

FINAL REPORT
ASSESSING THE NEED FOR AND POTENTIAL NATURE
OF A REGIONAL POLICY SECRETARIAT
FOR
INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGY (ICTs)
IN
SOUTHERN AFRICA

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Executive Summary

In the course of its work on Information and Communications Technology (ICT) in Southern Africa, the IDRC has identified the need for more extensive ICT policy support in the sub-region, so as to ensure better ICT policy development, and ultimately better policy implementation to facilitate the creation of an African Information Society. To this end, it is exploring the establishment of a regional ICT Policy Research Unit, which could assist in addressing the gap between the requirements for national ICT policy development and the capacity to deliver on these requirements

The envisaged Unit would provide support to national and sub-regional institutions, and governments, to enable them to make better-informed decisions relating to the use and application of ICTs. It would also ensure integrated policy development that could underpin the promotion of an information society in Southern Africa. The Unit would achieve this by providing technical support in the form of focussed research in a number of proposed areas and also set out to strengthen research capacity in ICT policy within the region.

The present report explores the feasibility of such a unit. The researchers have conducted extensive desktop research regarding similar structures elsewhere in Africa and the world and defined alternative structures for consideration in the sub-region. They have also conducted structured interviews of more than sixty ICT role players in the region. Those include senior public and private sector officials and academics representing institutions in Mozambique, Namibia and South Africa, as well as SADC and the ECA. The study also surveys international funding agencies that might have an interest in ICT research activity in the region.

Support for ICT policy research support was unanimous. There were, however, a variety of opinions as to whether a unit should be at one physical location, distributed across countries, or simply a “virtual” network of researchers. There was also discussion as to the nature of the activity – coordination of research conducted at other institutions, in-house project work, or a mixture of the two. There was strong encouragement for the research activity to be closely associated with SADC’s ICT structures, although, again, there was discussion as to whether a research unit should be incorporated into SADC, or simply work alongside it.

Three conclusions from the study strongly underline the need to support ICT policy research. First the ICT tidal wave sweeping the globe threatens to engulf the developing world. Any support that speeds up and focuses attention on effective exploitation of ICT will benefit countries in the sub-region and help arrest the widening of the digital divide. Second, agencies such as the Economic Commission for Africa, the IDRC and the IICD are progressively engaging more and more African countries in ICT policy and infrastructure development. The need is now growing to learn from each other in Africa, building on what works and avoiding what does not. Third, even in the better-endowed African countries, there is minimal ICT policy research capacity. This is due to very small numbers of tertiary level researchers in general, many fewer in the ICT arena, and even fewer able to blend the hard and soft sciences that characterise ICT policy research.

The proposed unit would need to ensure that its research supports national and sub-regional goals. The study has already started to reveal particular needs that, for instance might not be relevant in other parts of the world. They include ICT policies to further information society goals in developing countries, the technicalities and economics of communications infrastructure appropriate for dispersed and largely rural populations, arrangements to foster

electronic commerce in the Southern African sub-region and awareness raising and entry-level ICT curricula for schools.

In principle a variety of structures and processes could be applied to increase the amount and quality of research in these and other areas. This study concludes however that the IDRC should establish a policy research unit provisionally named the Information Policy Research Unit for Southern Africa (IPRUSA) based in South Africa with national nodes in Mozambique and Namibia. Initially IPRUSA would consist of a director and small support staff, especially with a member responsible for designing and implementing a Web Portal as a resource for researchers and others in the region. At an early stage three national projects and a regional project should be defined and researchers in the countries concerned contracted to start work. The report concludes with recommendations as to next steps the IDRC should take to turn IPRUSA into a reality.