The Acacia Initiative: Overcoming Marginalization and Exclusion among Disadvantaged Communities

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With the advent of the Internet, the world has truly become a global village. This gigantic communication network has abolished distances between communities and between people. For the first time, thanks to this matchless medium, it is now possible for the under-developed countries of Africa and Latin America to jump aboard the third universal revolution, in real time.

Despite missing out on previous technological revolutions, which occurred in the nineteenth century, Africans now have an unprecedented chance to make up for lost ground in the area of high technology, particularly with respect to new information and communication technologies (ICT). Yet, such access will only be open to a certain class of people — those who live in urban areas. Many social groups thus face the threat of being left behind. It is to overcome this gap (which could put such groups at a further disadvantage) that the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) launched the Acacia Initiative to allow isolated social groups to integrate these new technologies into their daily lives.

Key objectives

The Acacia Initiative is designed to empower sub-Saharan communities with the ability and the means to apply information and communication technologies to their own social and economic development. Acacia has three primary objectives:

- to discover and demonstrate how disadvantaged sub-Saharan African communities, especially their youth and women, can use information and communication technologies to solve local development problems;
- to learn from the Acacia Initiative's research and experience and to disseminate this knowledge widely;
- to foster international interest and involvement in using ICTs to support development in rural and disadvantaged communities, thereby increasing community access to information and communication.

Integrated approach

To achieve these ends, the Acacia Initiative takes an integrated approach relating to policies, infrastructure, technologies and tools, as well as to applications and services. To put this integrated approach into effect, Acacia is placing its priority on national strategies, which are being tested initially in four countries: South Africa, Mozambique, Uganda, and Senegal.

Acacia activities in Senegal are the outcome of a long participatory process involving all of the major national stakeholders (government, NGOs, community associations and organizations, the private sector, research and teaching institutions, etc.) and international cooperation partners, which led both to a national strategy — adopted in March 1997 by the IDRC Board of Governors

— and to a protocol of agreement between the Government of Senegal and IDRC, in December 1997. In that protocol, the two parties undertake, among other things, to foster the creation of a telecommunications sector regulatory body, as well as to strengthen national capacities and seek alternative solutions that will take into account the national language factor in reaching out to the more remote villages of Senegal. They also intend to promote community telecentres as a means of supporting grassroots development.

Mid-term record

Just one year after the strategy's launch and the beginning of activities in Senegal, the Acacia record is quite encouraging: a total of eight high-potential demonstration projects have been initiated, whose purpose is to empower target communities to make use of and appropriate these technologies. Moreover, solid mechanisms for joint action and partnership among the various stakeholders have been put in place — including a joint coordination forum, working groups, and regional focal groups. These mechanisms were created to facilitate implementation of national strategies and to ensure closer articulation of research and action, as well as national and regional activities. Their role is to promote further thinking about the implications of ICTs from the political, socioeconomic and cultural viewpoints, and to provide for monitoring and evaluation of activities conducted under the national strategy.

Acacia has funded a number of other activities in Senegal, including a vacation camp where youth from disadvantaged backgrounds can be introduced to ICTs. It has also supported a 'cyber-youth' event, held during the festival of Education, and Family Life clubs. As well, studies were conducted into ICT training needs, the prospects for joint efforts among cooperation agencies involved in the ICT area, and a sociological and economic 'X-ray' of telecentres and their impact on development. In all, the total cost of Senegalese Acacia activities during the first year of implementing the national strategy was CA$1.5 million — or about CFAFr 615 million.