

THE UGANDA DEVELOPMENT GATEWAY – NETWORKING COMMUNITIES

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Abstract

Development stakeholders in Uganda have recognised the importance of easy and timely access to relevant data and information in effectively planning, implementing and monitoring development initiatives. Community based organizations have also realised the importance of access to relevant, accurate and timely information as critical to the economic success of the typical rural activities.

The liberalized and open environment in Uganda has in addition led to a multiplicity of efforts by development partners, NGOs, and the private and public sectors aimed at different facets of human development. Each of these initiatives independently generates a lot of baseline data as well as experience and other information that could benefit similar or related initiatives. Unfortunately, there is no established framework for information sharing.

*Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are an enabler whenever we talk about information sharing. The creation of an information-sharing network must therefore go hand in hand with the role of ICTs in achieving the objectives. ICTs ranging from the most basic to the most advanced (and policies that affect their penetration) as a vehicle for delivering development are an important issue. The inherent challenge here is the recognition that what is needed is information, and that the level of ICT available should not be used as an excuse for denying access to information needed by the rural communities. **ICTs range from the internet and computers to telephones, radios, TVs and indeed the print media, and whichever is available at the rural community level should be used.***

It is with this background that the Uganda Development Gateway was initiated, spearheaded and hosted by the Directorate for ICT Support, Makerere University.

1. Introduction:

The Uganda Development Gateway (UgDG) was planned by the Makerere University Directorate for Information and Communication Technology Support (DICTS), with funding from the World Bank *infoDev* department, from May 2002 to November 2002. A total of 132 stakeholders from Uganda, the World Bank and four other Country Gateways from Eastern and Southern Africa attended the planning consultative workshops.

The main objectives of the planning phase, which were all achieved, included the development of the following:

- Business plan.
- Strategic plan.
- E-readiness and E-needs assessment.
- Technology strategy.
- Local content strategy.
- Memorandum and Articles of Association.
- Governance model i.e. an Annual General Meeting of stakeholders, Board of Directors and a Secretariat of 4 professionals.
- Partnership building strategy.

- Registration of the organization as a company limited by guarantee.
- A UgDG portal, whose URL is www.udg.or.ug has been developed and is up and running.

The guiding principles of UgDG are 4, and these are:

- Partnerships.
- Ownership.
- Sustainability.
- Development focus.

UgDG Mission

The mission of UgDG is: *to promote information sharing through innovative use of ICT for Uganda's sustainable development.*

UgDG Vision

To be the leading facilitator linking Uganda's rural communities to relevant development information.

UgDG Goal and Purpose

The overall goal of UgDG's programme is to effectively address current gaps in the development networking and delivery of relevant information, with emphasis on the rural sector that is currently marginalized. The programme also focuses on ownership and sustainability, driven by the commercial opportunities in development networking for the stakeholders.

UgDG Strategic objectives

The UgDG is striving to achieve the following main objectives:

- a) Promoting national dialogue, partnership, and a shared vision among public and private sector stakeholders on the potential of timely access to relevant information in facilitating sustainable human development in Uganda.
- b) Contributing to a better understanding of the impact of ICT on development at community and individual level; and creating sufficient capacity to interface productively with ICT through the dissemination of best practices.
- c) Promoting greater coordination in the exchange of development information, with emphasis to the rural setting.

UgDG Strategic Actions

To achieve the above objectives, UgDG is undertaking the following activities:

- (a) Initiating and sustaining mutually beneficial partnerships with public, private, and civil society institutions as well as development partner agencies.
- (b) Provided an inter-net portal for information on sustainable development and poverty reduction programs; and delivering, through appropriate means, relevant information to the rural communities that, generally lack access to the internet.
- (c) Linking existing portals and networks countrywide through suitable technology platforms to provide a cost-effective e-commerce platform for rural-urban socio-economic transactions.
- (d) Providing content and web hosting capabilities, especially for CBOs and other rural sectors.

2. Current status

The UgDG is a portal for sharing information on sustainable development and poverty reduction in Uganda. It helps communities, organizations, development agencies, individuals and government to build partnerships, share ideas and experiences, and work towards sustainable development and poverty reduction.

The UgDG, with savings from the planning funds, stakeholder membership and subscription fees, as well as the grant from the Uganda Communications Commission Rural Communications Development Fund, commenced the implementation of the Business and Strategic Plans on 1st April 2003. The secretariat staff, consisting of an acting C.E.O. and Administrative Assistant, implements the programme. The plan is to have a lean secretariat of 4, to include an IT Specialist and Content Manager; and Marketing and Business Development Manager.

The UgDG has secured a one-year implementation grant of US\$ 110,000.00 from the Development Gateway Foundation.

