

THE LINK BETWEEN TELECENTRES AND RURAL COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN MALAWI: THE CASE OF VIKWA COMMUNITY TELECENTRE

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the link between telecentres and rural community development in Malawi focusing on one telecentre: Vikwa Community Telecentre. It also examined the challenges that Vikwa Telecentre is facing in developing its community. The study employed Sustainable Livelihoods Framework. Quantitative and qualitative were collected from 46 users through questionnaires that were given to them by a means of convenient sampling technique; and from the Telecentre Manager through interviews. Observations were also conducted within the Telecentre. The study revealed that, through its services, Vikwa Telecentre is improving human skills and knowledge, strengthening the social life of the community, increasing the finances of the community and also overcoming geographical barriers by bringing the ICTs close to people. The main challenges that are being experienced at the Telecentre include frequent blackouts, slow Internet connection and high prices for consumables. The study recommends that the Telecentre should buy the generator as an alternative power source and that the Telecentre should change the Internet Service Provider.

Key words: Telecentres; Vikwa Telecentre; Development; Malawi

1. Introduction

It is common knowledge that Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) play a great role in development. Therefore, many developing countries are establishing telecentres which are facilities that provide public access to ICTs for educational, personal, social and economic development (Rothenberg-Aalami & Pal, 2005, 6) in order to develop. The dawn of Telecentres can be traced back to early 1980s when one of the first telecentres was established in Sweden in a small village called Velmdalen with the idea of bringing benefits of ICTs to rural areas and bridge the digital divide. Developing countries like Malawi are also establishing these facilities with the aim of improving socio and economic development because telecentres have the potential of transforming rural areas by improving the lives of rural community dwellers. For example, telecentres, through provision of ICTs like Internet, rural community dwellers access information on different aspects of life e.g. health, education and agriculture (Mukerji, 2010).

Just like in many developing countries, the Government of Malawi through Malawi Communications Regulatory Authority is establish telecentres to accelerate socio economic development. So far, only three community managed telecentres are in operation and many more are yet to be established. The assumption behind telecentre establishment is that rural communities will be developed. However, literature shows that this is not always the case (Soriano 2007). In Malawi, little is known on how telecentres are contributing to rural community development.

This study, therefore, investigated the link between telecentres and rural community development in Malawi focusing on one telecentre, Vikwa Telecentre. The study also examined the challenges that the Telecentre is facing in developing its rural community.

2. Theoretical framework

The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework guided the study. The Framework points out range of capital assets which individuals, households and communities access and use in order to sustain themselves, improve their lives and overcome poverty. The capital assets of the framework include: *social capital* which are social resources upon which people draw in pursuit of livelihoods, such as networks, membership in groups. Telecentres can improve the social capital by providing spaces for discussion and debates, by allowing people form bonds and also fostering communication through the ICTs within the telecentres; *human capital* composing of the skills, knowledge, ability to labor and good health important to the ability to pursue different livelihood strategies; *physical capital* thus basic infrastructures such as transport, shelter, water, energy and communications and the production equipment and means, which enable people to pursue their livelihoods; *financial capital* which are resources which are available to people and which provide them with different livelihoods; and *natural capital* which are natural resources used to generate means of survival for example, land and water. These assets can be supported by an information system like telecentres (Parkinson & Ramírez 2007; Soriano, 2007) hence the choice of the Framework in this study. The study only employed the first four.

