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The Impact of Stakeholder Management on the Sense of Ownership in Telecenter Projects: the Case of Malawi

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Abstract. Telecenters are meant to provide public access to information and communication technology (ICT) services to contribute to the development of the masses. The government of Malawi is implementing a telecenter project to provide ICT services to rural areas. However, most of the telecenters are not meeting the expected goals. The aim of this study was to explore how telecenter projects in rural areas are conceptualised and implemented. The study sought to understand who was involved in the project and how that influenced the sense of ownership of the telecenters. The research used the Stakeholder Theory as a theoretical framework. It was found that the telecenters faced challenges in the management of stakeholders. Although the projects identified stakeholders at the initiation of the project, they failed to keep the stakeholders engaged in the later phases of the project. This led to a low sense of ownership. Due to these occurrences, the telecenter projects have worked in isolation of the key stakeholders.

Keywords: telecenter, Stakeholder Analysis, sense of ownership, rural community, Malawi

1 Introduction

Despite the opportunities which Information Communication Technology (ICT) bring to communities, diffusion of ICTs in rural areas remains slow (ITU, 2010). Different governments and organisations are using different approaches to connect rural villages and communities. One such approach is the establishments of telecenters. It is hoped that telecenters may improve the livelihood of the rural communities.

The government of Malawi is implementing the ICT for Sustainable Rural Development Project (ISRDP) which seeks to provide ICT services to the rural areas. By 2012, the government, through the Malawi Communications Regulatory Authority (MACRA), had established about 50 telecenters across the country (MACRA, 2012). The performance of these telecenters has been poor and has not met expected goals. The telecenters are performing poorly due to various factors such as lack of awareness, location, staff competence and the model.

Telecenters continue to face challenges of sustainability. One of the factors which affects sustainability of telecenters is lack of meaningful stakeholder engagement and relationship in formulating and running such projects (Bailur 2006; Perrini & Tencati,

2006). There is, therefore, a need to explore factors which affect stakeholder engagement in telecenter projects. Many studies stress the need for participation of the local community to foster activities such as assessment of information needs, planning and operations (Bailur, 2006; Roman & Colle, 2002).

Using a case study approach, we explored how stakeholder management was conducted in a telecenter project in Malawi and how that affected the sense of ownership of the project. The study collected data through semi-structured interviews from various stakeholders, focus groups, documents analysis and observation. The results of the study would provide useful guidance both to telecenters project managers and ICT policymakers on ways to improve the sustainability of telecenters.

2 Study Setting: Malawi

Malawi is a small country with a population of about 14.84 million. About 84.7% of the population live in the rural areas (NSO, 2008). Malawi is divided into 29 local government administrative districts; a District Commissioner heads each local District Assembly. The district is divided into traditional chieftainships called Traditional Authorities, which are further divided into villages. The district development planning system for the government of Malawi provides guidelines on how the projects can be implemented in the districts. The guidelines emphasise the approach to be district-focused, people-centred, bottom-up and participatory by local people (Chiweza, 2010). The guidelines specify committees at village, Traditional Authority and District level, through which development projects should be coordinated.

The government of Malawi through MACRA implemented ICT infrastructure development through the establishment of telecenters in several rural areas. The projects were implemented under government funding in partnership with development partners such as the World Bank and the International Telecommunication Union (MACRA, 2011). The government adopted different models for implementing telecenter projects, (MACRA, 2011). Of interest to this study is the ISRDP model. ISRDP sought to provide ICT services to rural and underserved areas through the establishment of Multipurpose Community telecenters. The project had the mandate to support the government's efforts to reduce poverty and isolation of the rural communities, making accessible ICT-enabled services through scalable and cost-effective communication infrastructures.

3 Theoretical Framework: Stakeholder Management Theory

3.1 Definition of stakeholder

A stakeholder in an organisation is any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organisation's objectives (Freeman, 2010). Stakeholders are vital to the survival and success of an organisation (Freeman, Wicks & Parmar, 2004). Stakeholders can be primary or secondary (Carrol & Buchholtz, 2012). Primary stakeholders have a direct stake or interest in the organisation and its

success. Secondary stakeholders have a public or special interest stake in the organisation.