Local content has been compiled and posted on to the portal for sharing with communities, organizations, development agencies, individuals and government, on sustainable development and poverty reduction. The translation of the UgDG portal English text into the local Luganda language has been done. The plan is to translate it further into more local languages as and when need arises.

Content in the agriculture sector, with specific focus on local market information, including commodity prices, consumption trends, and market and investment opportunities have been posted. In the health sector, content with specific focus on HIV/AIDS programs and support services in Uganda, has also been posted. With the recruitment of more staff, there will be frequent updates of content thus making it dynamic.

The first UgDG newsletter for sharing development information with the UgDG stakeholders, potential donors and other community members has been produced and a copy is available on-line. The second and more comprehensive publication is being compiled.

3. Process of networking communities

The Uganda Development Gateway (UgDG), a portal for sharing information on sustainable development and poverty reduction in Uganda, helps individuals, communities, organizations and government to build partnerships, share ideas and work together towards sustainable development and poverty reduction.

UgDG is a membership organization that enjoys a wide network of stakeholders, both as individuals as well as organizations spread throughout the rural areas of Uganda.

With liberalization in Uganda, several communications companies have been established. Such companies include the Mobile Telecommunications Network (MTN), Uganda Telecom Limited (UTL) and Celtel. These are using a wireless platform to reach most of their customers.

UgDG is now building and working through partnerships with its wide network of stakeholders spread throughout Uganda, NGOs, CBOs, as well as making use of the services provided by the communications companies to achieve its goal and purpose. In so doing, UgDG hopes to collect/capture relevant development related data and information among the rural communities and arms

of government. The sectors being targeted by UgDG include health, agriculture, commerce and marketing. The providers of this data and information are to be facilitated by UgDG to evaluate and verify it, analyse it, and process it into relevant, friendly and development focused content, which is in turn organised and packaged into useable forms. The content is then availed for sharing using the various available ICTs, ranging from the Internet and computers to telephones, radios, TVs and the print media. The rural communities can then use this content to address their development needs.

Among the rural communities, information needs are as simple as: When will it rain? How much rain is expected? What can be planted? What are the prices of different produce in different localities? How does one prevent malaria? How can one get rid of the banana weevils? Which on-farm concoction can be used for pest control? In which proportions can one mix cow dung with urine to form effective manure? Any effective Indigenous Knowledge that can be applied for pests and disease control in plants and animals, known to a few people and not available to others who may need it? In addition, there are some useful experiences and best practices out there that ought to be shared among different rural communities.

4. Challenges

With no established framework for information sharing, quite often there is a duplication of effort leading to: dissipation of limited resources; failure to learn from successful local, regional and international initiatives; and failure to create synergies of initiatives addressing related facets of the same problem. The fragmentation of what should be complementary efforts has led to limited translation of investment in development initiatives to real human benefit. This lack of harmony presents the continuing reality of poor utilisation of resources (human, financial and technical).

Uganda like the rest of the world has experienced rapid changes in the information and telecommunication sectors. The ICT revolution has changed society and the way society handles all transactions – but this has not yet permeated to the greater percentage of Ugandans. This revolution, properly channelled, can play a major role in the socio-economic transformation of people, especially those living in rural areas.

The information that is needed by rural communities is, in most cases, quite urgent. Such information may range from the expected amount of rainfall and its timing, which would enable them make decisions related to planting of crops; to market information that would enable them maximize profits from the sale of farm produce. This then calls for a quick response in the networking process so as to avail such information in a timely manner, when it is still relevant.

The means of disseminating the needed information to the rural communities will depend on the level of ICT that is readily available, which varies from one locality to another. There is need, therefore, to determine and use the level that is available for disseminating the information. Further still, not all the rural communities will access any of the ICT available, which calls for pooling of resources such that those not able to access any of them can do so through their colleagues.

The UgDG is facilitating the NGOs, CBOs, and communities to create their own self-sustaining networks. The UgDG plans to maintain a central role and become a conduit for the information flow, while the communities and other development partners share and utilize the information amongst them.

5. Attitude adopted at UgDG

The attitude at UgDG is that being illiterate does not mean stupid. The rural communities know exactly what they want and can get it done, provided they are given a fair opportunity and forum to participate in decisions. They have a wealth of information that can be harnessed and used to solve many of today's development dilemmas. Through participatory and rapid rural appraisals, rural communities can be facilitated to identify and prioritise their development needs. Through the same process, they can in turn be facilitated to identify solutions to their prioritised needs by availing the relevant information, which can then be shared by all the beneficiaries.

6. Conclusion

Communities, NGOs, CBOs and other development partners, if well networked form a reliable, sustainable and continuous flow/source of development information. Solutions/answers to their everyday development dilemmas can thus be compiled and shared with others.