3. Literature review

3.1 Telecentre's contribution to rural development

As mentioned above, telecentres are being established to develop rural communities thereby developing countries at large. Literature shows that are indeed telecentres helping in developing rural communities. One of the ways is through human skills development. Through services like Internet access and computer training where people are taught basic computer skills, telecentres are reducing computer illiteracy (Sey, 2009, 10). These computer skills help telecentre users to find jobs. Furthermore, some telecentres improve human skills by providing farmers with information on livestock and poultry (Buhigiro 2012; Lesame 2014). Telecentres are increasing the finances of communities they serve by employing people thereby reducing poverty levels of rural communities (Buhigiro, 2012; Kapondera 2014, 65); and by providing users with information on available jobs which helps users secure jobs (Sey, 2009, 11; Chigona, Lekwane, Westcott & Chigona 2011). Telecentres also provide information on market demand and supply which helps farmers to know the best time to sell their products and better farming practices thereby yielding huge profits (Soriano 2007; Buhigiro 2012). The ICTs in the telecentres help to strengthen the social life of the communities they serve because ICTs helps users communicate with their friends, relatives, peers, colleagues and many more (Rothernberg-Aalami & Pal, 2005, 9; Mbangala & Samzugi, 2014, 15). Interaction at the telecentres when people are accessing telecentre services also leads to stronger social cohesion (Ibrahim & Ainin 2009; Kapondera 2014). Most rural areas in developing countries, for example Malawi, are characterized by poor road networks and limited means of transport (Isaacs, 2007). As such, rural community dwellers always face problems to access ICTs which are mostly located in urban areas. Telecentres help to overcome geographical barriers by bringing ICTs to rural communities (Soriano, 2007).

3.2 Challenges facing telecentres

Telecentres face challenges that affect their contribution to development negatively. Some of the challenges include: frequent power cuts because they rely on one source of electricity (Mtega & Malekani, 2009, 83); lack of appreciation by community members thereby leading to telecentres' low usage (Sey, 2009; Kapondera, 2014); slow Internet speed which frustrates users at the end (Mtega & Malekani, 2009); bureaucratic delays when making decisions (Kapondera 2014); and shortage of opening hours whereby most telecentres are only open during working hours (Gcora, Gopeni, Tuswa, Lwoga & Chigona, 2015).

4. Research design and methodology

The study targeted Vikwa Community Telecentre found in Kasungu District of Malawi. The Telecentre is located 25 kilometres away from Kasungu Town It is located in Mphepo Village, Traditional Authority Wimbe in Kasungu which has a population of 180,000 in the TA. In its catchment area, there are eight secondary schools, over 30 primary schools, three health care centers. It also serves people from outside the catchment area for example people from Kasungu Town. Many people in this area are tobacco farmers. The main services offered include: Internet; printing; photocopy; book binding; lamination; color printing; library; ID design and printing; Airtel money; Kiosk (a tuck shop and soft drinks; Computer Training and Scanning. The Telecentre was opened in May 2010 (Njinga 2016). The choice of the Telecentre was based on the fact that it is the oldest community managed telecentre (Ninga, 2016) and that it is the one that has widest usage base in the country (Banda, 2016). The study targeted users and the Telecentre management. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected from two groups: 46 users through questionnaires given to them by a means of convenient sampling technique; and from the Telecentre management through interviews conducted with the Telecentre Manager. Observations were also conducted within the Telecentre. The researcher adopted a mixed method approach to minimize problems that occur with the use of a single method approach (Onwuezbuzie & Jonson, 2006, 48). The use of qualitative questions enriches data obtained in the quantitative questions. Quantitative data were analysed using excel. On the other hand, qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis techniques. This involved transcribing data, generating codes and organising data relevant to each code to easily map them on the themes, searching for themes, reviewing and finally refining the theme to avoid duplication of the themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

5. Results and discussions

5.1 Characteristics of respondents

This section presents characteristics of 46 users who responded to the questionnaires. This is based on gender, age, income levels, their highest qualification and occupations.

5.1.1 Age and gender

User respondents were asked to indicate their age since literature shows that telecentres are mostly used by youths mostly in their 20s (Kapondera, 2014; Mbangala & Samzugui, 2014). Forty two responded to this question. The age ranged from 11 to 38. The average age of these respondents was found to be 22 and the mode being 19. Observation confirmed this because those who were seen visiting the Telecentre were youths. One can conclude that the Telecentre is

used by youths and confirms the trend in the literature. Results on gender confirms the trend in literature that telecentre usage is dominated by males (Sey 2009; Mbangala & Samzugi 2014) as 29(63%) were found to be males this study.

5.1.2 Highest qualification of Vikwa Telecentre users

Results in Figure 1 below show that the Telecentre is mostly used by those with Malawi School Certificate of Education (MSCE) (31, 67%) obtained after finishing secondary school education. This might be attributed to the fact that most users as indicated is in 5.1.3 below, are students. Though these already have MSCE certificates, majority of these are the ones who already wrote MSCE exams but did not perform well and want to improve their grades as evident in the following comment made by one of the users.

