

# Telecentres: From Idea to Reality in Mozambique



Jertrudes, a market vendor in Manhica, Mozambique, enrolled in a computer training course at a local telecentre. (IDRC Photo: Kevin Conway)

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*Kevin Conway*

"With computers," says Polly Gaster, "it's garbage in, garbage out. The human element still dominates."

Don't talk of computers or other information and communication technologies (ICTs) leapfrogging stages in a country's development. History, she points out, is littered with high-stepping technologies that fell flat.

The researcher from Mozambique's University Eduardo Mondlane Informatics Centre (CIUEM) does concede, however, that "you can get quick adoption of computers or other ICTs, but you have to have all the other bits and pieces too: the human resources, the way the technology is introduced, what's done with it, and training — these are all critical components."

## **A formidable challenge**

Dealing with all the "bits and pieces" is something with which Gaster has become quite accustomed. In 1996, she led a multidisciplinary team charged with pilot testing telecentres in Mozambique. From the beginning, the project's goal was to create a tool to promote local development, especially in rural areas where 80% of Mozambique's 17 million citizens live.

The challenges were, and still remain, daunting: Mozambique is a large country lacking in infrastructure (although, in telecommunications, it is improving thanks to large investments by the Mozambican government); 60% of Mozambique's population remains illiterate and unemployment is high; the number of Internet users hovers at about 8 per 10 000 people (compared to close to 4400 per 10 000 in a country like Canada); and new subscribers who can afford the installation fees can still wait more than four years for a telephone line.

At a practical level, Gaster notes, "nobody knew what a telecentre in Mozambique would look like. So we asked Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC) to support a proper feasibility study."

Two pilot sites were identified: one in the town of Namaacha, 70 kilometres southwest of Mozambique's capital, Maputo City, along the border with Swaziland; the other in Manhiça, 78 kilometres north of the capital. [See related article: [Telecentres: A One-Stop Communication Shop](#)] In both study areas, researchers gauged local information and communication needs, family income and spending priorities, and economic and demographic trends, as well as people's willingness to pay for new or improved services.

"The feasibility study was really a way of getting to know the people and getting a little feel for local dynamics," says Gaster.

### **A menu of services**

To no one's surprise, the study confirmed the telephone as the principal means for communicating with the outside world and radio as the standard medium for receiving information. It also highlighted health and education as spending priorities after "food and water-type expenditures. Where people really wanted telecentre services was in the areas of education, basic communication, and computer skills," says Gaster.

The menu of products and services created to meet these needs included: access to the Internet, electronic mail, use of computers, training in the use Microsoft Office software packages, printing and related services (digitization, word processing, the production of invitations, business, and visiting cards, etc.), photocopying, fax and telephone services, television and video, and a small library. In Namaacha, because of established trade ties with neighbouring Swaziland, an English course was also offered.

To date, photocopying services and the public telephone have proven to be the telecentres' most popular features. Much less used are email and Internet service. To use either, patrons must first access the telecentre's Internet Service Provider, the CIUEM in Maputo. Connecting to their server means a long distance phone call and the high cost is prohibitive for most users.

Computer training is also popular. "It is one of the most sought after services and something people will pay for," says Gaster.

### **Reaching out to women**

Other organizations have also capitalized on the telecentre's training facilities. For example, the Forum Mulher, a national umbrella organization for women, was able to secure funding for its affiliates, groups such as the Manhiça market vendors. [See related article: [A New Window on the World for Women](#)] A key outcome, says Lucilia Xerinda, the Forum Mulher's course coordinator, is the confidence that comes with mastering new skills and an unfamiliar technology. "Women no longer believe that computers are for men and young people only," she says.

Despite the Forum Mulher's efforts, Gaster's own data shows that women use telecentres less often than do men. The telecentres' most devoted clients are young men aged 17 to 25. This is likely a reflection of the greater amount of formal education young men receive compared to young women. Both groups see computing skills as a springboard to better jobs, but men are more likely to pursue their ambitions.

### **Constraints to expansion**

Despite an assessment indicating that the people of Manhiça and Namaacha value their telecentres, Gaster admits, "we haven't been able to implement all that our telecentre theory implies we should

do in terms of proactive development work." One of the reasons she cites is the cost and quality of current telecommunications products and services that make Internet access and email too costly for ordinary people.

"It's also prohibitive for the telecentre itself given that we've been trying to test out this business of a sustainable model," she says "The telecentre staff are afraid to use the Internet because they know they'll get this whopping phone bill at the end of the month."

Human resources are another constraint. "Our telecentres," says Gaster, "are run by 22 year-olds with a tenth grade education. Their ability to initiate, to experiment, to go further — especially given the cost of experimentation — is limited. So you must train, and retrain. Too often we do not have the time or budget to do all these things as well as we would like."

### **Future prospects**

When Gaster looks to the future, she notes with some satisfaction that the idea of a telecentre and all it entails has entered the vocabulary of people at the provincial level. She can also point to the telecentres' pride of place in the country's ICT policy and the implementation strategy, as well as to how the notion of universal access has been enshrined in the same two documents.

"I hope it will lead to other initiatives with different people in different parts of the country," she says, "because we do not want to build up a franchise. Our job is to pilot, test, prove, disprove, and so forth."

She worries, however, about the current debate within Mozambique surrounding sustainability and the role of the private sector in the creation of telecentres in other parts of the country.

"My big, big concern is that we are losing the original concept of a telecentre as a proactive tool for local development. We are getting hung up on this other discourse about sustainability, etc., at the cost of those other bits and pieces that require funding, like training women. This is a conundrum that has not yet been solved. It's something that has to be constantly kept in mind by people who work in this area, whether private or public."

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### **For more information:**

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