3.2 Stakeholder Theory – overview

The Stakeholder Theory is intended both to explain and to guide the structure and operation of an organisation (Donaldson & Preston, 1995). It views an organisation as an entity through which numerous and diverse participants accomplish multiple, and not always entirely congruent, purposes. The theory takes into consideration the interests of all legitimate stakeholders (Freeman, 2010; Fontaine et al., 2006). The purpose of stakeholder management is to create methods to manage the different groups and relationships that result in a strategic action (Fontaine et al., 2006).

The research adopted the framework from Bailur (2006) which has three stages: 1. Stakeholder Identification, Stakeholder Behaviour Explanation and Coalition Analysis 2. Stakeholder Management and 3. Concessions/Bargains.

Stakeholder analysis is a process of determining whose interests should be taken into account when developing and/or implementing a policy or project (Schmeer, 1999). Stakeholder analysis helps to identify the key actors, their knowledge, behaviour, interests, positions, alliances and importance related to the project, while allowing policymakers and managers to interact more effectively with key stakeholders and increase support for a given policy or project (Schmeer, 1999).

The main objective of stakeholder management is to ensure that the primary stakeholders achieve their objectives and that other stakeholders are dealt with ethically and are also relatively satisfied (Carroll & Buchholtz, 2012). Stakeholder management for an organisation must address five major questions which are (Carroll & Buchholtz, 2012): (a) Who are the stakeholders? (b) What are the stakeholders' stakes? (c) What opportunities and challenges do the stakeholders present? (d) What economic, legal, ethical and charitable responsibilities does the organisation have to the stakeholders? (e) What strategies or actions should be taken to best manage stakeholder challenges and opportunities?

Concessions and bargains are important aspects for developing projects, as they define how different stakeholders reach agreement and get assurance that threats or risks from complaints or lawsuits arising from unsound and unethical business practices have been minimised, if not totally eliminated (Freeman, 2010).

4 Methodology

The research was a qualitative cross-sectional exploratory study. We adopted a case study approach for the study. The cases in the study were the telecenters and the communities where the telecenters are located. We targeted the key stakeholders within the 5km catchment area for the telecenters; these included traditional leaders, surrounding communities, community-based organisations, Local Management Committee (LMC), telecenter staff and schools. We also targeted implementers such as MACRA and district councils.

The study targeted two telecenters. We sought telecenters which had been operating for at least two years, since these would have had enough data: these were Vikwa Telecenter in Kasungu and Khudze Telecenter in Mwanza. Purposive and snowball sampling was used to identify stakeholders who were involved in the projects, including officials from MACRA, district councils, traditional leaders, telecenter staff, LMC and the surrounding community of the 5km catchment area.. These included community-based organisations, users of the telecenters, community extension workers and farmers. At Khudze, all the traditional leaders within the impact area of the telecenter were involved. Representation from the following community-based organisations were involved: Area Development Committee (ADC), Village Development Committee (VDC), dairy farmers, fruit farmers, teachers, students, wine groups and business people. The study involved MACRA as the regulator of the telecommunication sector in Malawi and also the implementer and financier of the project. Two MACRA members of staff who were involved in the initial setup of the project and one participant who was involved in the initial stage but had left for another institution, were interviewed. The sample also included (i) District Council – the highest policymaking body at the district level, responsible for promoting infrastructure and economy development in the local government; and (ii) Directors of Development Planning: one from Mwanza and one from Kasungu.

The main data collection tools for the study were semi-structured interviews and focus groups. These were supplemented by direct observations and document analysis. The focus groups provided an opportunity for participants to report their individual experiences, and also respond to the experiences of other group members. The data from LMC, village heads and students was collected through focus groups. The interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. Direct observation was mainly on telecenter activities and the community behaviour towards the telecenter. Secondary data was obtained from various sources such as reports on telecenters. The study used thematic analysis with the use of Weft QDA, a free and open-source software for the analysis of textual data.

