Florence Etta and Sheila Parvyn-Wamahiu, 2003. *Information and Communication Technologies for Development in Africa: The Experience with Community Telecentres*. Ottawa: CODESRIA and IDRC. Foreword, Preface, Acknowledgements, Executive Summary, Table, Figures, Appendices, Bibliography, xxx + 193.

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Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) are relatively recent phenomena in Africa. The huge differences in access to and utilisation of ICTs in Africa have been a cause of much concern. The difference in access and utilisation of ICTs has been dubbed the digital divide. In a bid to bridge the gap, many initiatives have been started. One such initiative is the development of telecentres. The book under review *Information and Communication Technologies for Development in Africa: The Experience with Community Telecentres* focuses on ICTs in Africa.

This book is in a series of three volumes dealing with ICTs in Africa. The others are Volume 1: *Information and Communication Technologies for Development in Africa: Opportunities and Challenges for Community Development* edited by Ramata Molo Thioune and Volume 2: *Information and Communication Technologies for Development in Africa: Networking Institutions of Learning – SchoolNet* edited by Tina James.

In volume two, Etta and Parvyn-Wamahiu evaluate ICTs with specific attention to experiences with community telecentres in selected countries in Africa as an initiative intended to propel Africa into Information Revolution. It presents findings of country case studies that examined the setting, operations and effects of community telecentres. The volume, therefore, contains results of evaluation research highlighting the relationship between ICTs and development. The research was carried out in five African countries—Mali, Mozambique, Uganda, South Africa and Senegal.

The study utilised methodology that blends qualitative and quantitative approaches. This is enriched with a strong participatory approach (telecentre owners, employees and users), which facilitates ownership and subsequent ploughing back of the results for improvement of management of telecentres.

The book consists of a foreword, preface, executive summary and eight chapters. The foreword by Adebayo Olukoshi (executive secretary of CODESRIA) and Maureen O'Neil (the president of IDRC) which under-

lines that ICTs engender both fear and hope. The world is awakened to 'the real possibility of global information divide whose contours would mirror those of economic prosperity' and 'the potential of information communication technologies (ICTs) to make real changes in ensuring prosperity' (p. xii).

The executive summary presents the contents of the book in a nutshell. This section shows that the information and knowledge age characterised by 'economic globalisation and the new information communication technologies (ICTs) is making inroads in Africa through community telecentres'. The primary goal of a telecentre is the public provision of tools and skills to enhance communication and the sharing of information. (p. xvii). The telecentre is a pioneer movement intended to address disparities in access to ICTs in Africa. The telecentre is 'one answer to the prevailing condition of uneven and unequal access to information and communication technologies in rural and remote areas' (p. xviii). A captivating analogy summarizes the place and essence of the telecentre: 'The telecentre is to information what the school is to education and the hospital or clinic to health and well-being' (p. xxvi).

Chapter one underlines the importance of Africa joining the information society in the new information world order. At the same time the authors caution that 'the new information and knowledge society, rather than close the development and poverty gap, might in fact aggravate it, thereby reducing dividends of global capitalism' (p. 1). In addition, this chapter outlines the key research issues, research questions, methodology and definition of key concepts such as 'information technology', 'information communication technologies' and 'telecentres'.

Chapter two extends the issues addressed in chapter one and places the ICTs in Africa in the context of globalisation showing the disparities in the telecommunication sector. The chapter narrows down to discussion of the concept of telecentre in the African context.

Chapter three to seven presents specific findings from multi-country studies of telecentres. Telecentres in Mali (chapter three), Mozambique (chapter four), Uganda (chapter five), South Africa (chapter six) and Senegal (chapter seven). The key findings show that the telecentres have brought a large number of people in Africa into direct contact with ICTs. However, taking into account the total population, the number of people having access to ICTs is still very small. In all the countries, it is clear that age, sex, education levels and socio-economic status influenced telecentre use. A striking finding which cuts across the five countries is the pronounced gender differences in the utilisation of ICTs. By far women lag

behind in the utilisation of ICTs. The country case studies go beyond evaluation of telecentres to provide useful insights into the status of ICTs.

In all the country case studies, key impediments to the use of telecentres are identified. The major ones include high cost of equipment, mainte-nance and supplies, which result in high cost of services. Poor manage-ment and locational factors also featured prominently as contributing to the poor state of telecentre services.

Perhaps one of the most valuable aspects of the volume which comes in these chapters is not only the identification of the impediments to telecentres but also the recommendations made which could be used to improve the operations of telecentres. The impediments need to be ad-dressed for the telecentre movement to 'grow, spread and have the ex-pected or desired effects'. Although the authors recommend that the spread of ICTs should be grounded on social change theory, it does not specify the appropriate theory of social change, and which one.

The volume concludes with a befitting question: Whither community telecentres? To this end, the African continent must concentrate on five critical Cs: Connectivity, Content, Capacity, Costs and Conceptual frame-work (p. 167). Of the five Cs, the need for a conceptual framework is of over-arching importance 'because without a framework anchored in the realities and genuine needs of the continent, any strategies developed to drive the spread and adoption of ICTs will fail' (p. 167).

In the information age and in information poor Africa, the volume makes important contribution to the understanding of penetration of ICTs in Africa. The identification of problem areas and numerous recommendations for improvement of telecentres makes this volume of immense value to all people involved in the promotion of ICTs in Africa. If the ever-widening digital gap is to be removed or at least reduced, the volume provides valuable hints on promotion of utilisation of ICTs in Africa.