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*Economic, social and cultural rights
and the internet*



ASSOCIATION FOR PROGRESSIVE COMMUNICATIONS (APC)
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Economic, social and cultural rights and the internet

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BENIN

USING THE INTERNET TO ENGAGE MARGINALISED COMMUNITIES IN BENIN



KEYWORDS: access, marginalised communities, literacy

POPDEV Bénin

Sênouéd Pacôme Tomètissi

Introduction

In Benin, adult literacy is around 44.6%.¹ This presents a major challenge to using the internet to enable economic, social and cultural rights (ESCRs) in the country. To make matters worse, many government documents that provide information in key areas such as health are written in French. While French is the official language, many marginalised communities do not speak it.

As this report suggests, while the government is committed to expanding the information society in Benin, it has not given due consideration to the socio-economic contexts that marginalised communities find themselves in. Adult literacy programmes are the first step towards enabling the rights of these communities, and several projects show how these can be developed using the internet, while providing communities with life-essential information.

Policy, economic and political background

Benin is a West African country, 114,763 km² in size, and bordered by Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Niger and Togo. It has a population of over 10.74 million.² Since 1990 Benin has organised 17 elections, including six presidential, seven legislative and three local elections. Its constitution, the oldest in Africa, has never been modified, although the newly elected President Patrice Talon plans to organise a referendum to adopt a new constitution which will include a new term of office and mandate for heads of state. Benin has a good reputation on political rights such as freedom of expression.

The country's constitution establishes that the government has to provide each citizen with equal access to health, education, culture, employment and vocational training.³ There is also a requirement for the public's access to information. In 1992,

two years after the adoption of the constitution, the country ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR).

In 2008, the government adopted a policy and strategy paper for telecommunications, ICT and postal services.⁴ The mission of the policy was to implement an information society and full internet access for everyone by 2025. The main vision of the policy is to transform the country into an African digital hub with two key pillars: e-government and e-business. The aim is to improve governance, civil service and the economic environment by focusing on the legal and institutional framework, infrastructure, human resources, content and competitiveness. In 2014, the parliament passed a law on electronic and postal communications to regulate the sector.⁵

Early in 2016, the former Ministry of Communication and New Technologies was transformed into the Ministry of Digital Economy and Communication.⁶ The government then organised a conference and launched a call for public contributions to an action plan with a focus on the digital economy.⁷ This plan puts ICTs at the heart of the social and economic development agenda. At the launch of the agenda in June 2016, the president committed to work on a law to enable access to the internet, stating that the digital economy is the future. The necessary resources for the implementation of the action plan on the digital economy are yet to be mobilised.⁸

Barriers to accessing the internet for marginalised communities

It is 8 a.m. in a cybercafé in Abomey Calavi, Benin's second largest city after Cotonou. The manager has just finished wiping down the 10 desktop computers in the café, and has started switching them on.

1 National Statistics Bureau of Benin.

2 Ibid.

3 Article 8 of the Constitution of the Republic of Benin, available at: www.cour-constitutionnelle-benin.org/lacourpresent/decrets/Constitution.pdf

4 arcep.bj/admin/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/DPS_BENIN.pdf

5 assemblee-nationale.bj/fr/dernieres-lois-votees/369-loi-nd-2014-14/file

6 www.communication.gouv.bj

7 https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSc7Kxp7eDXffQdEjJ_oMxm4uJHMocxjQED7pBqyWQ7va5zFw/viewform

8 President Patrice Talon's speech at the Innov Bénin 2021 conference, 31 May 2016. www.l-integration.com/?p=11736

Fanny, a 22-year-old biology student, has arrived and has handed XOF 250 (USD 0.50) to the manager in exchange for an hour of internet access. She is looking for information for an exercise that her teacher assigned to the class the day before. Many other people start to arrive, some to check their emails, to log into their social media accounts or even to visit adult websites. Like Fanny, there are many people who use cybercafés for internet access in Benin.