5 Case Study Description

Vikwa Telecenter is located in Kasungu, 22KM from Kasungu Town. It is surrounded by trading centres and schools including the elite Kamuzu Academy High School. Khudze telecenter is located about 5km from Mwanza town. Both telecenters were officially opened in 2010 (MACRA 2012). The telecenters are located in rural villages and are in the midst of the villages. The telecenters are housed in a building which cost MACRA over MK70 million.

The telecenters were managed by a ten-member Local Management Committee (LMC) which included two ex-official members from MACRA and District Council, and the telecenter staff (MACRA 2006). The committee acted as Board of Directors of the telecenter. The operational issues of the telecenter were managed by the telecenter staff; the staff was paid by MACRA. The committees were set up in 2007 and the staff was recruited in 2010, prior to the launch of the telecenters. LMC was

tasked with the responsibilities of getting the telecenter operational, ensuring that the centers were used effectively and served as the link between the telecenters and MACRA (MACRA, 2011) The telecenters were supposed to operate for one year under MACRA sponsorship and, thereafter, to start operating and sustaining themselves (MACRA, 2011). At the time of the study, both telecenters had operated close to three years and were still fully sponsored by MACRA.

The telecenters offered basic ICT services at a fee. Each telecenter charged, depending on the market value of the service offered within the community. The aim of charging for services was for the telecenters to sustain themselves. Each telecenter had a bank account into which they deposited its revenue. The funds were kept for future use when the telecenters would be weaned off to sustain themselves. However, some funds were used at the telecenters when necessary. The committee and staff were also encouraged to use the funds to venture into other services which were needed at the telecenters.

6 Findings

6.1 Telecenter stakeholders identification

The stakeholders in this study were categorised at two levels: national and community. Records from MACRA show that 12 categories of stakeholders were identified at national level (MACRA, 2006). At national level, stakeholders for the two telecenters were identified through brainstorming by MACRA, based on the national roles they played in the country that could relate to the project. Stakeholders at the community level were identified through various approaches such as through (i) the results of the preliminary research, (ii) a bidding process, election and recruitment, and (iii) based on the services or roles which they would provide to the project.

The members of the LMC were chosen through election from the surrounding communities. Traditional leaders from within telecenter catchment areas were asked to identify representatives who could be members of the LMC. The major criteria for selection were representation from villages and from different backgrounds such as churches, retired personnel and farmers.

The telecenter staff was identified through a formal recruitment process. The village headmen posted vacancy advertisements within their areas. The recruitment was done by the LMC with the help of MACRA. Some respondents were dissatisfied with the way the recruitment was managed, mainly when filling posts that subsequently fell vacant. Traditional leaders felt that the process was not transparent as the community was not informed of the vacancies. LMC recruited additional staff members without informing the community and the existing staff.

The committees which are responsible to monitor developmental projects at the district and traditional authority village levels were not included as part of the stakeholders for both telecenters.

6.2 Behaviour Towards the telecenter

Some stakeholders believed that the telecenters were brought to the community by the government through MACRA and the community had not requested the project. Others were ignorant of who had requested them, while some thought the project had been requested by the community through the District Council. Nevertheless, the community accepted the project after MACRA had explained it to traditional leaders and the community. However, the community did not understand the concept and the services which could be offered.

The community felt the major benefit of the projects to the community were some non-ICT related services which came with the telecenter. These included electricity which had enabled the instalment of the maize mill in the community, charging of phones, a venue for social activities such as parties and meetings for various institutions, and water for the surrounding villages.

We used to struggle to go to the maize mill, ... now it is closer because of the electricity. Most people are connected to electricity and most of the functions that happen in this area are done there ... such as weddings, engagements, . . . meetings. (Traditional leader, Khudze)

Respondents at Vikwa telecenter felt the most important benefit were the ICT services; although the telecenter was also used for other non-ICT related services. This could be due to levels of development at the time the telecenter was implemented. Due to the proximity of an established elite school, Kamuzu Academy; electricity was already available in the area. Furthermore, it was near a trading centre which provided basic needs to the community. The telecenter was used to access internet to do some online transactions by the communities.