QR42 My life and those of my friends have changed. In this telecentre there is a library and most of people who are repeating their MSCE come here to study because they have good books and good environment for studies.”

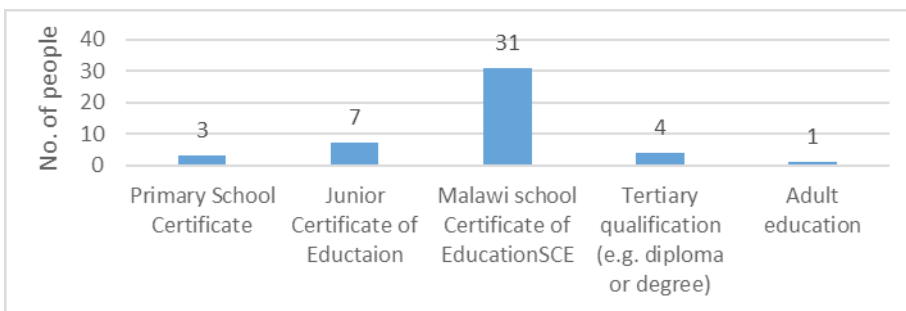


Figure 1: Highest education qualification for Vikwa Telecentre users N=46

5.1.3 Occupation of Vikwa Telecentre users

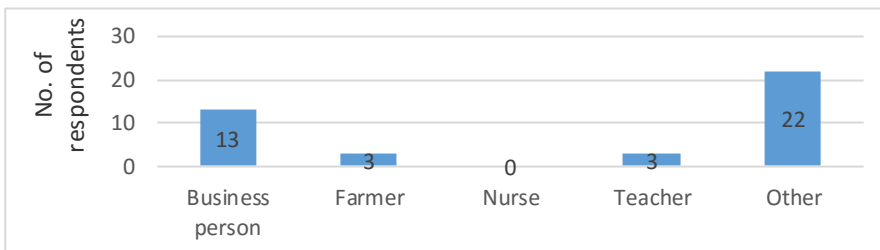


Figure 2 Occupation of Vikwa Telecentre users N=41

From the Figure above, majority 22(53.7%) of the 41 who respondents belonged to the ‘other’ category. All these 22 indicated that they are students. This was followed by 13 (31%) who indicated that they are business personnel. Student’s dominance might be attributed to the fact that the Telecentre has conducive environment reading and that most schools have no libraries in the area as discovered through observation and through interviews with the Telecentre manager. The results agree with Mbangala and Samzugi (2014)’s study which found that telecentre usage is dominated by males.

5.2 Vikwa Telecentre’s contribution to the development of its rural community

5.2.1 Changes experienced since the establishment of Vikwa Telecentre

Users were asked to indicate whether they have experienced changes in their lives since they started using Vikwa Telecentre. All 44 (100%) who responded to this question indicated that their lives have changed. These users were asked to explain how their lives have changed. Table 1 below shows some of the responses. Most of these relate to improving human skills; strengthening social life in the community, increasing financial and also overcoming geographical barriers (physical capital).

Improving skills	<p>QR24 because many pupils from the surrounding schools are performing well</p> <p>QR15 My life now is improved pertaining to performance in class because of studies I undertake here at Telecentre as at first my performance was poor due to lack of place for taking my studies</p> <p>QR9 Because now my performance at school has changed because here in telecentre they have more books most students use them and get knowledge; I am now able to acquire computer skills and I have improved my studies using the library which has made performance of my school improved</p> <p>QR17 My performance in school has increased and I have learnt how to use computers in</p>
Social capita	<p>QR23 “...and that I am able to link up with my friends and family through the use of Internet available in the Telecentre</p> <p>QR40 My life has changed so much because I have known various people through this telecentre</p>
Financial capita	<p>QR37 For communication and business</p> <p>QR4 It has changed in the way that it is easy to communicate with buyer and seller since I am a business person</p>
Physical capital	<p>QR43 Because the money I would have been spending on transport in search of Internet to send messages to my family I save because I just come to the telecentre and that the telecentre is cheaper</p>

Table 1 Themes from selected users’ comments on how their lives have changed

5.2.2 Role of the Vikwa Telecentre in developing its community

The information in this section was obtained through four Likert Scale all deemed important for telecentres in contributing to socio economic development of any rural community. Figure 3 below depicts results on the four Likert Scale statements. These statements relate to contributing to social capital, human capital, financial capital and physical capital. The information in this section compliments the information presented above obtained through open ended question. The analysis of each aspect follows in sub sections below and is based on Sustainable Livelihoods Framework briefly explained in some section above that guided this research.

