

# Crossing the Digital Divide and Putting ICT to Work to Improve People's Lives

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## INTRODUCTION

Information and communications technology (ICT) is a key weapon in the war against world poverty. When used effectively, it offers huge potential to empower people in developing countries to overcome development obstacles, address the most important social problems they face, and strengthen communities, democratic institutions, a free press, and local economies. But, a “digital divide” separates those who can access and use ICT to gain these benefits, and those who do not have access to technology or cannot use it for one reason or another.

Governments can play a fundamental role in creating an environment that will foster technology use and encourage investment in ICT infrastructure, development, and a skilled workforce. Government action is also important in spreading the benefits of technology throughout society, and governments have the power and mandate to balance the needs of their citizens for long-term economic growth and social prosperity. However, translating a vision into practical steps that fit the local context is not a simple matter. Leaders need to have a realistic appreciation for what ICT can—and cannot—do for their countries and communities, and they must lead effectively and bolster public confidence in the path they take.

The digital divide is a complex problem, presenting both practical and policy challenges. And it is apparent that solutions, which work in developed countries, cannot simply be transplanted to developing country environments: solutions must be based on an understanding of local needs and conditions.

## GOVERNMENT POLICY CAN HINDER EFFORTS TO TACKLE DIGITAL DIVIDES

A range of projects are underway in developing countries to integrate ICT in a number of critical areas, including education, healthcare, government, trade, and small business support. However, these projects frequently encounter obstacles that directly or indirectly relate to the

country's policy environment. One example involves projects that rely on technology or infrastructure use that is limited by current laws or regulations, such as laws that control or ban the use of satellite, wireless, or Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) technologies. Another example involves ICT projects that are hindered by a general law or regulation, such as fiscal or customs policies that limit cross-border trade in computing technologies. Another involves projects working in a particular subject area (such as healthcare) where current laws or regulations do not cover ICT use (such as privacy and data protection laws governing the handling of electronic health data).

To cross the digital divide and put ICT to effective use to improve people's lives, countries and communities must be “e-ready” in terms of infrastructure, access to ICT, training, and a legal and regulatory framework that will foster ICT use. If the digital divide is to be narrowed, these issues must be addressed in a coherent, achievable strategy that is tailored to meet local needs.

Many national leaders have embraced ICT and are ready to promote a legal and regulatory environment that will enable its widespread use. However, at the working level, many government officials do not understand the implications of existing policies that may hinder ICT use, nor the changes they need to create a more favourable environment. Although the development aid industry generates a tremendous volume of reports, advice, and analysis aimed at helping developing countries in the policy area, developing country governments frequently report that such recommendations do not show sufficient understanding of local needs and conditions. Some governments have subscribed to e-strategies promulgated by outsiders, but at a practical level they lack the political will to drive change because they do not enjoy widespread public support for an ICT-focused approach. Often this is because government officials fail to engage stakeholders in framing the e-strategies, so they do not have public buy-in for their long-term plans. In some cases the government has partnered with the country's business and civil society sectors to promote ICT-enabled development at the ground level, but the various stakeholder groups lack the experience and resources to give effective input.

## **CITY OF CAPE TOWN: AN EXAMPLE OF BEST PRACTICE AT CITY LEVEL**

Many of the policy issues related to ICT use are at the national level and include issues such as legal and regulatory frameworks and macro-economic policies. But there are other issues where city governments have a key role to play.

The City of Cape Town is an example of a local government committed to putting ICT to work for social and economic development, and driving the changes necessary to ensure ICT is used effectively. Cape Town's leaders have recognised that ICT is a powerful tool for transforming the way that people do business, communicate with each other, access information and, if used effectively, can help the City achieve its goals.

In January 2002, the City Council commissioned *Bridges.org* to undertake a pioneering assessment of the digital divide in Cape Town, in order to get a view of where its citizens, communities, and organisations stood in terms of current ICT use and the potential benefits of ICT use in the City. The study examined the access, use, and need for ICT in Cape Town, with a special focus on the millions of people who live in disadvantaged communities within the greater metropolitan area. The study helped City leaders to measure ICT integration, plan for expansion, focus their internal efforts, and to identify areas where external support was required. The study also provided benchmarks for external comparison and gauging internal progress. Finally, the study served as a valuable part of a greater process to bring a wide range of stakeholders into the discussion about ICT and development in Cape Town.

National-level assessments of this nature commonly study e-readiness by compiling information from government agencies, big companies, business associations, and other secondary sources. This study started with such an approach. However, it then went further to collect direct input from communities, small businesses, and community organisations, to gauge the need for ICT service in the community and depict the real-life constraints—and opportunities—that people and institutions face as they work to harness ICT for local benefit.

At the same time, the study assessed the interest and capacity of the City's communities, businesses, academic institutions, and government agencies to help 'bridge the divide'. Such an approach allowed this study to look ahead to the social appropriation of ICT for local benefit, so that practical options and recommendations could be framed to guide the City Council as it developed its own plans. Further, the processes used in the study helped the City better connect with its people and to gain widespread support for the e-strategies the process developed.

As a result, several public and private sector initiatives commenced in Cape Town with the related goals of (1) fostering the budding ICT sector and using ICT as an enabler for broader economic growth, and (2) tackling the problems of the "digital divide" to maximise digital inclusion. Perhaps the most notable example was the City of Cape Town's Smart City Strategy, which won the African ICT Achievers Award for e-Government in 2002. This strategy aimed to put ICT to work in ways that would enable the government to transform itself to deliver more effective and efficient service to citizens. It also aimed to empower citizens to deal more effectively with the growing digital economy. The city envisions "a smart city populated by informed people, connected to the world and each other by the technology of the information age."

## **ABOUT BRIDGES.ORG**

*Bridges.org* (<http://www.bridges.org>) is an international non-profit organisation based in South Africa with a mission to promote the effective use of ICT in developing countries to improve people's lives. One area of focus is in informing policy decisions that affect people's access to and use of ICT. *Bridges.org* also conducts technology research and provides social consulting services to ground level projects using ICT, helping with project planning and evaluation and relaying lessons learned. It brings an entrepreneurial attitude to its social mission, and is committed to working with, instead of against, government agencies and the business community.

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