As of July 2016, Benin had 1,232,940 internet users out of an estimated total population of 10,741,458 people, with around 800,000 Facebook subscribers.⁹ According to the ICT regulation authority, in 2015 the country had around two million mobile phone internet subscriptions, with more than nine million phones in circulation.¹⁰ However, the quality, affordability and geographic reach of the internet in the country are questionable. Given its cost, the 3.7 million people¹¹ living below the poverty line are not likely to access the internet. Many based in rural areas also have no or limited access. An article in the daily newspaper *Adjinakou* suggested that while in Hong Kong the average internet speed is 45.57 bits per second (bps), in Benin it is 0.73, the second slowest in Africa.¹²

As the owner of the internet infrastructure, the government coordinates the market and organises the sector through the ministry of communication, the national telecommunications company, and the electronic communication regulatory authority, ARCEP.¹³ Internet service licences are allotted through an agreement between the government and internet service providers. Each year, the government organises an “internet week” to promote its plans on ICT roll-out in Benin.¹⁴ While many initiatives such as setting up Wi-Fi service in universities have been implemented by the government, the real cost of access for beneficiaries that would in particular allow vulnerable groups to access the internet has not been taken into account.¹⁵

Analysts say that for people living in poverty, and for those with a low monthly income, technology is a luxury item. Besides cost, illiteracy and poor electrical infrastructure are further obstacles for

marginalised communities.¹⁶ The challenges around illiteracy are worsened by the fact that much of the government public information available is written in French, the official language of Benin, rather than in the mother tongues – Fon, Adja or Baatonou – of indigenous communities. Many in these communities cannot speak French, meaning that there is a real need for information on socioeconomic rights in indigenous languages. These barriers limit the potential of using the internet to meet the information needs of marginalised communities.

Informal e-education and e-learning as an emergency exit

Many organisations, including international and local NGOs, have launched literacy-for-empowerment programmes, which include projects focusing on the mother tongues of beneficiaries as part of their core work. Many of them run learning centres focusing on adult literacy in villages. Community workers and illiterate people are gathered and trained using language-learning manuals. The communities, including, for example, farmers and women’s organisations, have been taught practical skills such as sales management and accounting, as well as being provided with information on development issues relevant to their work and lives, such as climate change, family planning and gender rights. This strategy helps learners meet their literacy needs, as well as attending to their socioeconomic rights.

Some of these initiatives use the internet in their work. For example, The Hunger Project Benin (THP Benin) works with communities to enable their access to basic services.¹⁷ People are involved in functional adult literacy and numeracy classes so they can increase their skills and build capacity. Hundreds of adult literacy courses are offered in a dozen centres implemented by THP Benin. Two of the centres have information technology hubs. In Tanguiéta, a city in the north of Benin, the NGO Action & Development educates parents, opinion leaders and young people through youth work and functional literacy. With the support of several other organisations it installed a library with over 7,000 books and a cyber centre with 10 computers.¹⁸

The Réseau national des opérateurs privés pour la promotion de l’alphabétisation et des langues

9 www.internetworldstats.com/stats1.htm

10 ARCEP. (2015). *Annuaire Statistique 2015*. arcep.bj/statistiques

11 www.actubenin.com/?Default-de-plan-de-developpement-de-l-economie-numerique-Le-Benin-dans-les

12 bj.jolome.com/news/article/qualite-de-l-internet-le-benin-classe-avant-dernier-en-afrique-659

13 arcep.bj

14 www.dgcep.gouv.bj/vues/siz2015/vues/actu.php?action=afficheArticle&idarticle=2

15 bj.jolome.com/news/article/accessibilite-a-une-connexion-internet-haut-debit-le-reseau-iwi-desormais-disponible-sur-le-campus-d

16 BeMARKETING. (2013). *Les FAI au Bénin: quel plan marketing pour un marché statique*. bemarketingmagazine.com/Etude_de_cas_Les_fai_au_Benin_quel_plan_marketing_pour_un_marche_statique.html

17 www.thp.org/our-work/where-we-work/afrika/benin/literacy-education-benin

18 www.planete-urgence.org/documents/conge-solidaire/fiche-projet-conge-solidaire.php?PROJET=2125

(ReNOPAL)¹⁹ is a network of close to 100 NGOs working on literacy for empowerment. ReNOPAL helps people to read and write, and to learn the basics of spoken French. It also teaches them elementary maths. Some other civil society organisations, such as POPDEV Bénin, use popular education as a strategy to promote people's participation in development. In doing so, it educates people on their rights. Learning strategies for these two organisations include computers and sometimes the internet.

