

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2008

Focus on access to infrastructure



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CONGO, REPUBLIC OF

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Introduction

As the whole world moves towards an information society, the Republic of Congo finds itself a slow starter. Having taken note of the important role that information and communications technologies (ICTs) play, the country is trying its best to organise itself in order to catch up, and, with difficulty, to reduce the digital divide that has grown over the years.

Estimated at more than three million inhabitants, the Congolese population is 51% female and 49% male. It is concentrated in the southern part of the country (more than 80%), where most people live in urban areas (66%). The average population density for the whole country is around 8.4 inhabitants per square kilometre.

The Republic of Congo is in large part covered by forests (60% of the country's territory) interspersed with savannas. It has a road network of 12,745 kilometres, and at least 10% of roads are paved. The Congo-Océan railroad (510 kilometres), completed in 1934, needs to be repaired. The principal airports are found in Brazzaville (Maya-Maya), the political capital, and Pointe-Noire (Antonio Agostino Neto), the economic capital, and the principal ports in Brazzaville (a river port) and Pointe-Noire on the Atlantic.

The Republic of Congo's economic activity is dominated by the petroleum sector. The share of the country's gross domestic product (GDP) contributed by crude oil production increased from 53.6% in 2002 to 70.4% in 2006. Transport and telecommunications contribute from 4% (in 2006) up to 5.1% of GDP.

The Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications, which is responsible for new technologies, worked on a national ICT strategy at the end of 2004, with the support of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). However, it was never adopted by the Council of Ministers, and as a result has become a dead document.

This national strategy has served as one of the information sources for this report, which is also informed by interviews with stakeholders in the ICT sector.

National ICT policy development

The national ICT policy formulated in 2004 aimed to reduce poverty and introduce the Congolese population to the information society era. To do this, several objectives were established:

- To accelerate the development of a viable and sustainable economic network which will contribute to job creation

- To support ICT access for populations living in cities and rural and disadvantaged areas
- To secure ICT infrastructure
- To define a legal and regulatory framework adapted to ICTs
- To develop ICT capacities and transform the educational system by means of ICTs
- To promote good governance by utilising ICTs.

However, implementation of the policy has not been easy. Over the last four years there have been three changes of ministers of postal services and telecommunications in charge of new technologies. At the same time, few institutions and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the Republic of Congo are involved in ICT policy and the ICT sector. Those that are involved work to popularise ICTs, to develop services by means of ICTs, and to educate the public about using ICTs for community development.

Civil society was involved in national discussions during the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) preparatory process in the Republic of Congo, but only one women's organisation contributed to the discussions. For some women's organisations, ICT policy is a technical area reserved to men, and they prefer to advocate for other causes.

Moreover, funding for work on ICTs is scarce for civil society organisations, as ICTs are not seen as a priority for development. Donors are keener to fund projects and programmes related to HIV/AIDS, peace-building and rural development.

Access to infrastructure

Landline telephones

The end of the National Office of Postal Services and Telecommunications (ONPT), the state-run monopoly operator, resulted in the creation of two public entities: SOPECO for postal services, and SOTELCO for telecommunications.

However, the telecommunications infrastructure inherited by SOTELCO was old, and consisted only of landline telephone services for the two main cities in the Republic of Congo, namely Brazzaville and Pointe-Noire. Practically all landlines are used by private companies, state administration, and in public call centres. The use of landline telephones disappeared from Congolese homes following the destruction of infrastructure during the socio-political troubles which plagued the country in the 1990s.

Mobile telephones

Celitel Congo was created in 1999. It was the first operator of the global system for mobile (GSM) network in the Republic of Congo. By 2008 it connected 760 cities and towns, and plans to connect 213 more locations by the end of 2008. Celitel has more than a million subscribers, out of the country's three million inhabitants.

MTN Congo, another mobile telephone company, was born after it bought and rebranded Libertis Telecom in 2005. Libertis Telecom had been operating in the country for six years. In seven years the company's capital stock increased from USD 20,000 to USD 10 million today. Investments by MTN in the Republic of Congo increased from USD 52 million in 2005 to close to USD 100 million in 2007. The investments are, in large part, concentrated on strengthening quality and the acquisition of new sites throughout the country. MTN presently covers more than 152 locations (towns and villages). It has already attracted some 500,000 subscribers.

Warid Congo is the third mobile telephone operator in the country. In 2006 it signed a partnership agreement with SOTELCO and began advertising its products and services in March 2008. Warid Congo plans to cover 44 cities and locations in the Republic of Congo within the next two years. For the moment, only Brazzaville, Pointe-Noire, Oyo, Ollombo and Dolisie are connected.

Internet access

Several internet service providers (ISPs) operate in the Republic of Congo: DRTVnet, A-Link, AMC Télécom, Dell Ofis, MTI and AlTech Congo. A growing number of cybercafés and telecentres operate in the main cities, namely Brazzaville, Pointe-Noire, Dolisie, Owando, Nkayi, Ouesso, Sibiti and Kinkala. However, the total number of cybercafés and telecentres is still low. While mobile telephone companies offer internet services for mobile phones and laptops, internet access in general is still limited to cities, and rural areas have almost no access.

Access should be boosted by the investment of USD 15 million in a pilot project using fibre-optic cables, which will be carried out in 2010.

Despite the noticeable presence of companies selling ICT products and consumer electronics, computers and other multimedia information technology (IT) equipment remain expensive. A recently formed community telecentres network has plans to advocate for affordable access to the internet and ICTs. The cost of internet subscriptions remains very high and out of reach for most Congolese citizens, ranging from USD 200 to USD 700 per month.

Use of ICTs

Access to ICTs has significantly changed Congolese society. The democratic era has changed the lifestyles of citizens and led to the liberalisation of the telecommunications sector.