The community from both telecenters expected the projects to provide more services, such as training the youth from the catchment area on computer use, at no charge. They also wanted additional services such as TV, tuckshop, and more books with relevant content. They also wished for involvement of other stakeholders such as ADC, VDC and chiefs. At both telecenters, some villagers were scared to use the facilities and felt the building and services offered were not for their level. This was strong at Khudze telecenter where some villagers were even scared of entering the building since it looked too “*high class*” for them. At Vikwa, despite the feared to enter a computer room, villagers could enter the building to buy groceries:

There are some who have never dared entering the offices; others consider the building to be too good for their levels by looking at aspects of dressing. They fear the computer, the furniture and look of the building. (Staff at Khudze)

Some stakeholders at Khudze telecenter felt the project was not owned by the community but, rather, by MACRA and the LMC. The community felt that the telecenters did not involve the community, but only those who were directly involved and had direct benefit such as staff, LMC and MACRA. They felt it was the business

of MACRA and they did not see the benefit of the telecenters in terms of the revenue generated there. They felt the telecenter revenue would be used for constructing other developmental projects within the community.

That thing is a MACRA business, all workers at the centre are doing business on behalf of MACRA and not for the community. MACRA just wanted to be given free land for construction by the chief here for their business. If you ask anyone in the village here, you will be told that they are not aware how much is realised from that place and we are not updated on anything. (Traditional leader, Khudze)

Despite good relationships at Vikwa telecenter, traditional leaders had similar opinions to traditional leaders as at Khudze telecenter on the use of the funds from the telecenter. The traditional leaders wanted the funds from the telecenter to be used for other projects within the community. The LMC, on the other hand, felt chiefs were not allowed to know financial issues, as guided by MACRA.

There was a strong relationship among LMC, traditional leaders and telecenter staff at Vikwa telecenter. This started during the site identification, construction and operation, as traditional leaders were continuously engaged in providing guidance when there were problems.

. . . I make sure that when there are problems we should solve them together and also I do have time to go there and see how other things are done. (Traditional leader, Vikwa)

The stakeholders at Khudze felt there was a proper approach to consultation during the initial stages of the project. However, as time went by, the key stakeholders such as chiefs were left out of the project. Some felt that the LMC had overstayed their welcome; the committees had been elected in 2007. Some of the stakeholders expressed the need for change and to incorporate new members into the committee. They felt that since the committee had stayed too long and they were prone to make mistakes and nobody would criticise them.

6.3 Behaviour Towards telecenter sustainability

There were leadership challenges at both telecenters. Some stakeholders felt that extension workers (e.g. Agricultural, Health) should be incorporated into the committee, so that they could provide knowledge on how to apply ICT in their sectors. Others misused the powers which they had in the community to the disadvantage of the telecenter. The committees for both telecenters lacked knowledge since they had not been adequately trained. Some of the committee members resisted change and hindered the normal operations of telecenter. This caused conflict, misunderstandings between staff and the community.

There could have been a committee comprising people working in government and NGOs, to develop a plan on how they can manage the telecenter, but those running lacks knowledge of how an institution like

that one is supposed to operate as most dropped school and cannot run that complicated modern facility. (Interviewee, Khudze)

The challenges are that the telecenter committee comprises majority members who are related. . . . it is difficult to hold meetings because members already discuss the issues outside (Interviewee, Vikwa)

6.4 Stakeholder interaction

During the formation stage of the telecenter project, some stakeholders such as the District Council felt that they were side-lined. They felt that they were supposed to be involved in all stages of the project and, even after the handover of project to the community, the council felt that it could provide necessary advice to the community. District Council is mandated to monitor projects and provide leadership in the district; members were also ex-official members in the LMC. However, there was limited interaction with the telecenter for both projects.

Furthermore, although traditional leaders were consulted during the initial phase of the project, they were not updated on the activities of the telecenter and they felt side-lined about the operation of the telecentre.

