

A model of sustainability

An organisation in South Africa has developed a network of local and international partners to offer a broad range of technology services to underserved communities.

A future for telecentres

The idea was to bring technology to underserved areas of South Africa, places that had seen little investment in the country's history. Many of these places, known as townships, are densely populated and close to large urban centres, but they still do not have access to technology. Having technology nearby, however, is not the only challenge to be overcome. It has to be affordable too.

In 2006, Siyafunda Community Technology Centres started to look at ways to bring ICTs to communities in the Ekurhuleni (East Rand) area of South Africa. The organisation was aware of previous attempts to introduce specialised technology centres to communities in the country, and was determined not to make the same mistakes.

The government had set up nearly 200 telecentres in townships and rural areas across the country in the late 1990s. Unfortunately, as there was little ongoing support for the centres and their management systems afterwards, very few of them remained operational.

Siyafunda wanted to introduce a new model for running community technology centres, and worked to develop the facilities with other community-based organisations that

were already present in the area's townships. There were no publicly available broadband services in the area, for example, but the offices of the Ekurhuleni Metro Municipality were connected. Siyafunda engaged with the municipality to make their network available for a technology centre's internet connectivity, and also arranged to turn some of their vacant premises into digital hubs.

The organisation continued to develop partnerships with other government agencies, local community, social and educational organisations, technology companies, including software developer SAP, and with entrepreneurs.

These partnerships have helped Siyafunda offer a wide range of services that are affordable and at rates that still ensure the centres have sufficient income to make them financially viable. The organisation also provides regular training courses for the centre managers. The courses help managers develop services that the local communities want, and give advice on how to promote the centres.

Siyafunda started with one centre in November 2006, with the intention of running it for around 12 months to test their model of establishing sustainable telecentres through affordable services and electronic learning opportunities. A local community organisation became interested in the work, and soon after went into partnership with Siyafunda to open a second centre. This opened up a network of similar organisations operating in other townships and, as word spread, the number of centres rapidly expanded.

There are now around 50 centres operating around the country, all with links to existing community organisations or businesses that recognised the need for access to ICTs in their area. These community technology centres, therefore, arose from demand within the community and are supported by established enterprises.

Vital connections

By offering a wide range of services, the centres attract a variety of users,

including schoolchildren with homework projects, unemployed youth looking to develop their technical, business and other skills or look for jobs, and NGOs and small businesses that make use of the office services or equipment that would otherwise be too expensive for them to buy.

The challenge of reaching communities beyond the urban centres and townships remains, however. To expand the technology services to those areas, Siyafunda supports internet cafes already present in remote communities to adapt to their business model and expand their services. More universities and municipalities in South Africa are interested in the model, with Siyafunda set to develop around 30 new centres in rural parts of the Limpopo and Mpumalanga provinces, and in the semi-arid areas of the Northern Cape.

Recent recognition as best telecentre initiative of the year at the 2011 eIndia awards has raised the profile of the community technology centre programme and put Siyafunda in touch with other related businesses. The organisation is investigating ways to make use of these new connections to develop the use of mobile networks and provide cost-effective services to rural areas. Wireless technology can extend an internet connection and remove the need for cables, or even the need for a physical bricks and mortar centre.

Perhaps the greatest advantage of working with a carefully selected group of partners in community access schemes is that it avoids duplication and re-invention of the wheel. Close collaboration and clearly defined working relationships between government agencies, educational institutions, businesses and community organisations means that resources and costs are shared, and the likelihood of two centres opening in the same small town are reduced. All this helps to ensure that communities get the services they need, at a price they can afford, and from a centre that is likely to be around for the foreseeable future. ◀

Close collaboration means the partner organisations can share costs and resources, and reduce the chances of duplication.



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