

CHAPTER 5: LIMITATIONS TO ACCESS TO ICT IN THE GAMBIA

Access: the opportunity to make use of ICTS (technology, knowledge, information)

Access to ICTs is a critical factor in development particularly in the fight to eliminate poverty and to achieve economic growth. In the Gambia, to improve and deliver access, Education, Affordability, Gender Issues, Health, Connectivity, Human Resources, Geographic locations are relevant areas to address and focus on.

5.1 Education

There is an urgent need to address the issue of education and knowledge as well as its transfer rapidly. First and foremost, the common message has to be very clear that ICT has no boundaries and the sweep of digital technologies and the transformation to a global knowledge-based economy have created robust demand for workers highly skilled in the use of information technology. To develop our economy rapidly and therefore improve the lives of Gambians we therefore need a basic level of education underpinned by developing a learning culture. The ability to use new technology that is ever changing, acquire relevant knowledge and convey information in a manner that empowers individuals to maximize their natural potential perhaps stands out as the most basic prerequisite. In this regard access to ICTS has to be precluded by training and learning.

5.2 Skilled Workforce

In The Gambia the proliferation of ICT training will provide a future base but at this point in time it is important we recognize that the relevant knowledge base and therefore skills

required to be competitive or have the competitive edge are lacking. Without an appropriately skilled workforce we have no chance.

Before we even get in to the IT fields or the lack of it in schools, what first comes to mind is the ongoing debate about the atrocious level of English proficiency in schools. Language forms a fundamental part of development and it is through this that the principle of skill acquisition is based on regardless of which skill one needs to acquire. Imagine trying to study computing without a basic understanding of English, French or some other language that the course is based on. It becomes increasingly difficult to generate a skilled workforce if this most basic of fundamentals is non-existent.

The basic understanding of mathematics, languages and the sciences are certainly prerequisites and it is high time that a lot of thought is put into revitalizing this part of the education system as way of pushing access issues forward.

Educating the non-educated people in benefits of ICT is a solution to access at another level. It is no point taking a computer to a village community centre and telling them that they have access to the Internet, which can help solve their problems. The solution is to first analyse the problems maybe they have in getting the right prices for their crops. It is at this point that ICT solutions that help in this area can be discussed. Eventually the solution is to put in place mechanisms allowing the villagers to have access to latest market prices before selling their goods and thus eliminating the middle man to maximize profits.

In a nutshell access to technology must mean more than just computers and connections: (bridges.org's 12 **Real Access** criteria)

Providing access to technology is critical, but it must be about more than just physical access. Computers and connections are insufficient if the technology is not used effectively because it is not affordable; if people do not understand how to put it to use or if they are discouraged from using it; or if the local economy cannot sustain its use. The following issues are the determining factors in whether or not people have Real Access to ICT -- access that goes beyond just physical access and makes it possible for people to use technology effectively to improve their lives.

5.3 Awareness

“Information is power” as has been well noted time and time again. Power to empower and power to act. The whole learning process for us in Africa and The Gambia specifically is challenged by how quickly we raise the level of awareness of ICTS. There is no doubt that IT is still a luxury to a greater degree than not. This means that spending money to browse the Internet, buy computers, keep up with technological advances is challenging and a fine balancing act alongside providing the proverbial “daily bread“.

At present, the ICT industry in the Gambia is more focused on selling computers, basic computer training, networking and a few other basic services. The innovation is certainly lacking. It is through this way that PC sales can actually increase because you are actually demonstrating to people what a simple computer program can do for them or their business which can translate to the need for computers.

5.4 Affordability

Universal Access to and affordability of ICTS are inextricably linked. Until ICTS become more affordable in the Gambia, the objective of building masses IT literate population cannot be achieved. In the Gambia, the cost of computers and the price of accessing the Internet are one of the main issues that impact on the spread of ICTS. Purchase of equipment is still far beyond the reach of the average citizen. The high price tags compared to other basic necessities in life act as a barrier to access and becomes prohibitive. In The Gambia, the introduction of a zero-tariff on computer equipment brought in a glimmer of hope. However the effect and benefit of this action is yet to be gained as the dream of cheap computers has just remained a dream.

For Internet access, the prices in the Gambia are still a lot cheaper than other African countries but for the masses to be able to access the Internet on a more frequent basis, the price has to surely come down more.” It is also envisaged that with the liberalization of

Gamtel and effective administration of the Universal Service Fund by PURA both service providers and consumers will benefit in terms of cost reduction.

5.5 Gender

Women's access to and control of ICTs has featured prominently in both the theory and practice of the gender digital divide. Women's access to and control of ICTs is dependent on factors such as gender discrimination in jobs and education, social class, illiteracy and geographic location that mean that the great majority of Gambian women have no access to ICTs. Despite the emphasis of the information society on getting women connected, civil society actors have argued that the issues of access and control are more complex than just connectivity. The high cost of computers and connectivity keep ICT services far beyond the reach of most women. ICT infrastructure is largely urban-centred. Internet content is overwhelmingly in English. Insufficient attention is paid to content in local languages and the use of the Internet for women with low levels of literacy and gender roles and other cultural factors translates to the fact that women have less time to make use of ICTs

5.6 General

One of the limitations that has accompanied the information revolution and the rise of ICTS is the digital divide: the gap between those who have and those who do not have **real access to information** in a wide sense. The Internet as we all know is one of the most well-used and influential examples of ICT. The Internet has worldwide broadcasting capability, mechanisms for information dissemination, and acts as a medium for collaboration and interaction between individuals within and without. The main access gaps highlighted in the chapter are mainly in access to infrastructure, hardware, software and skills needed for using ICTs. Proliferating access will therefore significantly narrow the Digital divide at all levels in the Gambia.