

Report

NGOs and ICTs use in Republic of Congo

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Research on ICTs and NGOs in the Republic of the Congo

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I – Introduction:

The progress achieved in the area of ICTs has revolutionized the transmission of information throughout the world. ICTs have transformed the world into a global village. Congo is no exception. Use of the Internet and of cell phones has become widespread. The government has indicated its interest in ICTs development by designating the Ministry of Postal Services and Telecommunications as responsible for new technologies.

Congo has had fixed telephones since 1964, available from the National Office of Postal Services and Telecommunications [ONPT], which holds a monopoly and has the status of a national company which operated until 2003. In March, 2001, the ONPT listed 108,400¹ subscribers connected to the public switched telephone network. This brings the phone density in Congo to 3.61 fixed phones per 100 inhabitants, estimating the current population at 3,000,000.

Despite this significant figure on phone density, the rate of phone penetration is quite low, since over 95% of the subscribers are in the two largest cities, Brazzaville and Pointe-Noire. The network does not cover all Congolese territory.

The country had only recently emerged from a war when the GSM network companies started. In order to meet popular demand for phone service, the government authorities have loosened regulations on mobile cell phone services. Thus three private operators have obtained licenses and are in operation: CIRTEL, since 1997, Celtel Congo since 1999, and Libertis Telecom since 2000. This competition between four phone companies is good to better develop the telecommunications sector.

Celtel Congo is a subsidiary of MSI Cellular, a Dutch group, and, like Libertis Telecom, operates in several African countries. Celtel Congo represents the largest network of mobile phones using the GSM, with over 240,000 subscribers. This company is present in both urban and rural areas, and its network covers seven large areas.

The former operator of national fixed telephones, ONPT, was replaced by another company designated as SOTELCO [Telecommunications Company of Congo] in March, 2003. Compared to other African countries, telecommunications infrastructure in Congo is still underdeveloped. According to the World Bank², in 2000 there were only 24 mobile phones for every 1000 inhabitants.

As part of the regional policy on ICT use for regional integration, a conference was held in September, 2002, in Yaoundé, Cameroon, for representatives of the Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa [EMMCA/CEMAC]. The countries of EMMCA, of which Congo is a member, are considered to be those which have benefited least from the advantages of ICTs.

Internet has been in Congo since 1999. At present, Internet connections are possible only in urban areas. Among Internet Service Providers, there are Congo Net, the national Provider, Afripa Telecom and Celtel Congo, private ISPs and Interconnect, Raga Net based in Kinshasa, DRC.

There are several ongoing worldwide research projects on ICTs. It is important that Congolese researchers not miss the opportunity to participate in such an initiative, in order to find solutions linking

¹ Source: Analysis of situation of telecommunications development in Africa, ITU, May 2001.

² Source: ICT Infrastructure and Access, ITU [International Telecommunication Union] and UNESCO

ICTs to social change. The need to create an infocommunication community in the world and in Africa in particular offer the Congolese Government and NGOs opportunities that must be seized by establishing strategies to develop communication infrastructures in order to benefit of ICTs.

This study is a contribution to the development of ICTs in Congo.

II – Costs of telephone, computational, and Internet services:

This study is based on interviews with various kinds of NGOs, 50 working in urban areas and 20 in rural areas. 30% of the urban NGOs examined have existed up to five years and 70% for over five years. 34% of the NGOs have activities in rural areas but no offices in these rural locations.

100% of the rural NGOs and community organizations [CBOs or Community-Based Organizations] examined have existed up to five years. 65% of these NGOs or community organizations have projects financed by international groups.

The degree of NGO access to ICTs is dependent on financial resources. Not all NGOs are able to acquire a mobile phone or a computer or to pay Internet use fees in a cybercafé. In urban areas, Brazzaville for example, the average NGO has one mobile phone, with a quarterly cost of \$90 USD for phone service. Moreover, the purchase of a mobile phone costs at least \$70 USD. These amounts correspond to the monthly salary of a Congolese who rents a home and provides for his household. In rural areas, there are 3 cell phones for every 10 NGOs, with an average quarterly cost of \$25 USD, which represents the income of a farm woman who sells two 25-kilo sacks of peanuts, after at least three months of hard labor.

A subscription to Celtel Congo's GSM network costs \$15 USD; with Libertis Telecom it is \$11 USD. The prepaid cards commonly called credit cards or units cost \$8 USD for 20 minutes of airtime over a 30-day. The economy in Congo is far more oriented towards cash payment. And therefore, pre-payment corresponds well to the Congolese mentality.

