

## **THE SCHOOL-BASED MODEL - A RECIPE FOR SUSTAINABLE TELECENTERS**

Since the 1990s when the biggest waves of pilot telecenters were first established in Africa with support from IDRC, UNESCO and ITU, the question of sustainability has remained the key concern. This is not to infer that the utility and development impact of the telecenters have been resolved. However this comes from the backdrop of a seemingly tiring development community that is eager to move on to other pressing development challenges. The good news is that it might not be too long before telecenters get sustainable if lessons from School-Based Telecenters can be replicated.

Building on earlier telecenter models, the World Bank Institute, ICT for Education program and World Links have been working with SchoolNet Uganda to implement 15 School-Based Telecenters (SBTs) in Uganda for the last 2 years. The SBT model, which provides ICT access to school and out-of-school communities, has demonstrated high levels of sustainability and scalability. Two years after, all the 15 SBTs can now pay their running costs and the majority can support expansion planning.

The SBTs are in a network of 15 telecenters with access to high speed VSAT Internet access and an average of 10 computers per site. Every telecenter has an ICT coordinator and a management committee responsible for planning. SchoolNet Uganda as an implementing agency provides partner linkages and backstopping services to the ICT coordinators.

The School-Based Telecenters provide a wide range of services including Internet/e-mail, distance learning, ICT literacy training, ICT for education support, On-line Counseling on Adolescent Sexual Reproductive Health, Youth Entrepreneurship training. The last three services fall within what is categorized as SBT High Impact services. These are services specifically developed for a particular client/user group in a community to respond to a special need. SBT-EFA service is another activity within the high impact service and aims at contributing to achievement of the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of Education For All using ICTs. Over 30 upper primary school teachers in 3 districts are trained at the SBT in ICT literacy and educational content development to create a Basic Education Resource Bank. More than 800 pupils (6-12 years) are expected to directly benefit from the resources.

The School-Based Telecenter is built on the premise of using a school or college as the host of the ICT facilities, taking advantage of the organizational and administrative capacities of the host institution to plan and make services available. The host institution agrees to allow managed access to members of the community and to participate in the planning and management of the telecenter. The host school and the community share the cost of maintenance of the telecenter through user fees and service contracts. For instance at Moroto High SBT the local government and NGOs are members of the Management Committee which has helped to strategically position the role of the SBT in Moroto community.

## **Meeting the sustainability dimensions**

Sustainability is a multi-dimensional concept. Therefore a typical Telecenter would be faced with sustainability questions on several dimensions including; sustainability of infrastructure, services and relevancy, human resources and finances (Mayanja, 2003). The school-based Telecenter model fares very well against key sustainability dimensions:

***Sustainability of infrastructure and equipment*** – the SBT Model takes full advantage of the host institution to negotiate better price offers and service contracts. In the case of the SBT pilot, the administrative system has been useful in ensuring good management and maintenance of equipment, which is profiled along side the regular inventory of the institution. For the case of Kigezi High SBT, the electrician of the school has been detailed to support the SBT in all electrical services.

***Sustainability of services and service relevancy*** – Through a strong broad management committee, the SBT Model has capacity to conduct user surveys and create custom services. The host institutions have attracted strategic partnerships and proposals for services, as was the case for Makerere University Distance Education department that proposed to use 3 of the SBTs as centers for the departments' ICT supported distance education program. This is also associated with the confidence and credibility that the host institution brings to the telecenter that might also be reflected in its services.

***Sustainability of human resources*** – A stable host institution would have developed human resource policies and guidelines. The SBT Model has extensively used, with additional training, regular staff of the host institutions. The main difficulty faced by Community Telecenters is institutional management deficiencies. The model demonstrates that it is more profitable to host telecenters in an existing institution – hospital, school, community center to reduce the pressure of developing initial administrative procedures. This frees up SBT useful resources to implementing the core business – ICT for development.

Management and business development training for the staff is very critical. The SBT telecenters benefited from targeted technical, pedagogical and business planning and management throughout the 2 years of the SBT pilot project and management teams increasingly showed better adaptability to their respective tasks. The teams also got a lot of support from the administrative structure of the host schools and other schools from the network through our continuous learning approach to management.

***Financial sustainability*** - More than half of the SBTs now operate a separate telecenter account to streamline management of funds. Within the SBT model, host schools make the first clients and contribute finances in advance of use of services. Students have been charged an equivalent of US \$ 2 per year towards the running of the SBT thereby qualifying to enjoy priority of access. A typical host school has 800-1000 students. It is very important for a Telecenter to have a sustained revenue collection however small it could be, to reduce financial pressure and ensure that at least the core services would be available all the time. Additional revenue is collected from the community on a pay-per-use basis.

Nevertheless, the SBT model needs to improve in service outreach. The SBTs could be able to reach more user groups if management teams can shed off their core non-business approach to service delivery. Traditionally schools and colleges in Uganda are concerned with teaching and learning which rarely requires the school administration to mount proactive marketing campaigns to get students. To increase the relevancy of telecenters to development, services and content creation have to be a continuous process as the needs and opportunities within the community shift with time. The SBT model introduces the teachers to market research and service development, which is fairly a new pre-occupation. Development groups that intend to replicate the model therefore need to address this attitude problem ahead of time through training.

For more information and inquiries about the SBT project visit our website <http://www.schooltelecenters.org> or contact the Task Manager Robert Hawkins at the World Bank Institute [rhawkins@worldbank.org](mailto:rhawkins@worldbank.org)

Meddie Mayanja  
ICT Community Development Specialist  
World Bank Institute  
[mayanja@ugabytes.org](mailto:mayanja@ugabytes.org) / [mayanja@hotmail.com](mailto:mayanja@hotmail.com)