

## Chapter 32

# Public Access ICT in Uganda

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Uganda is a landlocked nation in central equatorial Africa, and for many years has been torn by tumultuous political, social, and economic turmoil. There have been violent armed conflicts and governmental shifts that were marked most prominently by the horrific reign of Idi Amin, who was ousted in 1980. Throughout history, epidemics and health issues have devastated the population, and Uganda still faces major problems with HIV/AIDS and sleeping sickness. Outbreaks of Ebola have devastated untold numbers of people.

The economy has recently shown signs of improving, and the GDP has reached a robust US\$240 billion in the past few years. Uganda still relies most heavily on an agricultural base that consumes 80% of the workforce. Coffee is the primary export. Some income is drawn from copper and cobalt mining and a very minor amount of light industry. The nation is bounded by Sudan to the north, Kenya to the east, the Republic of Congo to the west, and Tanzania and Rwanda to

the south. The 236,580 sq km landscape ranges from tropical rainforest to mountains that reach heights of 16,000 feet. A third of Uganda is covered by lakes, and Lake Victoria alone covers 20% of the country.

The diversity among the people of Uganda presents a unique case for equitably delivering information. Many ethnic groups are represented, with a few that are dominant, but most of the local languages are based on an oral heritage without a literature. There is an opportunity for public access venues with information and communication technologies (ICTs) to address the needs of these special groups while preserving their cultural and social values. Interestingly, national programs are unified through English and Swahili, making it easier to achieve harmony in capacity-building efforts.

Since 1986, the country has been undergoing a transformation, and the government deliberately began to shift the economy away from central control to encourage the private sector by implementing a number of restructuring strategies. During this process, the governmental powers

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were decentralized and parastatal entities began to be sold off to the private sector.

The government has announced its support for enabling and favoring a competitive environment for private investors. Consequently, the government enacted a number of specific policies and acts, including the Rural Communication Development Fund (RCDF) policy, the ICT policy, the National Libraries Act, the Electronic Media Act, the Press and Journalist Act, the Information Act, and many strategic directions, such as the Vision 2025 initiative. The result has done much to reflect the country's movement to foster development. But because of the high rates of poverty that limit much of the population, a large segment of the population remains isolated and has very limited access to information and social services. Many of those people are completely unaware of the benefits to be gained through ICTs, or the potential that ICTs hold for enhancing development and social change.

Uganda was selected to participate in this international study to assess the ability of the public to access information and communication venues, and also to review the role of ICTs across the overall economic, political, and regulatory framework. The researchers assessed how the venues function, how they serve user needs, how they meet operational constraints, how they realize successes, and how they meet the needs of underserved communities and groups.

This research, therefore, was directed especially towards public access to information and communication in Uganda, while specifically focusing on public libraries and the information needs of underserved communities. It is the first investigation of its kind in Uganda, and the findings of this research are expected to be useful to policy and decision makers in improving information access for underserved communities.

## **Methodology**

The research team began the study with a literature review, examining documents in five key categories: 1) previous research work, 2) policies and regulatory controls, 3) Information Communication for Development (ICT4D) sources, 4) internal reports and publications, and 5) news articles and Internet websites. Sixty sources were examined from the Uganda Communication Commission (UCC), the Public Libraries Board, Makerere University Library, the Ministry of Gender and Labor, and the Uganda Bureau of Statistics. Other special reference resources came from bookshops, the Uganda AIDS Commission, the National Agricultural Advisory Services (NAADS) resource center, and other inequity support groups.

The five major types of venues that offer public access to information in Uganda are multi-purpose telecenters, public libraries, community libraries, post offices, and cybercafés. The scope of this study focused on the multi-purpose telecenters, public libraries, and community libraries, largely because these venues are involved in activities aimed at providing access to information among vulnerable and disadvantaged groups. Also, these three categories enjoy good public recognition as venues that are strengthening access to information for the public. Cybercafés and post offices were excluded because they lack coordination, and little reliable information was available about the estimated 25,400 cybercafés in Uganda.

However, before eliminating any venues from the study, the team made random visits to facilities in each of the five types of venues. During this preliminary effort, the team visited four multi-purpose telecenters, seven public libraries, three community libraries, three post offices, and four cybercafés.

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