Improving the lives of slum dwellers through innovative uses of ICT

With only five years left until the 2015 deadline to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the pressure is on information and communication technologies (ICT) to help play an important role in delivering progress. Millennium Development Goal 7 is to “ensure environmental sustainability”. And Target 11 of this Goal is to improve the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers by 2020. This article reveals some pioneering programmes that are helping to improve the lives of slum dwellers in some of the world’s cities through innovative uses of ICT.

Taiwo Olayinka had little knowledge of the Internet before he joined an ICT training programme known as the Ajegunle.org Capacity Building Exercise. Ajegunle is a slum in Lagos, Nigeria, where three million people, from all over West Africa, have settled. The name, Ajegunle, cruelly translates to “residence of wealth”. In the past, the only means for slum dwellers of Ajegunle to improve their lives was through a talent for football or music.

“Boldness, courage and improved communications are my major gifts from Ajegunle.org,” says Taiwo. “Anytime I now see opportunity, I smile because I know that the skills acquired and the experience I have, working as an intern, will put me ahead of others.”

First agreed at the United Nations Millennium Summit in September 2000, the eight MDGs set worldwide objectives for reducing extreme poverty and hunger, improving health and education, empowering women and ensuring environmental sustainability.

UN-HABITAT, the UN agency in charge of Target 11 to improve the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers — as part of Millennium Development Goal 7 — recognizes the role that ICT can play. The agency’s former Executive Director, Anna Tibajuka,
Improving the lives of slum dwellers through innovative uses of ICT

Dr. Hamadoun I. Touré, ITU Secretary-General, emphasized this when she signed an agreement to help bring ICT to the inhabitants of Kibera slums in Nairobi, Kenya.

“To be credible in 2010, any national programme to realize the MDGs and poverty reduction must include the application of ICT across the economy,” she said. “This reality was underlined at the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), and the Millennium Development Goals explicitly refer to the need to apply ICT to the task of poverty reduction,” she added.

“ICT provide solutions to many of the problems facing cities even as they become magnets for migrating populations, as well as contribute to making them more eco-friendly and economically viable,” said ITU Secretary-General Hamadoun I. Touré in his message to mark the 2010 World Telecommunication and Information Society Day (17 May). This is why ITU’s governing body, the Council, chose the theme “Better city, better life with ICT” to celebrate the Day. That vision is in keeping with the overarching theme — Better City, Better Life — of the World Expo 2010 in Shanghai, China, taking place from 1 May to 31 October 2010.

ITU’s World Telecommunication/ICT Development Report 2010: Monitoring the WSIS targets provides policy-makers with a comprehensive assessment of the achievements to date and makes recommendations on measures to help connect people everywhere by 2015. The report says that great progress has been made, with close to five billion mobile cellular subscriptions worldwide at the end of 2010, and almost two billion people throughout the world now having access to the Internet. But it also underlines that vast improvements are still needed.

“In particular, we need to bring affordable broadband access within reach of the great majority of the world’s people — noting today that three quarters of the world’s inhabitants have no access to the Internet,” Dr Touré says. “What we need to see is a rapid and equitable spread of broadband networks matching the extraordinary growth of mobile cellular networks over the past decade.”

Providing ICT skills to Nigeria’s Ajegunle slum

The Ajegunle programme aims to extend this inclusiveness by offering 25 students like Taiwo — every other month — the chance to learn ICT skills and get entrepreneurship training. At the end of the six-week training period, these students are expected to start their own businesses and compete for internships and special training slots. The training is entirely free, but graduates are expected to return 10 per cent of their income over six months to help sustain the programme.

Ugo Nwosu, Programme Manager for Ajegunle.org, believes that ICT are a leveller, providing simple tools that will fast-track development in slums. “Our graduates do well in business because they are able to keep records using spreadsheets, which helps in business decisions. They are able to better express themselves, thus opening up more opportunities.”

The graduates pay for their education and support their families from their earnings, either from internships or small businesses. According to Nwosu, they have also become bolder and go on to tackle life issues without the feeling of insecurity.

The benefits not only help the trainees integrate better into society, through job and ICT skills, but also improve the image of the community through the Internet.

Now slum dwellers, like Taiwo, see a brighter future thanks to their ICT training. “Whenever I sit to...
think about the future,” he says with hope, “I feel relaxed and my thoughts are always positive because of the skills I have acquired.”

Digital inclusion for Brazil’s favelas... and how the promotion of broadband has helped

A group of favela residents in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, were so fed up with negative media coverage that, in 2001, they established their own small website to link themselves directly to media directors in order to provide an alternate source of information on life in favelas, rather than news just being sent in via the police.

The goals of Viva Favela were to democratize information in two ways. The first is to provide news about the favelas from an insider’s perspective. And the second is to serve as a mechanism to reduce social exclusion by providing amateur journalists, cameramen and web technicians from the favelas, with the tools and training to empower them to take up opportunities to become professionals.

“This media project was developed to change the way society receives information about favelas,” explains Maya Jucá, Project Coordinator for Viva Rio, the non-governmental organization (NGO) behind Viva Favela. “We wanted to remove the stigma that people associate with favela residents and remove the fear — to highlight, through ICT, the creativity and innovative solutions that residents are achieving, from education, sports, culture and economics.”

