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**ICT ACCESSIBILITY FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES  
IN AFRICA REGION: UGANDA'S COUNTRY REPORT**

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## **1 INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 Basic Country information**

Uganda is a landlocked country covering an area of 241,551sqkm. It is bordered by Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Sudan.

In the financial year (2007/2008) Uganda's real GDP grew at a rate of 8.9%, with a GDP per capital of 680,210UgShs (400US dollars)<sup>1</sup>. Uganda, which enjoys a good climate and fertile soils, is basically an agricultural country with a population of 28.2 million as of mid year 2007; of these approximately 86.7% live in rural areas and with 31% of the population living below the poverty line. The literacy level as of 2005/2006 was 69% for persons of 10years and above.

### **1.2 Facts on Persons with Disabilities in Uganda**

In Uganda, the Disability Act 2006 section 21 (1) urges government authorities to promote the right of Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) to access information through;

- a) The development and use of sign language, tactile, sign language interpreters in all public institutions and at public functions;
- b) Brailing of public information such as government documents, government newspapers and other publications.

It further stipulates in Sub-section (2) that; Any person who owns a Television station shall provide sign language inset or sub titles in at least one major news cast program each day and in all special programs of national significance.

*Disability is a condition which denies a person a normal economic and social life, which has lasted or is expected to last 6 months or more. In Uganda, cases of epilepsy and rheumatism are classified as disabilities while internationally, they are not*<sup>2</sup>. Key facts on persons with disabilities include:

- The most frequently observed types of disability; loss /limited use of limbs (35%), followed by serious spine problems (22%) and hearing impairments (15%).(the 2002 Uganda population and housing centre);
- 7.2 % (2.5 million) of the population have a disability (Uganda National Household Survey 2005/2006);
- More than 40 % of the older persons in Uganda have a disability (Uganda National Household Survey 2005/2006);
- PWDs who are out of school are four times more than those in School (Uganda Population and Housing Census 2002);
- Only 2.2 % of PWDs in Uganda have attained post secondary level education (Uganda Population and Housing Census 2002);
- Approximately, 90 % of PWDs in Uganda do not go beyond primary education (Uganda Population and Housing Census 2002);
- 60 % of PWDs in Uganda do not receive any kind of rehabilitation (Uganda National Household Survey 2005/2006).

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<sup>1</sup> Exchange rate; 1US dollar=1700UgShs

<sup>2</sup> 2002 Uganda Population and housing Census, Uganda Bureau of statistics

- The likelihood that people who stay in a household with a disabled head live in poverty is 38% higher than the likelihood that people who stay in a household with a non disabled head live in poverty (Johannes G. Hoogeveen : Disability and Poverty in Uganda, 2004)<sup>3</sup>.

This paper highlights information related to policies, challenges and proposed actions on issues of ICT accessibility by persons with disabilities in Uganda.

## **2 POLICY FRAMEWORK FOR ICT IN UGANDA**

The legal framework governing the ICT sector in Uganda is influenced by a number of laws, policies and regulations. The key laws and policies being the following:

### **2.1 The Communications Act, cap 106, Laws of Uganda**

The Communications Act established the Uganda Communications Commission as a regulator for the communications sector. Its role includes licensing providers of telecommunications services and infrastructure services. Specific to Persons with Disabilities, the Act stipulates that the Commission shall promote research into the development and use of techniques and technologies including those which promote accessibility of hearing impaired people to communication services.

### **2.2 The National ICT Policy, 2002**

The National ICT Policy is main goal is to promote the development and effective utilization of ICT such that quantifiable impact is achieved throughout the country within the next 10years.

### **2.3 The Proposed Telecom Policy of 2006**

The Telecom policy (2006) with a mission, to establish, by the year 2010, a fully liberalised Telecommunications sector as an engine of growth that is driven by the human developments needs of Uganda has the following policy goals that seek to address ICT accessibility for Persons with Disabilities;

- a) To ensure the ubiquitous presence of telecommunications infrastructure services that will enable sustainable human development through ease and affordability of access to relevant, accurate and timely information (actual content being the responsibility of the various public sectors as well s civil society and private sector initiatives.

To date this has been achieved through the licensing of a number of service (voice and data) and infrastructure providers (24 providers as of June 2008) under a technology licensing regime. The infrastructure deployed by these operators includes wireless based technologies such as GSM (2G and 3G), CDMA, WiMax, WiFi and VSAT and wireline technologies such as fibre optical cables and copper cables (ADSL). Over 80% of the country is covered with wireless based infrastructure. The number of mobile subscribers as of march 2008 was 5,704, 506 while that of fixed 3 National subscribers was 166,552. According to the Uganda Bureau of Statistics 2002 Housing census, 0.5% of households own fixed phones while 5 % owned mobile phones.

International access bandwidth capacity as of Dec 2007 via satellite connectivity was Uplink/Downlink 86.933 Mbps/257.5 Mbps. The number of Internet users as of June 2007 were 155, 515 with 40% of the internet access being via dial up. Estimated internet users as of 2006 stood at 1.6 million. In spite of the low capacity and costly access to international bandwidth, there are a number of efforts or initiatives geared at broadband infrastructure development in the country to provide access to international links at higher data speeds and lower costs via fibre optic. Some of these are private sector led (through competition) and others through private and public sector partnerships.