For the majority of NGOs in both the cities and the villages, the costs of telephone communication are not built into the annual operations budget, if such exists, and they are generally covered by the members on an individual and voluntary basis. NGOs not having cell phones make use of telephone booths.

The study reveals that 40% of NGOs in urban areas have computer equipment. Most often this is a Pentium computer with an ink jet printer. In 24% of cases, the equipment was bought by a member. Maintenance is done by contract with technicians.

It is important, however, to note that even when a NGO does not have computer equipment, two leaders, on average, are computer literate.

Expenses for supplies and maintenance come to an average of \$95 US per NGO per quarter. According to remarks by Mr. Mbougou Florent of the Congolese Association for Family Welfare, "computer use increases work efficiency and data storage, and it guarantees quality work."

Although 60% of NGOs in the city lack computer equipment, the gap in this area is quite large in relation to NGOs and community organizations in rural locations, 94% of which are without computers. Mr. Nkaya Jean of the Association for Social Action and Integrated Development, which works in rural areas, sets forth the difficulties in using this equipment: "Among the drawbacks are the lack of technicians in NGOs who can deal with a breakdown and the difficulty of getting necessary replacement parts." The

price of a new computer in Congo is high, starting at \$ 1100 USD. Many NGOs buy second hand computers.

The main problems experienced continue to be the high cost of acquiring computer equipment, the lack of qualified personnel in NGOs, and the lack of information on donors of computer equipment.

82% of city NGOs makes use of cyber cafés. There is at least one cybercafé per neighborhood. Online use costs \$1.50 US per hour.

The cost of the Internet connection from ISPs listed above is approximately of \$2000 -3000 USD, and monthly costs of Internet use for cyber cafes are of \$ 450 -800 USD.

III – Infrastructure.

The various wars in 1997 and 1999 destroyed most of the telecommunication infrastructure of the national company, ONPT. Some towns and villages in the interior of the country were equipped with IMMARSAT suitcases.

In rural areas Internet connections, computer services, and cell phones are dependent on electricity, which is a problem for the national government to resolve.

Electricity is supplied by the National Electric Company [SNE], which covers all areas of the country, but with the highest concentration in the densely populated areas. In the country's interior there are numerous towns and villages that are not electrified. This makes it difficult to charge cell phone batteries, thus making these phones less desirable. As Mr. Marcel Mokoko of the National Association of Friends of the Earth, which works in rural areas, emphasizes, "Major obstacles include lack of information on this tool, the absence of electricity in the countryside, and the lack of sales outlets for pre-paid phone cards. In the countryside, you have to stand on hilltops to reach a signal. Moreover, the monthly incomes of rural inhabitants do not allow for the purchase of a cell phone."

Semi-monthly electric bills in Brazzaville, the capital, range from \$60 USD to \$150 USD. Electrical outages are frequent, and city residents whose incomes do not allow for the expense of electricity use storm lamps and candles.

In the country's interior, communication remains a thorny problem because of the isolation of certain areas due to the inferior condition of the roadways. Although Celtel's GSM network is available in rural areas, the points of sale for handsets and prepaid phone cards are difficult to reach.

In the large cities, Brazzaville and Pointe-Noire, some cybercafés use generators to deal with electrical outages. Others must sometimes refund fees to their customers.

IV – NGOs and ICTs:

There are advantages for NGOs in computer services, Internet use, and cellular phones. The Internet was first presented as a tool for communicating with relatives living abroad, more quickly than by the postal service, which was criticized for being slow and unreliable. Residential Internet connections are expensive, and most users go to cybercafés, just like the NGOs do.

There are two local NGOs who have opened cybercafés, Doctors of Africa and Creative Space. There are a few figures to take into consideration as regards Internet use by urban NGOs. 18% of NGOs do not have

e-mail addresses. Average online time per month is seven sessions, equivalent to 7 hours, at a cost of \$10 US.

At cybercafés 44% of the online fees are picked up by NGO members. Just as for the telephone, the issue of budgeting remains problematic.

Even in urban locations where there is an Internet connection, awareness of the possibilities offered by the Internet is low. 94% of NGOs do not have websites, generally because of a lack of information on free site hosting, as well as on the necessity of having a site and the advantages it offers. 53% do not have information on portals and international data bases.

The Internet has not yet caught on among Congolese NGOs, and knowledgeable utilization of its potential is even less evidenced.