Currently, the country has more than one million mobile phone users. Cities that were once isolated and inaccessible are no longer so, thanks to mobile phones.

Companies that use ICTs are improving their performance. As a result of ICTs, many projects are being implemented. The banking sector is one of those which have experienced a significant change from the use of ICTs. Customers' payments are no longer performed manually. This not only reduces the waiting time for customers, but also improves working and living conditions of bank agents. Today, cards for automated teller machines (ATMs) allow users to carry out banking operations at any time.

The Congolese administration, including security services and public policing, have brought out computerised identity cards and biometric passports. The time for obtaining these identity cards has been significantly reduced from several months to a few weeks, or even days.

Several innovative services and jobs were also created through ICTs. These include the development of agencies for fund transfers through major localities of the country, and express parcel delivery services. In just five minutes, one can transfer funds to a family member or business partner located in most centres in the country. The transfer is automatic and is done using a phone and a computer.

ICT-related companies, mainly GSM mobile companies, are now amongst the biggest employers in the Republic of Congo. Formal and informal enterprises, including travel agencies, have sprung up as a direct and indirect result of mobile operators.

Access to the internet, although not at high speed and still quite expensive, facilitates the exchange of information and creates a climate of openness. It is now possible to have access to any kind of information on companies and services (e.g., products, special offers, flight schedules, night-time pharmacy hours, doctors, hotels, and restaurants).

ICTs have revolutionised the broadcast world of radio and television. For instance, computers enable TV and radio programmes to be prescheduled and broadcast. ICTs are also in the service of health, as in the case of a free line set up for information on HIV/AIDS by MTN and the National AIDS Committee.

Multimedia and digital technology has revolutionised the habits of the Congolese population. Mobile phones and digital cameras now film the events of society. Digital photos are developed quickly. Before, the process was quite long and involved expensive equipment and training.

ICTs have also made a considerable contribution to the revision of the electoral register and of state administration. In education, ICTs have proven themselves with the introduction of bar codes for examinations. Results for secondary schools and higher education institutions are now published on the internet. In the past, it could take several weeks, or even months, for students to access their results, especially for students living in rural areas.

Several other projects using ICTs are being implemented or planned. These include the incorporation of ICTs in

immigration control and the computerisation of the port authority. However, the growing use of ICTs is not without its consequences, which include a resurgence of fraud at all levels, access to pornography on television and the internet, and cyber scams.

Capacity development

ICTs are not yet part of the national education curriculum. In some schools there are no computers for learners. Only the national university, Marien Ngouabi University in Brazzaville, has faculties or departments that have integrated computer training modules into their course work. The digital campus at the university, Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie (AUF), offers distance learning and provides both students and teachers with easy access to the internet – and this at reduced rates. There is also a distance-learning programme affiliated to Cisco in the faculty of sciences.

The Ministry of Technical and Vocational Education started a new course on computer science at a technical high school in Brazzaville two years ago. The aim was to increase the number of students with ICT skills. But, for the moment, students enrolled in this course do not have the opportunity to undertake undergraduate studies in computer science, as it is not offered at Marien Ngouabi University.

For a long time, students from the Republic of Congo have travelled abroad to study computer science at the postgraduate level. Most of them enrol in universities and colleges in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, France and in West African countries. This results in a brain drain, as most of them do not return, since employment is also a challenge.

Several NGOs, such as AZUR Développement, the IT Professionals Association (AIP), the Committee for the Promotion of Information Technologies in Congo (COPTIC), and the Congo Community Telecentres Network, provide access to computer equipment and training in basic computer skills. There are also several schools and private centres across the country training senior technicians in the field of IT, including the maintenance of networks and computer systems.

The mobile phone companies train their staff. Celtel Congo's training budget for 2007 stood at USD 1,578,000. In 2008, it spent USD 1,450,000 on training, apart from USD 60,000 spent by the group for the training of top management, making the total sum of one billion CFA francs devoted to the training.

State-owned enterprises such as the Congolese Informatics Office provide training and offer ICT-related services.

There are gender differences in ICT education. Men tend to study in technical fields, such as maintenance and networks, and are developers. Women engage more in training in basic computer skills. It is also a challenge for the very few women who study technical courses to find employment: most of them end up as secretaries.

Action steps

Being a developing country, the Republic of Congo is late in the appropriation of ICTs for development. Other African countries have successfully committed themselves to the promotion of ICTs, and the implementation of national strategies for the development of ICTs. Having recognised the role that they can play in economic and social development, the government should invest more and make access to affordable ICTs for the Congolese one of its priorities. In addition, there should be a gender-sensitive ICT policy. International organisations could support civil society organisations in order to achieve this.

The issue of electricity and roads is acute in the Republic of Congo. Because of this, ICT development must go along with the development of basic infrastructure such as roads and electricity, as well as training; otherwise all efforts will amount to little. The cost of access, including hardware and internet connectivity, must come down as well.

An appropriate legal framework is also essential to achieve these goals, as is the involvement of government at the highest level, and the involvement of civil society. ■

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GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2008 is the second in a series of yearly reports critically covering the state of the information society from the perspectives of civil society organisations across the world.

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH or **GISWatch** has three interrelated goals:

- **Surveying** the state of information and communication technology (ICT) policy at the local and global levels
- **Encouraging** critical debate
- **Strengthening** networking and advocacy for a just, inclusive information society.

Each year the report focuses on a particular theme. **GISWatch 2008** *focuses on access to infrastructure* and includes several thematic reports dealing with key access issues, an analysis of where global institutions stand on the access debate, a report looking at the state of indicators and access, six regional reports and 38 country reports.

GISWatch 2008 is a joint initiative of the Association for Progressive Communications (APC), the Humanist Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries (Hivos) and the Third World Institute (ITeM).

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