The Role of Politics in Telecentres: Cases from South Africa

Einar Braathen, Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research (NIBR), Norway
Heidi Attwood, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa
Julian May, University of the Western Cape, South Africa

ABSTRACT
What has been the role of politics within and around the community telecentres (TCs)? The background is the depoliticized international discourse that has accompanied ICT4D policies. The focus is on multi-purpose TCs run by non-governmental organizations, equipped with computers and internet connectivity, tasked to implement public ICT-to-the-poor policies. Specifically, the article discusses the differences of technical-social functionality of such TCs within the same country and policy context. The assumption is that empowerment, particularly of the local operating organization and its personnel, is a key factor. The strategy is to combine stakeholder and power analysis to assess the extent of empowerment by exploring a multi-dimensional framework for understanding power relations. Four TCs in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, were studied over a two-year period of repeated visits of intensive fieldwork of participatory observation and interviews. The research found that big differences existed between the TCs in terms of empowerment. Changes in power relations are necessary, although not sufficient, conditions for a community TC to function in the way desired. Moreover, three stages of empowerment are suggested, highlighting the Operating Organization, the TC manager/staff and the TC users, respectively. The article concludes by reflecting on the analytical-theoretical framework for power relations.

Keywords: Empowerment, Local Politics, Power Relations, Technological Functionality, Telecentre

THE NEGLECT OF POLITICS
A rather uncritical euphoria concerning information and communication technology (ICT) reached the international development agenda in the 1990s (Woods, 1993; International Telecommunications Union, 1994; World Bank, 1998). In year 2000, “making ICTs available” was included in the Millennium Development Goals (United Nations Development Programme, 2010). Although complex societal issues were addressed, such as the growing ‘digital divide’ within and between countries (Civille, 1995; Castells, 1996), the ICT-for-development (ICT4D) agenda reflected to a less extent political issues. The different interests and asymmetry of power among the actors involved in ICT4D activities were not highlighted. Instead,
formulation and implementation of policies were moulded in a technocratic-managerial fashion. The main policy formulation took place in international forums, and implementation was supposed to be market and community based. This meant the active involvement of privatized/corporate service providers and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). There was little scope for national democratic decision making, and direct intervention and large-scale service provision by the government was discouraged. These tenets were embraced by the action plan coming out of the World Summit on the Information Society (United Nations Development Programme, 2005).

The points of departure for this article are, first, the mentioned world summit which recommended “connecting villages with ICTs and establishing community access points” as a main strategy to make ICTs available for the poor (United Nations Development Programme, 2005). Second, the government of the post-apartheid South Africa had a significant role in this policy process. It hosted the UN Information Society and Development Conference in 1996, and in line with a programme promoted by a leading donor agency in this field, the International Development and Research Corporation (Canada), South Africa chose the establishment of multi-purpose community telecentres as a main instrument to support the access to computers and internet of people living in poor communities (Benjamin, 2001b). Third, the success of South Africa’s policy in this area has been questionable (Attwood et al., 2010), and the policies formulated and chosen at the international and national levels represent problems that need to be addressed (Braathen & Schaanning, 2011). This article will, however, explore the implementation of the policy at the local community level and, in doing so, try to bring politics back in. Hence, the overarching question is: what has been the role of politics within and around the community TCs?

**APPROACHING TELECENTRES (TCs)**

A multi-purpose TC refers to a place providing “connectivity and access to information via a range of information and communication technologies including phone, fax, computers and the internet” (Bailur, 2007, p. 62). They can be run commercially as small businesses with some non-commercial features or they can be run by community organizations as non-profit and subsidized facilities for community benefit (Dymond et al., 2010).

Most of the ICT4D literature on TCs has been evaluations or studies commissioned by development or government agencies. These reports have been rather managerially oriented and deal with issues related to the success of TCs such as access, usage and sustainability, and lessons to be learnt from TCs based on case studies from developing countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. A pioneering and critical report was written by Benjamin (2001a, 2001b) about the first TCs in South Africa. There are examples of research into factors explaining the impact of TCs on poor communities, but their focus tends to be narrowed to the impact of certain managerial-organizational designs chosen (Parkinson, 2005; Kumar & Best, 2006; Dymond et al., 2010). Few efforts have been made at theorizing beyond generating operational knowledge, and local political and social contexts and factors are usually not part of the analytical-theoretical framework. There are two types of research about TCs that oppose the managerialist mainstream and emphasize politics.

One is the use of stakeholder analysis as shown by Savita Bailur (2007) in an analysis of TC projects in India. She defines stakeholders as “those groups without whose support the organization would cease to exist” (2007, p. 64), drawing on Freeman (1984) who in business studies identified the stakeholders to be...
Related Content

Media and Participation: A Site of Ideological – Democratic Struggle
Itir Akdogan and Celia Romm Livermore (2013). International Journal of E-Politics (pp. 54-56).
www.igi-global.com/article/media-participation-site-ideological-democratic/76896?camid=4v1a

DemonD: A Social Search Engine Built Upon the Actor-Network Theory
www.igi-global.com/chapter/demond-social-search-engine-built/39748?camid=4v1a

The Myth of the e-Commerce Serf to Sovereign Powershift
www.igi-global.com/chapter/myth-commerce-serf-sovereign-powershift/21446?camid=4v1a