The use of e-mail is very popular, even among the young. Although it is costly, NGO members use this tool with the view of accessing the world, to learn about other NGOs, to seek donors, and to acquire various information. As for young people aged 12-25, they use the net to communicate with student friends in other countries, to seek pen pals, and to look for admissions and scholarships to western universities.

French-language sites are the most visited, since the official language is French. Although translation sites exist, many users are not interested in using them. In contrast to urban NGOs, those growing out of a rural setting know little about the World Wide Web. They are not members of the cybernaut community. They lack information on all the resources available on the web. The Internet remains a luxury reserved to residents of the two large cities of Brazzaville and Pointe-Noire.

In both urban and rural areas NGOs without cell phones use telephone booths. Cell phones have proved a rapid success in the Congo. Because with mobiles, unlike with fixed phones, you can contact a physical person, not a physical place. One doesn't call a number anymore but a person directly. And this reduces distances.

“Cell phones are expensive, but they save time, reduce transportation costs, and get information quickly to members,” argues Lydie Diaboungana, General Secretary of Association AZUR Développement. As an illustration, on 50 ONG examined, 38% of NGOs use the phone to communicate with other NGOs, 36% with members, 30% with donors. Donors are their principal source of projects funding and NGOs used to call them for information and follow-up of projects proposals.

However, use of phone in rural areas is different. The main use of phones on a daily basis is to communicate with program beneficiaries [30% of calls], members [25%], and project promoters [15%]. Mr. Malanda Rock, from the farmers' market cooperative MKA in the area around Nkayi, acknowledges that “the phone improves our handling of orders, and we can easily get in touch with our customers, so that we know prices right here, before we ship merchandise. The problem is that this requires money.”

Nonetheless great efforts remain to be made in order to supply ICTs to local NGOs. NGOs having Internet access and cellular phones are the ones whose members have ample financial resources; they use their personal mobile phones or they purchase prepaid cards.

Part of the explanation lies in the damaging effects of NGO inability to set budgets at the start of the year. Without membership dues and project financing, the NGO is paralyzed.

On the other hand, there are NGOs, such as the Congolese Association for Family Well-being, the Thomas Sankara Pan-African Association, and the Land and Village Association, who are well-equipped

with computer and telephone hardware. NGOs with operational budget problems struggle to carry out their objectives and do not have a registered office. This indicates a lack of organization. This creates some hierarchies between NGOs. And the most that are likely to receive funding from international organizations in the country are those that are well organized and participate in projects implementation budget.

V – The recent interest by NGOs in writing ICT project proposals:

As in other areas, ICTs are a growth sector which creates jobs, facilitates transmission of information, and allows participation in community development. It is not only NGOs specializing in communications who are of this opinion. Sixty-six per cent of the 50 urban NGOs surveyed say they have written ICT proposals but have not received financing. There are various kinds of proposals: training seminars, cybercafés, training centers, and others often not well enough formulated to draw the attention of donors.

This is the case with the Youth and Media Association, composed of young communications graduates of Marien Ngouabi University in Brazzaville, who presented a proposal to an international organization for an ICT training seminar with a total budget of \$20,000 USD. “Our ICT seminar proposal was rejected because the objectives and the indicators of success were not clearly defined, and the operative methods did not allow for partnering with other local NGOs,” acknowledged Gur Milandou Mouanga, president of this NGO.

Using qualified staff, ICTs proposals will be drawn up according to the financing criteria required by donors. This is personnel, however, whose fees the NGOs do not have the means to pay.

VI – Doctors of Africa:

The model of Doctors of Africa offers a unique strategy in the area of ICTs. It is one of the rare ICT proposals presented by a local NGO to get financing from donors in Brazzaville.

Created in May, 1995, Doctors of Africa has as its goal to promote primary health care in Africa, to contribute to the creation of health teams, to work alongside public agencies in developing national development plans, and to bring in humanitarian aid in cases of conflict or epidemics.

Doctors of Africa first began its initiation to ICTs with the creation of a website, which was designed and put into place in France by group members.

In March, 2000, Doctors of Africa submitted to the French Embassy in Congo a proposal, with a cost of \$32,300 USD, for a Center for Documentation, Information, and Counseling on HIV/AIDS [CDICS] at the OCH of Mougali III, a residential neighborhood of Brazzaville. This NGO received financial support from the French Embassy in Congo.

Doctors of Africa was thus able to set up in this Center a computer room with an Internet connection intended to serve as a research tool for the various users of the Center. The computer component of this project was designed in consultation with an IT technician.