For-profit groups have also developed some projects focusing on adult literacy in Benin. For example, Boîte A Innovations (BAI), a Canada-based organisation with a local branch and civil society partners in the country, uses video learning and user-friendly mobile applications as training strategies.²⁰ Issues learned include micro-finance and the use of ICTs. According to Tony Simard, the founder and CEO of BAI, when a person with a low level of literacy is able to read and write, and use a computer and the internet in both their mother tongue and in their official language, it means that a new world is born with hopes of new opportunities.²¹

Conclusions

This report shows that the digital divide is still wide in Benin. The government, the main duty bearer, is failing to implement what some consider the right to the internet for all. This means that the potential to use the internet as an enabler of ESCRs is limited. Access to information, well-being and even education could be improved with e-learning. The constitution of Benin guarantees its citizens access to health and social services. In a resolution, the United Nations called on governments to enable digital literacy and to facilitate access to information on the internet as a strategy to promote the right to education.²²

Despite the legal framework, policy and strategies, only a limited number of people have internet access in terms of quality, affordability and availability. The government has yet to develop a realistic and holistic action plan on the digital economy.

Infrastructural and social determinants of internet access, such as electricity, income and illiteracy, are further barriers to access.

Adult literacy programmes using the internet combined with life-relevant skills show promise. There is a need for stakeholders to understand the benefits of these programmes, and their challenges and successes, in order to effectively use the internet as an enabler of ESCRs in Benin.

Action steps

The following steps are necessary in Benin:

- Stakeholders should set up an action plan with a clear timeline to meet the internet rights of people in Benin. This means the provision of internet access that is affordable and appropriate, in particular for people living under the poverty line. The government has to make provision for this in its annual budget. Civil society organisations need to continue to lobby the government and financial partners in this regard.
- Civil society organisations have to invest more in popular education and in adult literacy programmes. These can be combined with computer and internet literacy. Content should be relevant to the lives of marginalised communities, including developing online open access materials on human rights, and in all of the country's languages. A national movement on functional adult literacy should include all civil society organisations, and a manifesto should be developed. The manifesto should include strategies on advocacy, knowledge sharing, and functional resources development, as well as deadlines for the internet to be made available to all people in Benin.
- Despite the low level of access, the number of people with mobile phones as well as the number of internet subscribers is growing in Benin. This is an opportunity for using the internet to enable ESCRs. For example, health information strategies could be developed using mobile phone messaging, as could programmes that provide farmers with market information. Mobile apps could also be used for adult literacy programmes.
- Access to the internet is essential for the youth. Stakeholders should foster young people's e-literacy and raise awareness among the youth of their socioeconomic rights. Using the internet, they could, for example, document human right violations through storytelling. Young people could share their stories through dedicated blogs, social media or other open access tools.

19 Allabi, A. (2014, 25 February). L'éducation non formelle au Bénin: Une expérience valorisante pour les analphabètes. *La Nation*. news.acotonou.com/h/18480.html

20 <https://bai.alphaomedia.org>

21 Sinathlafricaine. (2013, 1 May). Internet en Afrique: Déjà accessible aux populations analphabètes! *Daily Sinath*. sinathlafricaine.mondoblog.org/2013/05/01/internet-en-afrique-deja-accessible-aux-populations-analphabetes

22 McKenney, K. (2016, 5 July). The UN Declares Internet Access a Basic Human Right. *Paste*. <https://www.pastemagazine.com/articles/2016/07/the-un-declares-internet-access-a-basic-human-right.html>

Economic, social and cultural rights and the internet

The 45 country reports gathered here illustrate the link between the internet and economic, social and cultural rights (ESCRs). Some of the topics will be familiar to information and communications technology for development (ICT4D) activists: the right to health, education and culture; the socioeconomic empowerment of women using the internet; the inclusion of rural and indigenous communities in the information society; and the use of ICT to combat the marginalisation of local languages. Others deal with relatively new areas of exploration, such as using 3D printing technology to preserve cultural heritage, creating participatory community networks to capture an “inventory of things” that enables socioeconomic rights, crowdfunding rights, or the negative impact of algorithms on calculating social benefits. Workers’ rights receive some attention, as does the use of the internet during natural disasters.

Ten thematic reports frame the country reports. These deal both with overarching concerns when it comes to ESCRs and the internet – such as institutional frameworks and policy considerations – as well as more specific issues that impact on our rights: the legal justification for online education resources, the plight of migrant domestic workers, the use of digital databases to protect traditional knowledge from biopiracy, digital archiving, and the impact of multilateral trade deals on the international human rights framework.

The reports highlight the institutional and country-level possibilities and challenges that civil society faces in using the internet to enable ESCRs. They also suggest that in a number of instances, individuals, groups and communities are using the internet to enact their socioeconomic and cultural rights in the face of disinterest, inaction or censure by the state.

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