An Exploratory Study on Co-Locating Voter Registration in Telecentres Case of Malawi

Frank Makoza, Cape Peninsula University of Technology, Cape Town, South Africa

ABSTRACT

This article explores how co-locating voter registration at telecentres can address some of the challenges in the electoral process of a developing country. A case in Malawi was analysed using secondary data. A general inductive approach was used to analyse media reports on voter registration. The general inductive approach supported the development of themes for explaining the role of telecentres in addressing some of the challenges for voter registration. The study showed that the voter registration process has problems without obvious solutions including operational, social and political issues. Some of the problems can be mitigated utilising the services in telecentres. The services were mainly technical, logistical and communication. The study proposes a model for collaborative service delivery which suggests factors to be considered when co-locating voter registration in telecentres.

KEYWORDS

Electoral Process, Malawi, Telecentre, Voter Registration

1. INTRODUCTION

A telecentre is “a physical facility that offers the community access to computers and Internet” (Gollakota et al., 2012, p. 186). There are different ways in which telecentres serve the communities in which they operate. The services of telecentres can be housed or co-located in other organisations or operate as a standalone service. Empirical studies have showed that telecentres services can be co-located in other organisations such as learning institutions (Huerta & Sandoval-Almazan, 2007), libraries (Chigona, 2006; Chigona, Lekwane, Westcott & Chigona, 2012), post offices (Chikumba, 2011) and government offices (Madon, 2004; Perera, 2013). Co-locating telecentres in other public organisations has mitigated some of the challenges that affect their operations e.g. securing infrastructure, awareness of services and sharing of operating costs (Gomez et al. 2012; Huerta et al., 2012). While most studies have look at telecentres housed in other organisations, this study aims to explore in turn the role of telecentres in supporting other organisations that deliver public services e.g. voter registration in the electoral process.

The study used the case of Malawi which represented a low-income economy in Africa. The country conducted general elections in May 2014. There were 51 operational telecentres in the country at the time of the study (Kayira, 2013; GoM, 2013). However, their role in supporting other organisations has not been adequately studied. The study was guided by the research question: How

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can telecentres address some of the challenges for voter registration process? To answer this question the study analysed media reports confronting voter registration process. An inductive approach (Thomas, 2006) was used to generate concepts that could explain how telecentres can support voter registration process.

The rest of the paper proceeds as follows. The next section review literature on telecentres in the context of developing countries. Section 3 highlights the approach to the study. Section 4 presents the summary of the results. Section 5 discusses the results. Section 6 summarises the conclusions drawn from the study.

2. BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

2.1. Role of Telecentres in Communities

Telecentres offer services including access to computers and Internet, email, bills payment services, access to e-government services, fax, phone, computer training and other value-added services (Chigona et al., 2012; Gomez et al., 2012). One of the objectives of telecentres is help communities in achieving social economic development. The services in the telecentres are offered for free or at a cost to the user depending on the objectives of the telecentre. The ownership and management of telecentre determines whether the services offered to the community to be free or paying (Gollakota et al., 2012). Private organisations, government and non-governmental organisations may own the telecentres.

Apart from providing access to ICTs, telecentres have the potential improve the well-being of communities through promoting social inclusion, increasing access to information, support addressing literacy and learning (Chigona et al., 2012; Huerta et al., 2012). Telecentres act as meeting points and information hubs in rural communities where people and organisations can obtain and disseminate information on microfinance, health, agriculture and education (Bailur, 2007; Gomez, 2012). The services can be categorised into online and offline activities for sharing information and communication (Bailey, 2009). Thus, telecentres offer diverse services depending on context (Gollakota, Pick & Sathyapriya, 2012).

2.2. Challenges for Telecentres

Telecentres are fraught with challenges which may affect achievement of their objectives and sometimes lead to failure. Some of the challenges are the sustainability of the telecentres, lack of demand for the services in rural communities, lack of interest in telecentres for the users (Gollakota et al., 2012). Other challenges relate to the understanding of technologies and maintenance of equipment for the telecentres, especially for the telecentre staff. Governance and power relations amongst the stakeholders may also affect the operations of a telecentre. Social norms and practices for communities where the telecentres are operating can affect the operations of telecentre (Gomez et al. 2012; Huerta et al., 2012).

Chigona et al. (2012) highlight challenges inhibiting utilisation of telecentres co-located in a library. The challenges were lack of identification documents for some users, economic hardship for the users, attitudes of users towards the services, inadequate facilities to serve a large group of users at once, lack of skills of the users and privacy concerns when using the ICT services. Some telecentre users had no identity documents and proof of address which required for the membership of the library. Only registered members of the library were allowed to use the telecentre (Chigona et al., 2012). Telecentre users raised concerns that there was limited privacy when doing online banking transactions at the telecentre. Despite these challenges, the study noted that there was still demand for telecentre services in the communities (Chigona et al., 2012). This demonstrates that co-locating services in an ICT public access facility may be challenging.
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