

# Chapter 31

## Public Access ICT in Namibia

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

#### Introduction

Namibia is an independent republic located along the Atlantic coast of the far southwestern reaches of Africa. It is bordered to the north by Angola, to the northeast by Zambia, to the east by Botswana, to the south by South Africa, and to the west by the Atlantic Ocean. The land area covers 318,260 square miles is divided among 13 provincial regions, and has a population of about 2.1 million. Namibia has the second lowest population density of any country in the world. Eighty percent of the population is Christian, and the rest observe indigenous faiths. Seven percent of the people speak English, which is the official language, while 60% speak Afrikaans, and 32% speak German.

Overall, access to information and communication technologies (ICTs) is quite limited throughout the nation. A recent survey indicates that the Internet is accessed mainly at the workplace or in

schools. From a total of 854 households surveyed, only 51 had household members who had used the Internet, and of those people, only 3.9% had an email address. Internet access is not available to many people because of the limited number of fixed landlines, the high cost of Internet access, the lack of electricity, and the lack of bandwidth.

The lack of certainty in the regulatory environment has been a limiting factor in the availability of information access; there is a need for service-neutral and technology-neutral licenses. The policy environment is in flux and the existing ICT policy is being updated. The telecommunications and regulatory environment is a monopoly held by two mobile operators, and they offer no provision for VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) to the public. There is a need for better coordination among government agencies regarding ICT roll out to ensure the optimal use of the limited resources. The government has mandated that all 107 constituency offices are to be equipped with ICTs. The proposed Community Information Resource Centers will require shared use of the fiber-optic backbone already in these offices, as

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well as alternative power sources for those venues not on the power grid.

This study was designed to examine the public access to information and communication resources in Namibia, with a specific focus on such areas of interest as public libraries and schools, understanding the information needs of underserved communities, public access to information and communication venues, and the role of ICTs.

Namibia, which is classified as a lower-middle income country with a GDP of 4.1%,<sup>1</sup> has a particularly low population of 2.1 million, which translates into a population density of about 2.5 people per sq km. Overall, ICT access is very limited throughout the country, and the available ICTs in the schools are provided largely by SchoolNet Namibia.

## **Methodology**

This study was conducted in Namibia in 2008 and consisted of two phases. The first phase combined a literature review and an examination of the limited available source data. The researchers conducted interviews with key decision makers, held group discussions, and visited readily accessible venues in Windhoek and Gobabis.

The second phase was a field survey of two public libraries, three schools, two higher education institutions, and five commercial Internet cafés. The venue selections were based on their accessibility to the user base in each community, the availability of ICTs in the venues, and the presumption that each venue would have more than twenty users each day. The limited availability of public ICT access points, other than the SchoolNet Namibia sites, produced a very limited sample.

## **Findings**

There is a widespread, strong demand in Namibia for ICTs, driven to some degree by the huge distances between the communities and the geographic isolation of large parts of the population.

A huge digital divide separates those people who live in urban versus non-urban environments. The limited distribution of a reliable and inexpensive electrical power grid is a particular challenge nationwide, and alternative energy sources are in use or being considered to resolve the issue. Solar power and wind energy are both under consideration by MTC (the mobile telecommunications provider) and SchoolNet Namibia.

The study results revealed a distinct difference between the usage patterns of those users over and under 25 years of age. Most users over the age of 25 use the Internet for work and to maintain contact with their business colleagues. That age group typically sees the Internet as an information source and spends very little time using it as an entertainment medium. Many of the users below the age of 25 have access to ICTs free of charge in the school system. They commonly use mobile services to interact with their social networks, communicate through chat sites, and make appointments with one another by using text messaging. This younger population set generally uses the Internet for email, but most prefer social network sites where messages are sent across the network rather than to individuals. The Internet is often used to access music and films, and mostly through pirated means. The researchers observed very few gender differences with regard to ICT usage.

The researchers concluded that there is a strong need for better coordination among the government departments and agencies regarding ICT roll out to ensure the optimal application of the limited resources. The government has designated that all of its 107 constituency offices throughout the nation's 13 regions should be equipped with ICTs. The proposed Community Information Resource Centers will require shared use of the fiber-optic backbone that already reaches all of those offices, and alternative power sources need to be provided for those venues not on the power grid.

The following five recommendations were developed:

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