

Malawi's rural ICT initiative on course

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The Malawi government, through its ICT regulatory body, the Malawi Communication Regulatory Authority (MACRA) has told Bizcommunity.com that establishment of ICT telecentres in rural areas is on course.

MACRA Public Relations Officer Clara Mulonya said one pilot project currently running in the home district of Malawi's President Bingu wa Mutharika has proved a huge success.

"MACRA established this telecentre, which started operating in March last year, in a rented house but last month we finished constructing a purpose-built structure and services have since been moved to this new one," she said.

Under the pilot phase, three other districts have been identified for main telecentres – Karonga in the north, Kasungu in the centre and Mwanza in the south.

The cost for all three is estimated at MK150 million, but equipment will be donated by International Telecommunications Union (ITU).

"After the pilot phase Malawi will see a booming of ICT services throughout the country especially in the underserved areas," Mulonya declared.

MACRA has established another telecentre in the lakeshore district of Mangochi which will be operational this coming April. Women will run it as a way of involving them in ICT issues.

Services at the telecentres include, internet services, photo studio, video services, ID processing, computer lessons, fax, phone services, lamination photocopying, and more.

The telecentres fall under government initiative called Universal Access Policy, which aims at addressing access to telecommunication issues in rural and under-served communities.

The project began after MACRA undertook what Mulonya called 'a more direct approach' by embarking on a research, which looked at the possibilities of developing multipurpose telecentres at a local level.

The International Centre for Science and Technology through the United Nations Industrial Development Organisation (ICS-UNIDO) funded the research.

Information and Civic Education Minister Patricia Kaliati said, “We intend to reach out to all 29 districts; even when we are struggling in terms of resources we realise the need to speed up our integration into the global village,” said Kaliati in an interview with Bizcommunity.com

She said the ultimate goal is not only to provide communication services to the rural communities but also to grant ICT services that will act as catalysts for social economic development as highlighted in the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy.

Kaliati said currently, government is developing the Universal Access Policy to specifically address access issues to the rural and under-served communities.

“The Policy emphasises the requirements by services providers to roll out to rural communities to enhance ICT development in the country, a strategy, which the government aims to use to alleviate poverty and isolation,” she explained.

A pre-feasibility study in 2004 was designed to determine the economic viability and sustainability of the centres.

The main feasibility study followed in 2005 to sensitise the public on the benefits of ICTs.

In 2006, market research followed, aimed at finding the means to make the centres self-sustainable, and revealed that local communities have high interest in having multipurpose telecentres.

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