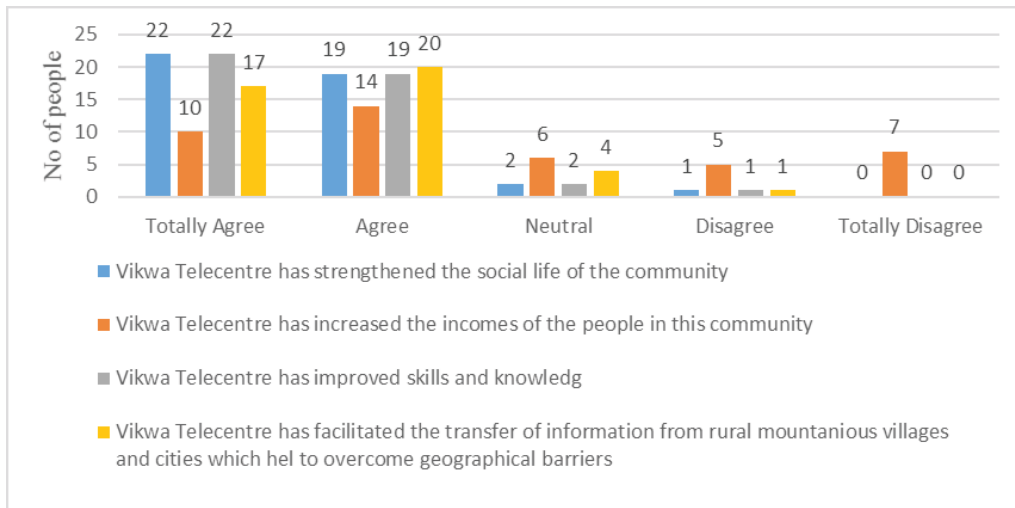


Figure 3 The role of Vikwa Telecentre in developing its community

5.2.2.1 Human capital

This section sought the users’ views on the role of Vikwa Telecentre in improving human capital of the community. As depicted in Figure 3 above, of the 44 who responded, majority, 41 (93%) either agree or totally agree to the statement “*Vikwa Telecentre has improved skills and knowledge*”. It seems the Telecentre is achieving through teaching computer lessons; provision of access to books and reading space which have made users to know a lot of things and improve their performance in school as evident in the following comments made by users who agree to the statement:

QR7 We have acquired computer skills and improved performance in school

QR9 Most people in Kasungu kowns how to use computers and most students gain skills through reading

The Telecentre Manager also agrees that the Telecentre helping students to perform well in class after having access to the library as evident in the extract from the Interview transcription below:

“most students, we are surrounded by schools, have got access to the library. It is affordable to them, it convenient where they can study and do better in their exams.”

Telecentre Manager

5.2.2.2 Social Capital

Of the 44 people who responded to the Likert Scale Statement “*Vikwa Telecentre has strengthened the social life of this community,*” 41(93.1%) either agree or totally agree to it as shown in Figure 3 above. One can perhaps assume that the Telecentre is playing a great role in social cohesion. Just as many studies in literature (for example (Ibrahim & Ainin 2009; Mbangala & Samzugi, 2014, 15) the Telecentre is achieving this by allowing users communicate easily through the provision of Internet. The Telecentre is also helping users them form friendships when they meet at the Telecentre. The following comments by users and the Telecentre Manager support this.