There is no link between us as community leaders and MACRA . . . the project doesn't seem like the one we wanted and was explained to us initially. What if we turn it into something else like hospital so that we can claim ownership so that we don't say it belongs to MACRA? (Traditional leader at Khudze)

I could have loved if reports were being submitted. Everything that is happening, whether good or bad, we should not only be meeting when there are problems, but I should be following each and every step so that we should see how to progress. (Traditional leader at Vikwa)

At both telecenters, the staff and the LMC met once a month to report on progress; they then reported to MACRA at the beginning of each month. Although, previously, Khudze telecenter staff used to attend District Executive Committee meetings with the District Council and consequently update the council on the Telecenter, after the first telecenter manager left, the staff never again attended the meetings. On the other hand, members of staff from Vikwa telecenter never attended any District Executive Committee meetings at all. There were no documented clear roles for Khudze telecenter as LMC and staff did not have job descriptions. In contrast, at Vikwa telecenter, there were clearly documented roles for both staff and LMC.

Since telecenter was opened, we don't have job descriptions and even the LMC don't have as we just saw draft Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) documented which was presented by MACRA but it was no signed until now. (Staff member Khudze)

The MOU was signed with Telecenter and Assembly which has job descriptions for LMC while staff have job description and everyone knows what to do. (Staff member, Vikwa)

The major interaction among stakeholders was between the telecenter staff and MACRA, where they exchanged reports and other operational issues at the telecenter. There were no clearly documented reporting lines; there were no operational guidelines or any policy given to the staff or the LMC at the telecenter.

6.5 Stakeholder management

At the formation phase of the project, the District Council and traditional leaders were briefed on the results of the research which had been conducted and the sites which had been selected for the telecenter. At the district level, the consultation was mainly a courtesy call to the District Assembly to introduce the project through the District Commissioner by MACRA. The aim of meeting with the council was to inform, consult, create partnership and identify the area in which the telecenter could be built. MACRA also met traditional leaders to brief them of the telecenter projects. The meetings were to explain the aim and objectives of the project and what the local authorities were supposed to do on the project.

We found no formal documents such as policies or concept papers about the project presented to the District Council and there were no consultations with the District Executive Committee.

During the planning phase, a comprehensive market research was conducted at community level to identify the main components of the marketing mix and to estimate the social relevance of the telecenter to the community (MACRA, 2006). The stakeholders identified the locations of the telecenter and its management model. The community chose the community-managed model rather than the privately-managed model (MACRA, 2006). Further meetings were carried out with the local authorities and the open communities to validate the research findings (MACRA, 2006).

During the execution phase, telecenter staff was recruited and the community was tasked to mould bricks for the construction of the telecenter. At Vikwa telecenter, the community moulded all the bricks for the telecenter. The process was coordinated by the LMC and the traditional leaders. In contrast, the community at Khudze telecenter did not complete the task. The community only managed to mould a few bricks; unfortunately the bricks were destroyed by the rain. The contractor had to buy all the bricks for the telecenter. Besides providing the piece of land, the community did not participate in other activities.

6.6 Concessions/Bargains

During the implementation of the telecenters project, there were conflict at both telecenters which were between staff and committee, between community and management and, finally, between management and political interference. At both

telecenters there were different conflicts between staff and LMC. Some of the conflicts were over finance, superiority and power.

There was a recurring problem of transparency at the Khudze on management of funds. Initially, the telecenter manager was the only signatory to the bank account and there was misunderstanding between LMC and the manager. This led to mismanagement of funds and it was alleged that the telecenter manager had swindled the money. The police investigated the matter; it was taken to a court of law and the telecenter manager was eventually dismissed. Three members of LMC became signatories to the bank account. This, however, did not address the concerns over transparency of the funds. The staff complained that they generated the revenue but were not aware of how much was in the bank account.

At Vikwa, since the opening of the telecenter, the telecenter manager and two LMC members had been signatory to the bank account and things were working well. However, there were challenges in monitoring of revenue. It is evident that there is a general challenge in management of funds in rural developmental projects.

