

ACACIA: Communities and the Information Society in Africa



Science for humanity



Une Science pour l'humanité



Information and communication technologies (ICTs) have changed the way people live and work in the industrialized world. It is generally believed that they can similarly help to transform the development prospects of people in Africa. The Acacia Program Initiative is testing this proposition by helping communities in sub-Saharan Africa develop the ability to use ICTs for their social and economic development. IDRC was among the pioneers in the adaptation and use of ICTs in Africa and Acacia continues to build on the Centre's research networks, programs, and partnerships.

Objectives

- To enhance understanding and knowledge of the effects of ICTs on poverty reduction and human development in Africa;
- To improve African countries' capacities to formulate and implement national policies that promote equitable access to ICTs and information for socioeconomic development;
- To contribute to research that supports the development and adoption of affordable and functional technologies for Africa;
- To support research that increases African content available through ICTs; and
- To learn from Acacia's community-based research and experimentation and to widely disseminate this knowledge.

Our approach to programing

Launched in 1997, the Acacia program initially focused on four countries: Mozambique, Senegal, South Africa, and Uganda. The program included social investments in pilot multi-purpose community telecentres, school networking activities, and accelerated ICT policy development initiatives in each country, as well as considerable investments in evaluation and related research.

Rapid changes in the ICT environment have moved Acacia into a new generation of applied research. The program has embarked on an ambitious plan to disseminate its findings while continuing to develop and implement innovative projects. These projects will address three key research themes: policies to promote equitable access to ICTs and information; appropriate technologies to overcome problems of rural access; and increased African content available through ICTs. Acacia programing will also expand to 14 countries.

Acacia's program directions for 2001–2005 are detailed in the initiative's prospectus, available on the IDRC Web site at: <http://www.idrc.ca/acacia/>

Some examples

Poverty reduction

Cyberpop, a project in Dakar, Senegal, is helping to demonstrate the role of ICTs in poverty reduction in Africa. Youth from community groups in eight of the city's poorest neighbourhoods are running resource centres that provide access to the Internet and computer services. The centres are so popular that they cannot keep up with the demand from local businesses for services, such as photocopying and printing business cards. While opening a window to the wider world of economic opportunity for poor communities, the centres have also created jobs for young managers and technical staff.

The project, coordinated by ENDA Tiers Monde, has won an international prize from French telecom operator Alcatel for its work in bridging social and cultural divides. It is now entering a second phase to strengthen community ownership of the centres and to ensure their sustainability.

Policy formation

Acacia has accelerated ICT policy development in the four countries where it initially concentrated its activities — Mozambique, Senegal, South Africa, and Uganda. In Mozambique, Acacia's support led to parliamentary approval of an ICT policy, which initiated a wave of reform in the telecommunications sector. Acacia has also helped eight other countries design their national information and communication infrastructure plans.

ICT content

Students and teachers in selected primary and elementary schools in Uganda will soon have access to curriculum in local languages on CD-ROM and the Internet. Another CD-ROM developed in Uganda is designed for rural women with little or no reading ability. The user moves the mouse across the screen and clicks on pictures or text to hear a voice describing, in her own language, various ways to earn an income.

School networking

Through ICTs, SchoolNet South Africa (SA) has opened up new educational opportunities for teachers and students at close to 3,000 schools in South Africa. In a country where most schools lack computers, SchoolNet SA has focused on bringing technology and training to historically disadvantaged communities. As a measure of its success, SchoolNet SA has been launched as an independent nongovernmental organization with funding from several major international aid donors.

Acacia team members

Edith Adera (Team Leader), Luis Barnola, Alioune Camara, Heloise Emdon, Florence Etta, and Ramata Thioune

For more information

In Canada contact:

Acacia
International Development Research Centre
PO Box 8500, Ottawa, Canada K1G 3H9
Tel: (1 613) 236-6163
Fax: (1 613) 567-7749
Email: Acacia@idrc.ca

In East Africa contact:

Acacia
International Development Research Centre
Regional Office for Eastern and Southern Africa
PO Box 62084, Nairobi, Kenya
Tel: 254-2-713160/1, 713273/4, 713355/6, 713578/93
Fax: 254-2-711063
Email: eadera@idrc.or.ke

In West Africa contact:

Acacia
International Development Research Centre
Regional Office for West and Central Africa
BP 11007, CD Annexe, Dakar, Sénégal
Tel: 221-8-640-000
Fax: 221-8-253-255
Email: acamara@idrc.org.sn

In Southern Africa contact:

Acacia
International Development Research Centre
Satellite office at the Development Bank of Southern Africa (DBSA)
PO Box 1234, Halfway House, Midrand, South Africa
Tel: +27+11+315 3515/3035
Fax: +27+11+313 3086
Email: heloise@dbsa.org

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