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The challenges of rural connectivity: eight case studies of Thusong Service Centres in Mopani District

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2015-03-02
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/17072

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Abstract

The research aimed to investigate the supply and demand side factors that enables or hinders the effectiveness of rural connectivity provided through public access points such as the Thusong Service Centres (TSCs). The lack of broadband and terrestrial infrastructure is often cited as the main reason why rural people are not able to participate in the information society. The status of the Mopani District rural connectivity indicates that the digital divide is not always due to the lack of infrastructure, but due to the etic approach towards the deployment of connectivity and the failure to locate rural connectivity within the broader community development goals. The failure to understand the user requirements contributes to the misconception that Very Small Apparatus Terminals (VSAT) satellite technology is an inadequate solution which must be replaced by fixed broadband. On the other hand, the failure of the Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA) blueprint indicates the poor level of e-government readiness within the public service sector. The status of the Mopani TSCs also shows that there is a lack of accountability, cooperation and collaboration across the three spheres of government and that there is a misuse of public funds in cases where connectivity resources are duplicated and not optimally used.

The separation of the public service connectivity from the public connectivity creates the digital inequality in the targeted communities. The separation has resulted in connectivity being available to some and not to all, because accessibility is based on personal relationships. In other cases there is constructed denied access due to local politics. 16 years later since the establishment of the Universal Service and Access Agency of South Africa (USAASA), the South African Community Informatics (CI) sector is struggling to achieve outputs that produce the desired impact in the targeted communities.

Keywords: readiness, appropriate technology, capability, functioning, purposeful consumption, digital literacy, digital divide, digital inequality, VSAT community informatics, ICT for development (ICT4D).