

**ITU Regional Workshop on ICT Accessibility for Persons  
with Disabilities for the Africa Region**

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**ICT ACCESSIBILITY FOR PERSONS  
WITH DISABILITIES IN THE GAMBIA**

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## **ICT Accessibility for Persons with Disabilities in The Gambia**

The development in the area of ICT has enabled people with disabilities to lead a more enriched life than ever before. Now people with disabilities in many parts of the world are carrying out electronic banking, online shopping, e-mailing etc. This has generated new demands and some of them new and common ICT oriented expectations. The disabled persons could co-op with the expectations of information society as a wide range of opportunities for learning and training are available.

The first ICT project to empower the disabled community in The Gambia was conceived by one Internet service provider, implemented and inaugurated to on this year ITU day celebration whose theme is 'connecting people with disabilities:' ICT opportunities for all. It was truly fitting that the computer lab was inaugurated and will go a long way in satisfying this year's ITU theme.

The beneficiary for this project is 'St John's school for the deaf' whose equipment includes seven brand new computers, one multimedia projector and a laser printer. The computer laboratory has also been fitted with a functional local area network envisaged to take up to 12 computers. A wireless Internet Service called 'schoolnet' has also been installed and provided free of charge by Unique solutions making sure all the computers in the laboratory have access to the Internet. Since the beneficiaries of this project are people with disabilities, the need to have specialized training cannot be over emphasized. The school will be working with Malcolm Garner, a special education expert who has a long standing relationship with the deaf. They shall be providing the teacher training assistance for the laboratory, energy needs and other logistics.

Emulating the success stories in the context of our own communities is the way forward. Sound liberalization and regulation policies, human resource capacity development, first class telecommunication and energy infrastructure, fair competitions are what govern these successes. The digital divide will then no longer exist; we would then have turned it to digital opportunity for the benefit of all citizens. Economic and social development opportunities need to be created for all members of the society.

This facility will be accessible by a small segment of the disabled community because of its location. The disabled community in the country has branches and skill centres in different parts of the country. There are a few cyber café's in various parts which the disabled people can access but the cost of Internet access is not only high but very slow. This is very disadvantageous for the public especially those with disability. Most of the internet access is through narrowband and there is only one gateway provider. All other Internet service providers lease capacity to the gateway from the incumbent operator. Because the bandwidth at the gateway is limited, service providers cannot guarantee higher speeds to customers. Their customers therefore have to spend a longer time downloading information which makes the service more expensive.

There is therefore the need to provide fast, and affordable internet connections for the public by providing high capacity fibre optic cable networks that service providers can rely on to grow, stimulate the creation of jobs and new business opportunities, and increase the country's competitiveness. This will encourage foreign investment in many areas for with ICT is inclusive.

Few people have access to a phone, a computer or the Internet. Operators are unwilling to expand their networks and services especially in rural areas because of the high cost of capital on infrastructural development and low return on investment. Government can play a role in easing the burden on operators through tax incentives on all equipment meant for rural development. Luxury taxes on operators have a negative impact on network coverage and penetration and constraint the wider potential of access by the public especially those with disability. Research shows that by lowering taxes on communication services, operators can roll out networks, meet universal services quicker and increase their customer base. An increase in customer base is directly related to more revenue because of network externalities hence more taxable revenue for the government.

The role of the regulator in providing a conducive environment for competition with fair and consistent policies will encourage service providers to have confidence in making the necessary investment in making services more accessible and available to the public. The regulator can as part of their social obligations to the disabled community sponsor individuals to participate in ITU workshops on 'ICT for the disabled'

Access to power supply is another factor that impedes the provision of ICT access. The number of places with electricity is limited and businessmen do not see the economic viability of providing ICT infrastructures in communities if they have to run generators considering the high cost of fuel. Where mains supply is available, the erratic nature of the power supply also means that they have to get standby generators. They also risk losing ICT equipment due to unreliable mains supply. Reducing/eliminating tax on ICT equipment or alternate power sources (solar panel, inverters) can encourage stakeholders to provide ICT access to rural areas.

Assistive technologies that ensure accessibility within the widest range of abilities ideally need to be provided by operators to ensure even distribution within the society. Special terminals that enable speech recognition and synthesis applications can greatly help the blind and partially sighted, whilst those with special educational needs can have their learning opportunities widened through information and communication technologies. The speech recognition systems can afford greater freedom of communication to those with severe arms restrictions.

Other technologies such as computers fitted with screen reading software, voice amplifiers, screen magnification software, and Braille printers could be provided in centres where those with disabilities can access.

Since these technologies are geared to the disadvantaged community whose earning power is limited, very few if any service provider will want to venture into such projects. It is only through private-public partnership, governments, regulators, Non governmental funding or through assistance for the international community can such projects be made available. These facilities should be made available in schools; vocational training centers for people with disabilities. A true commitment by all is necessary to help them use ICT to have greater economic and social interaction with the rest of the world, and in doing so making the world a better and brighter place for all. Assistance from these sources should be complimented by specialized training for teachers to be able to impart the required knowledge to those with disabilities.

Another important component that needs to be given urgent attention is awareness campaign. It was very interesting to note that when the project of the computer laboratory was being inaugurated; various pledges were made by the some of the few stakeholders (regulator and individuals) to assist in one way or the other in not only improving the facilities but making the place more conducive. If this project was given more coverage on television, radio and news papers, pledges for providing such facilities in other parts of the country could have been made. It is heartening to note that the National Television was absent from this important inauguration, despite the fact that they were invited.