

## Rural ICT access: Information Centers, CMCs and CLICs, a trigger for rural connectivity

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Local Information and Communication Centers (CLIC according to its French acronym) and Multi Media Community Centers (CMC) have been implemented in some information centers. They help communities deprived of quality communication infrastructure to have access to new technologies. This enables people to improve their life conditions as thanks to these technologies they are now able to obtain valuable information concerning the main sectors of development: health, education, agriculture...

Since 2000, the President Alpha Oumar KONARE has been expressing a wish to have all the parishes in Mali connected to the Internet. After the International Meeting Bamako 2000, where the issue of discussion was - Internet: gateways to Development, several partners committed themselves to making the necessary efforts to have that dream come true. These partners were, among others, the International Institute for Communication and Development (IICD), World Space, USAID, UNESCO, etc.

As far as Internet access is concerned, the rural areas of the country are very backward if compared with Bamako, the capital city of Mali. This is the reason why these rural areas are a target for the vulgarization of the Internet in Mali. During the last years, several organizations such as USAID, UNESCO and IICD have implemented different strategies in this area. According to the partners these initiatives have resulted in the creation of Information Centers, of Multimedia Community Centers (CMCs) and of Local Information and Communication Centers (CLICs)

Thanks to the support of Swiss cooperation, UNESCO has launched a project to set up 50 Multimedia community Centers in Mali. Up to now, 22 of these centers are already operational. These CMCs link up community radios and new information and communication technologies (ICTs).

Since 2003, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has been providing financial support to 13 CLICs in the towns of Kidal, Gao, Bandiagara, Mopti, Djenné, Macina, Ségou and others.

The International Institute for Communication and Development (IICD) has financed three pilot structures in Fana, Koulikoro and Kita.

The implementation of these structures raises a difficult question:

"How can rural communities take advantage of ICTs?"

According to Mr. Birama Diallo, Technical Coordinator of the CMCs at the UNESCO headquarter in Bamako, "Multimedia Community Centers are aimed at training and informing the farmers by means of the radio. And above all, the Centers try to propose and increase the standing of local contents"

The CLIC project is managed by Consulting Committees issued from the local communities themselves. This project is aimed as well at making access points to new technologies available for local communities in Mali, in order to help people improve their standards of living. And such an improvement will be obtained through the availability of information related to health, good governance, education and sustainable economic development.



"Thanks to these CLICs people in the communities can obtain access not only to Internet for all kinds of consultations but also for the treatment of photographs, for the making of wedding invitations and for acquiring computer literacy..." says happily Mrs. Yattara Oumou Sow, manager of the CLIC "Doni So" that means The hut of knowledge in the local language, at Ouéléssébougou, a small town situated at 60 km from Bamako.

"Today, we are very satisfied as we have noticed that farmers and small agricultural producers visit the center more and more. They come here looking for information concerning their activities, in particular they have expressed a lot of interest about issues such as cattle fattening, composting and market gardening" assured Mrs. Yattara.

The executive manager of the piloting committee, Mr. Salikou Berthé, is very happy:

"ever since the launching of this CLIC in May 2004, we have had 2254 clients coming from 42 villages. Moreover, we have trained 269 people that are now able to use word processors, to surf the net and to make use of different Internet search tools" he added.

The young Bouba Diaby, who has recently been accepted to follow studies for a bachelor's degree, has decided to take up a two months training at the CLIC, while he waits for the resumption of the courses at the university.

"I am very satisfied with the services I am getting from the CLIC. I have even opened my own e-mailbox. I am now able to share messages and information with my friends" he affirms.

## Updated farmers thanks to the ICTs

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According to Salikou Berthé, farmers can take a lot of profit from the radio and the CLICs. "these gadgets that have been brought here by white men have enabled us to improve our production techniques" added in his turn, Amadou Traoré, an old farmer at Ouéléssébougou.

The farmers in the area are very satisfied with the services they get from the center. As an evidence of their gratitude, they have chosen the CLIC head office to set up the poultry farmers office.

At Sikasso, third region at the south of Mali, the manager of the KénéDougou radio, Daouda Mariko, can't stop to say good things about the impact of ICTs on the populations.

"The radio obtains an important part of its information from the Internet and this is possible thanks to the CMC. We are now able to make a lot of information available for the agricultural producers. And this is very valuable information about composting techniques, about market gardening, about the drying and preservation of local products" he explained.

In rural environments, not only the farmers take advantage of the centers. At the information center Filaniso at Fana, its manager, Adama Soumaré, reveals that among its clients, besides students and teachers, also marabouts, a kind of Muslim priests, come discretely to the center to make photocopies of their manuscripts or to make online consultations to their clients abroad.

Djenné is a historic crossroads and tourist village in the region of Mopti. There, the CLIC Pinal, (the awakening in national language Peulh), helps the cultural promotion of the town. Tour guides, tourists and travel agencies have adopted ICTs as a tool for their work. According to the manager Mr. Lévy Dougnon, the center has offered its services to more or less 5889 clients between 2004 and 2006, and it has provided training to 1313 people. In terms of earnings, the center has produced during the same period around 8 millions FCFA. All these facts made the center gain a well deserved good reputation and it was awarded the title of best CLIC in 2006.

## Difficulties

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Among others, the problems these centers have to face are connectivity costs, which are far too high for a poor quality connection. Also, voltage fluctuations, lack of maintenance of the equipments, an outdated telephone network and an absolute lack of training of the actors involved.

At Ouéléssébougou, just as in many other local communities, the crucial problem remains the cost of consultations that is of 1000 FCFA for an hour of Internet access, an amount that is an obstacle impossible to overcome for most of the members of the community.

Each one of the CLICs is equipped with computers, printers and a kit formed by a video cam, a video tape recorder with a DVD drive used to view the contents and software for the making of wedding invitations, birthday cards, leaflets and calendars...

The centers are managed by local consulting committees who have the mission of supervising the managers.

In rural environments, the arrival of these CLICs is perceived by many observers as a real trigger for changes, as an authentic opening up to the exterior, to the outside world.

And this raises another obstacle as it to find the way of increasing the standing of local content. According to Birama Diallo from UNESCO, the obstacle addressed is to propose and to increase the value or local contents on the Internet...through CLICs and CMCs”.

To find an appropriate solution for this problem could take a lot of time. The promoters are well aware of this and so they have grouped themselves into an association under cover of a workshop organized by UNESCO in September 2006.

This initiative is supported by institutions like the IICD. As for the State, the government has implemented, in collaboration with its partners, a National Center of ICT Resources whose mission will be to take care of the after project phase of the different initiatives.

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www.iConnect-online.org is a knowledge sharing platform for Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in sustainable development. iConnect draws content from its partners, links resources and expertise and encourages collaboration. For the International Institute for Communication and Development (IICD), the host of iConnect, this is a way to share experiences, lessons learned and ideas, and interact with communities and people with an interest in development and the applications of ICTs. These experiences can lead to a better understanding of the actual benefits of ICTs for Development (ICT4D). The core of iConnect will be a series of locally written articles on the impact and the use of ICTs for development. The articles have a strong focus on fact finding; objective information on ICT4D practices from a southern perspective; Southern content written by Southern people. i4d is the iConnect partner for Asia, and ECA is the iConnect partner for Africa, disseminating the articles to their public.

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