QR15 Because people now are able to be in touch with other people outside the country through the use of Internet

QR24 Many people know one another through the Telecentre

QR43 people form friendships when they are learning in the telecentre

QR45 This is because people from different areas meet and interact here

“It has been very beneficial because they are able to connect with relatives far away”

Telecentre Manager

5.2.2.3 Financial capital

Figure 3 above shows that of the 39 who responded to the Likert Scale Statement “*Vikwa Telecentre has increased the incomes of the people in this community*” majority, 24 (61.5%) either strongly agree or agree with the statement. It seems that the Telecentre is doing this by boosting people’s businesses through the adverts they print at the Telecentre, helping people get jobs after being trained in computer, employing people and helping farmers communicate easily with buyers as evident in the following comments made by users who agree to the statement.

QR4 Because farmers communicate easily with buyers

QR7 Some are working in the telecentre which is helping them to earn income

QR9 By improving farming business because we find more agricultural information

QR28 Because what I was earning before the the Telecentre is now different .

QR31 Those people who have studied here have found their jobs concerning computer.

In his comment, the Telecentre manager also said that the Telecentre is increasing the incomes of the community by enabling them get jobs and opening up their businesses. He also claims that the Telecentre is allowing users communicate with customers. In the extract below, he gives an example of a farmer who, after being helped at the Telecentre to find the market where he could buy a machine for processing organic fertilizer, he found more customers and that he uses the same Telecentre to communicate with his customers.

“..I have been seeing people finding good jobs because they have been trained here in computer basics... Most of people working in Shayona Cementry have been trained here. Ah some people from Chinkhoma Auction Floors have been trained here. And some people who work in Kasungu Town Internet cafes have been trained here also. So, we always train people to establish their own businessYeah we do try to as much as possible to find markets maybe when they want to buy things like vehicles and other machines which can help them process other things. For example, there is a certain man who came to search for machines that can help him in his business. He actually processes organic fertilizer. So we tried as much as possible to search with him the place where he can find and the companies that do such products of machines and then he purchased... he is a business man and he is now known to a lot of places. He is producing a lot of aah organic fertilizer which he sells to Mzuzu Coffee and other places. And when he wants to communicate with the Mzuzu coffee people, he uses the Telecentre to connect with them via emails sending them invoices and whatsoever. He also downloads books so that can help him get up with his business.

5.2.2.4 Physical capital

Figure 3 above shows that of 42 users who responded to the statement “*Vikwa Telecentre has facilitated the transfer of information from rural mountainous villages and cities which help to overcome geographical barriers,*” majority, 37 (88.1%) agree to the statement. This might be attributed to the fact that the Telecentre is allowing users to have access to information and other facilities that were previously found in Kasungu Town only as evident in the following comments made by some users.

QR20 It is because we have access of information easily....It is good because information from other countries or different districts we know instantly

QR24 Because in the past we were spending a lot of money going to town to find things that are now in the Telecentre

The findings in this section agree with many studies in literature (for example, Soriano 2007) that telecentres help to bring the ICTs and information in rural areas.

5.3 Challenges Vikwa Telecentre faces

Observation within the Telecentre and interviews with the Telecentre manager revealed that the Telecentre faces three main challenges: slow Internet connection such that it has stayed for a year without Internet connection despite communicating to the service provider, Malawi Telecommunications Limited to fix the problem; frequent blackouts because it only relies on power supplied by Electricity Supply Corporation of Malawi; and high prices of consumables. These challenges affect the operations of the Telecentre.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

This study examined link between telecentres and rural community development in Malawi by targeting Vikwa Telecentre. From the findings, it can be concluded that the Telecentre is contributing towards the development of its community. The study has revealed that the Telecentre is improving human skills and knowledge through computer lessons and provision of access to books and reading space in the library; strengthening the social life in the community by allowing users communicate easily through the provision of Internet and helping users form friendships when they meet at the Telecentre; and helping to overcome geographical barriers by providing convenient access to ICTs that were only found in town. Though the study has shown that the Telecentre is increasing the finances of the community members, there was lowest agreement level to this by users. Furthermore, the study has revealed that there are a lot of challenges that the Telecentre faces when trying to contribute to rural development. The main challenges include frequent blackouts, poor Internet connection and expensiveness of consumables. Based on these conclusions, the study recommends that the Telecentre should buy the generator as an alternative power source; the Telecentre should change the Internet Service Provider. There is also need to conduct in the whole country on the same topic.

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