From an initial base of 20 recruits covering 20 communities, the website was updated in 2009 to accommodate new forms of ICT, such as smartphones, in both video and audio recordings. This has opened the website to a wider audience, to include those residents who are not wholly literate. “Now we have more than 400 registered correspondents who provide us with content in the shape of videos, photos and articles,” explains Jucá. “These come from favelas all over the country, not just in Rio.”
Improving the lives of slum dwellers through innovative uses of ICT

ICT success stories

Landa Araujo, 26, was selected in 2005 to become a community correspondent for Viva Favela and has since moved on to become a spokeswoman for the Social Welfare office of the Rio de Janeiro Municipality. “I still produce content for Viva Favela and live in Rocinha [one of Rio’s better known favelas],” she says proudly. Landa believes that the fact she is still living in the favela helps break down the prejudice from those outside and provides a confidence boost to other residents.

Self-esteem is not only increased for the trainees, but also for the residents accessing the website. Partnerships with mainstream popular newspapers have been developed, and when newspapers include reports from Viva Favela they are almost always sold out.

“People are happy and eager to read about it,” Jucá says. “They feel excited and proud of what the young trainees are doing, and now most want to be a part of it and be interviewed.” Likewise, when people see the content on the website, they are able to comment, commend the content and give encouragement. Adds Jucá: “It boosts their confidence and they [the correspondents] feel as though they can go out of the favela and work with people, do things in the city and feel more integrated.”

The success and penetration of Viva Favela has been assisted by the state and national government’s promotion of broadband. Some of the largest favelas are provided with free wireless broadband, telecentres and Internet cafés.

Dona Marta in Rio was the first favela to benefit from the Projeto Orla Digital (Digital Beachfront Project) in March 2009. Sixteen antennae broadcast a wireless signal to the favela’s 10 000 residents and the signal can be received anywhere on the hilltop. More than USD 620 000 had been invested by July 2009, and the project looks likely to be extended to link the entire population of Rio to wireless broadband. Some side benefits for the favela communities are that the broadband cables will also allow security cameras and lighting to be installed.

State Governor Sergio Cabral says: “The digital inclusion ... will enable more families to truly enter the 21st century. Before long, Rio de Janeiro will become the first state with 100 per cent free digital coverage. This is absolutely unique, and it inspires us to continue, in partnership with Rio’s technology sector.”

Some teething problems still exist though, with some extremely slow connections reported in various parts of the favela and others with mixed reception signals.

Taking mobile banking to Kenya’s slums

Many of the slums around the world, however, do not yet have reliable Internet access, but instead depend on the ever-increasing penetration rates of mobile phones to access ICT.

In Kenya, mobile phone banking has shown that when the formal sector fails the poor and marginalized, ICT can come to the rescue. In March 2007, Safaricom, the largest mobile communications provider in Kenya, and Vodafone, launched M-PESA. “Pesa” means money in Swahili and is an innovative mobile payment solution that enables customers to complete simple financial transactions by mobile phone.

In just over three years, M-PESA has grown to reach 10 million users. Financial Sector Deepening Kenya — an independent Trust established in 2005 to support the development of inclusive financial markets in Kenya — undertook a survey in 2009 and found that in urban areas, only 32 per cent of Kenyan adults have a bank account, whereas 80 per
Improving the lives of slum dwellers through innovative uses of ICT

ICT success stories

According to a recent survey, 80% of urbanites have a mobile phone, 20% up from 2006.

"Just because you don’t have access to a bank account doesn’t mean you don’t have financial needs," says Pauline Vaughan, Head of M-PESA business operations. "The success of M-PESA was that there was a need in the market which we were able to fill."

M-PESA has helped improve the lives of slum dwellers in Nairobi by providing a safe virtual place to keep money for short periods of time. "Quite often there are fires in the slums, and normally you would lose what money you had," adds Vaughan. The service is also saving people time and money.

"We did some research last year where people saved three hours of time per transaction as they didn’t need to travel to a bank and spend money on transport. This worked out to be a saving of USD 3 per transaction."

Within the slums, kiosk owners and similar outlets act as agents where people can collect or send their money. For example, 40 agents handle this in the slums of Kibera. "This is important as there are no bank branches at all in the slums," says Vaughan. "Banks just aren’t willing to set up branches, whereas for the M-PESA agent it’s much easier."

Originally intended to provide basic payment transfers, Safaricom is seeing many innovative ways that businesses and customers are using M-PESA. Grundfos LIFELINK, a water pump provider, teamed up with M-PESA to provide water systems to communities. Payments for the water and the loan are made via M-PESA, and each water user contributes.

Non-governmental organizations that operate in the slums of Kenya are also using the service to make social payments to slum residents. “Concern and Oxfam are using M-PESA to disperse funds to 5000 recipients living in slum areas,” says Vaughan. “It is working very well and gives the recipient a lot of convenience. It allows them to collect their payments when they want, and spend it on what they want.”

The success of M-PESA has grabbed the attention of other countries, banks and mobile phone service providers, and a similar service has so far been launched in Afghanistan, Fiji and Tanzania.