With the funds allocated by the French Embassy, the NGO purchased three computers, a photocopier, a laser printer, an ink-jet printer, a scanner, modems, and a hub. Doctors of Africa paid the costs of the Internet connection, about \$750 USD, from the national Internet service provider, Congo Net.

Because of frequent problems with the Internet connection, this computer research room was closed in 2001.

With the arrival of a new Internet service provider, Celtel Congo, the room was reopened in December, 2002. Doctors of Africa received a second grant from the French Embassy and acquired two computers. With its own money the NGO purchased two additional computers, for \$4000 USD. The computer room has become a public cybercafé, which employs three technicians and two attendants.

The cost of the Internet connection from Celtel Congo is \$3000 USD, paid out of the group's operations budget.

The monthly costs associated with this cybercafé are: salaries equal to \$265 USD, Celtel Congo Internet use fee of \$460 USD, and water and electricity at \$41 USD.

One immediately notices that the monthly cybercafé receipts of approximately \$700-\$800 USD barely cover the cost of maintaining the operation. These receipts could be higher, as explains Ghislain Sounghat, Administrator/Logistics Manager of Doctors of Africa: "The inadequate number of computers, the frequent electrical outages, the lack of generators to deal with them, as well as the instability of the Internet connection, all keep the cybercafé from being profitable any longer." The frequent outages of electricity have damaged the air conditioners, and because of a lack of money, the cybercafé is cooled by fans. The price of an air conditioner, starting at \$700 USD, corresponds to the monthly receipts of the cybercafé.

However, the social impact is significant nonetheless. Five persons are supported by the activities of this Center, with an average salary of \$53 USD, which corresponds to an undergraduate scholarship as well as to the public sector minimum wage [SMIC]. The cybercafé represents an opening to the world, a source of information for many teachers, university students, health professionals, and secondary-school students who visit the Center for Documentation.

The factors cited lead to a marked decrease in activity and indicate a huge gap that must be filled. However, the main goal, which of giving researchers more sources of information, has been met.

If the NGO was to receive new computers, taking advantage of competitive pricing and a tax-free status, the profitability of this cybercafé would grow towards an even greater social impact. "This model could be replicated at Pointe-Noire (second biggest town) by the NGO. As it is, we are seeking partners who would be able to help us carry out several projects," concluded Ghislain Sounghat.

VI – Conclusion:

The global village declared by McLuhan will not be a reality for the NGOs of Congo, as far as new information and communications technologies are concerned, unless they have the necessary material and human resources.

ICTs can have a positive and lasting influence on the economic and social development of Congo. Initiatives for projects in this domain are to be encouraged.

What emerges is that the difficulties to surmount relate in particular to limited human resources, the lack of investment in infrastructure, the high cost of access and hardware, the lack of dissemination of information, and insufficient financing in the telecommunications sector, particularly in ICTs.

Moreover, even the local private sector Internet ventures remain concentrated in the two large cities. Rural areas are thus cut off from ICTs. It has been shown to be important for development plans in this area to take into account consumer needs, including those of NGOs, and to work to lower costs for Internet and cell phone use.

As for human resources, there are a number of private schools teaching skills linked to computer services: analysis and programming, office secretariat, and network. Relying on volunteers would be a solution to setting up an initial ICT strategy for NGOs, but this solution is limited by the fact that IT specialists want above all to be compensated. This problem will not be solved unless NGOs set aside the necessary funds, while also contributing to the project as did Doctors of Africa.

Without electricity, ICTs remain a dream for people living in rural areas. Some possibilities such as solar panels and batteries might be explored in order to reach a quick solution.

If 76% of the NGOs in urban areas are saying that they lack information on projects and other information related to ICTs, this indicates a problem in the dissemination of information. This can be solved by organizing a national information distribution circuit for NGOs: creating an Internet network integrating a website, a list of electronic discussion groups, a mailing list, and incorporating as well the use of cell phones and mail for NGOs in rural areas.

The ICT development strategy for Congo will not prove effective unless the NGOs involve the government, the universities, and international organizations. With this in mind, extension campaigns to promote the potential of the Internet should be continued among NGOs in order to help them benefit from its resources.

Dr. Thomas Ndandou, program director of Emergency Aid Action [ASU], maintains “ICTs are assuredly a powerful means of development and social change.” That is, provided that international organizations give particular attention to financial support for this field in the Republic of the Congo.