One of the problems faced at both telecenters was the relationship between staff and the LMC. The staff felt that the LMC had more power; the staff worked with fear and embarrassment due to the behaviour of members of the LMC. They felt the committee made decisions on recruitment without consulting the staff; in one instance, they even exceeded the number of positions available at the telecenter.

The way they speak to us, because they know our salaries, they even announce them at drinking joints. Right now everybody's salary is known in the villages. (Telecenter staff member)

Another major problem was the remuneration for staff. The salaries had not been revised for four years (since the opening of the telecenter in 2010). Since the project belonged to government, the staff perceived themselves as civil servants and expected their salaries increment to be aligned with the annual increment for civil servants. Due to salary problems, some staff quit the job for other better-paying jobs.

Conflicts between the community and the telecenter management mainly revolved around water and land issues. Each telecenter had a water supply; the water was utilised at the telecenter. The villages around the telecenters had no safe water. The community felt they owned the telecenter since they had contributed through the moulding of bricks and other activities; therefore, they expected to utilise the safe water at the telecenter. All the requests from the villagers and schools to utilise the safe water were turned down by MACRA through LMC. This brought dissatisfaction from the community.

Both telecenters experienced problems with the land. The land was initially donated to the project; however, there was lack of clarity and proper guidelines on land. At one of the telecenters, the person who had given free land later changed his mind as there was supposed to be some payment for the land. At another telecenter, the former owner of the land believed he could still come to do things like cutting some bamboos without authorisation from the chiefs. The land issues were resolved after consulting other stakeholders such as chiefs and also after obtaining information from other telecenters.

7 Discussion and Conclusions

The community sense of ownership at the telecenters was low. The traditional leaders, the LMC and the staff felt that the project was owned by MACRA and not the community. After two years of operations, the decision-making was still in the power of MACRA. The community at Khudze was involved only in the site identification and possible selection of committee, while other issues such as bricks and other building material were sourced by the contractors. The implementation of the telecenters project was monitored by MACRA through the committee and no updates were communicated to local leaders. This meant that the communities were not empowered to fully participate in the running of the telecenter project, which led to over-reliance on MACRA this led to LMC, staff and traditional leaders working in isolation, with no recognition of political culture in the areas. There was no coordination among LMC, staff and traditional leaders on any issues, as things were reported directly to MACRA.

Local leaders at Vikwa had a high sense of ownership of the telecenter and played a role at the telecenters, especially when there were problems which needed their intervention. There was coordination among staff, LMC and traditional leaders. However, there was no link with District Council. During the construction of the building, the communities, through the local leaders, moulded bricks for the telecenter which showed their participation and responsibility. Consequently, in comparison to Khudze, there were more services which were demanded by the community.

Communities at both telecenters expected that the telecenter would benefit the community. They expected that the funds from the telecenter could be used to construct a school block or a borehole so that those who did not use the telecenter could indirectly benefit. However, these expectations were not met, since MACRA advised the telecenters management against doing that. The foregoing suggests that MACRA should limit its roles in the management of telecenters and empower the local community to own the telecenters. The stakeholder participation needs to start from the beginning of any project, while external actors, who traditionally lead design and formulation phases, need to limit their direct roles and responsibilities and, as far as possible, encourage local stakeholders to participate and take the lead (Ballantyne, 2003). MACRA's continued involvement in decision-making led to dissatisfaction of the communities.

Some local people were afraid of using the telecenters due to the 'class' of the building and furniture in the telecenters. Most locals were afraid to use, or even to touch, a computer. The building and the furniture was perceived to be of a high standard; even the District Councils wanted the structures to be in the town so they could change the face of the towns instead of putting the structures in the villages. This suggests that there were no consultations with the community on what type of the building could be constructed in terms of the standard and the furniture to put in place. Colle and Roman (2001) suggest research as a tool for finding out the needs of the community, their participation and a systematic, persistent effort toward community awareness about telecenters and ICT.

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