa

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

South Africa has long enjoyed a level of national wealth that evolved largely through the development of its enormous natural resources. That financial foundation has been well supported by an aggressive agricultural base and the ongoing emergence of South Africa as a prominent industrial nation in Africa. A valuable outgrowth of this combination has been South Africa's particularly robust and well-developed media and information sector, which is protected by strong constitutional provisions. Although the overall national economic position is secure and growing steadily, striking contrasts linger within the social sector.

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Eighty percent of the people are Black Africans, and the legacy of apartheid remains in evidence. Since the demise of apartheid and the installation of a democracy in 1994, the government has worked to address the inequities. This effort is apparent across a range of interest areas: from building an infrastructure for schools, clinics, roads, and electrification projects in rural and underserved areas, to the drive towards broad-based black economic empowerment initiatives designed to create wealth among the previously disadvantaged.

As a key response to the inequities, South Africa is working diligently to expand and improve access to information and ICTs. Despite significant successes in economic growth, inflation control, fiscal control, and revenue collection, other sectors have been slow to meet certain stated national

objectives. This slowness is particularly evident in the national power crisis, the delays in improving the education system, and the approach to the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

Methodology

Two international workshops were conducted under the leadership of the Technology & Social Change Group at the University of Washington, where the international research teams explored the approaches and findings from each of the 25 countries participating in the study. The research study was designed to provide an overview of public information and ICT access points.

This South African segment of the overall study was initiated in early 2008 and consisted of two phases. Phase I combined research into existing information, interviews with key decision makers and experts, and visits to readily accessible venues. Phase II was a field survey undertaken during June and July 2008, during which the research team examined ten public libraries, seven telecenters, and seven HIV/AIDS support centers. These particular venues were selected for their accessibility and to ensure that they reflected, as far as possible, variations in location (urban and non-urban), user types, and the services offered at each. In total, 799 user survey questionnaires were completed and analyzed with regard to information uses and needs.

Findings

The recent attempts by the South African government to improve access to information and communication technologies (ICTs) have not yet had time to have a significant impact on the public. Additionally, publicly funded initiatives have been slow to develop and often lacked effective coordination. Efforts to encourage a much more competitive telecommunications sector have not yet produced any substantial improvements in basic telecommunication infrastructure. While recent policy changes by government to increase competition in the sector are expected to result in lower Internet access prices in the future, access costs are currently still relatively high, and access is generally unavailable beyond the major urban areas. While mobile phones are in use by over 70% of the population, the costs to the users have not dropped by any significant amount despite the presence of three service providers.

The Universal Service and Access Agency of South Africa (USAASA) has not met its announced goal to establish additional telecenters, especially in rural areas. New strategies have been established in the USAASA in which its future role will focus more on policy than on implementation.

Due to the policy changes referred to above, 2.5G, 3G wireless bands, and fixed wireless services are becoming increasingly available in more of the outlying areas that previously had no access to broadband. New international submarine fiber optic cables have also come online and are expected to help to reduce the high cost of Internet access. Still, the most notable ICT-access impact has come from the thousands of "phone shops" opened and operated by private entrepreneurs that make use of the mobile GSM providers' networks. However, the phone shops have resulted in a generally unforeseen domino effect among other service providers.

The entrepreneurial public phone shops take advantage of subsidized voice call rates (about 60%cheaper) from the mobile operators who are required to provide discounted tariffs as part of their license obligations. Ironically, this subsidy led to the demise of the fixed-line phone shops, which offered local calls about 50% cheaper than the mobile phone shops, which had a much lower national rate. Subsequently, this development had the effect of significantly reducing the number of operating cybercafés. The cybercafés were most often started as fixed-line phone shops that could more easily obtain a DSL broadband connection. (The mobile-operator-supported phone shops have