- b) facilitate the delivery of the high level information and service needs to all sectors of society, especially the marginalized sections of society that comprise of rural or poor communities, women, *people with disabilities* through close integration with the following:- IT sector, broadcasting sector, media sector and postal sector ; This has been achieved through the administering of a universal access fund by the Uganda Communications Commission among others. Under this fund a number of projects have been implemented including Internet Points of Presence (PoPs) at District level, Universal Access Telephony in underserved areas, Multi Purpose Community telecentres, District web portals among others<sup>4</sup>.
- c) To ensure that all aspects of processes and operations in the sector take full account of the following cross cutting issues: gender concerns, *physically disadvantaged* and sustainable exploitation of the environment”.

## **2.4 The Electronic Media Statute, 1996**

The statute created a licensing system, under the broadcasting council for radio, TV stations, cinemas and videotape rental businesses including the purchase, use and sale of TV sets.

## **2.5 Cyber laws**

A number of laws related to Information Technology have been enacted which include the Electronic Transaction Bill, Electronic Signature Bill, and the Computer Misuse Bill.

## **3 ICT Accessibility for Persons with Disabilities, Challenges and Actions**

The government of Uganda has enacted laws and policies that address access to ICTs by PWDs, there are still challenges in the implementation these and ensuring that persons with disabilities do benefit from ICTs initiatives and programs.

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<sup>4</sup>Uganda Communications Commission website [www.ucc.co.ug/rcdf](http://www.ucc.co.ug/rcdf)

The challenges can be looked at in terms of the extent to which they facilitate the availability and affordability of ICTs to PWDs as these are key factors that influence the level of access to ICTs;

- a) Availability of ICTs: In terms of availability of ICTs, over the years the focus, at policy level, has been on increasing penetration of basic services (voice telephony) (from 0.26% in 1996 to now 20%), and meeting underserved demand in rural areas. However usage of ICTs by PWDs has not been addressed specifically. This can be shown by;
  - i. Design, environment and location of ICT points of access and facilities like Multi purpose telecentres, Internet cafes which for example, lack facilities that ease movement of persons with disabilities like rumps and screen magnification software, screen reading software etc. among other things.
  - ii. Access to ICT equipment/ facilities:
    - The user access terminals /interfaces, on the Ugandan market, restrict use by PWDs; For example, lack of hearing and visual enhancements (e.g., use of large text) on these interfaces like phone, computer terminals. For example use of computers requires one to be able to use a key board and a mouse which poses a challenge to persons with loss/limited use of limbs.
    - User Instructions for ICT application devices are not in formats that for example persons with visual impairments can comprehend( no Braille instructions) making it harder for them to access facilities such as ATMs.
    - Information on ICTs and its applications, is communicated (*stored, packaged and disseminated*) in a way that is not cognizant of the needs of persons with disabilities. For example; the majority of programs that are broadcast on television stations do not provide sign language, inset or sub titles in their news cast. Moreover the format in which information is stored and printed makes it impossible for persons with disabilities particularly those with visual impairments to access or use.
    - Capacity Building/ICT training programs in schools should address needs of PWDs especially in light of the low levels or enrolment into schools by persons with disabilities.
- b) Affordability: ICTs are still not affordable to a number of Ugandans(5% of Ugandans own mobile phones, 0.5% own fixed phones)<sup>5</sup> especially; the 31% of Ugandans who live below the poverty line and these include PWDs who are not as economically empowered as the average Uganda citizen.

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<sup>5</sup> 2002 Uganda Population and Housing Census Report, Uganda Bureau of statistics

- c) Lack of incentives to encourage private sector commitment to meet the costs implications related to enabling access to ICTs by PWDs.

Notwithstanding the above, Uganda's declaration of principles and plans of action to WSIS (2003-2005)<sup>6</sup> identified the following proposals and plans of actions to address these challenges;

- a) As a means of inclusion of persons with disabilities in the development of infrastructure; it was proposed that a universal access fund for Infrastructure especially geared to underprivileged areas, and disadvantaged groups including women, youth and persons with disabilities be established;
- b) Education, training and human resource development; governments in partnership with civil society to increase opportunities for training of women and persons with disabilities taking into account special consideration underprivileged areas;
- c) As part of policy development process , facilitate and encourage the participation of women and other disadvantaged groups in the ICT policy development and implementation process.

#### **4 CONCLUSION**

Uganda has taken the initial important steps in addressing the issues of ICT accessibility for persons with disabilities by enacted laws and policies and ensuring that issues related to this subject are addressed within these policies; however there is need a lot to be done in terms of :

- a) Continually addressing the socio economic challenges of low income levels and literacy levels with specific attention on persons with disabilities;
- b) In depth assessment of the extent of which existing ICT initiatives are addressing the needs of PWDs, identifying and implementing specific programs and projects;
- c) Exploring Private Public Partnerships in addressing the challenges of access to ICTs by PWDs;
- d) Establishing structures that facilitate research into techniques and technologies that promote access to ICTs by PWDS.

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<sup>6</sup>Uganda's working document for 2<sup>nd</sup> Preparatory meeting for the World Summit on the Information Society(WSIS), February 2003, Geneva