

# Power to the people



*Highway Africa delegates enjoy the sounds of Savile (right) – Grahamstown's local jazz band.*

By Pieter Conradie and Wiida Fourie

**O**n paper, a guiding principle of the public service in South Africa is that of “service to the people”. In practice, however, providing effective access to government information and services in South Africa has proved to be a major problem, especially in rural areas.

In reaction to the challenges involved, the Government Development Communication Initiative has set up “multi-purpose community centres” (MPCCs) – an expanded version of the telecentres concept – as a major means of offering services through ICTs in rural and disadvantaged areas.

These involve not only establishing, but also providing some staff and logistical support to a series of

ICT-equipped community centre structures that can house several government departments providing services to local communities.

By August 2003 a total of 42 MPCCs had been established countrywide.

But how effective are they? Since the beginning of 2003 Technikon Pretoria has been working with the Government Communication Information Service (GCIS) to research how effective ICTs are for providing information and services to disadvantaged communities. Here are some of the preliminary findings of the study:

Generally speaking, three main models of multi-purpose community centres are emerging:

The most elementary is a one-room structure that is erected in a rural area and that usually contains some ICTs and a number of counters for some crucial government departments (such as health and welfare, agriculture, labour, home affairs and justice). This structure can even be a refurbished shipping container.

The second is a more elaborate structure that contains several offices or rooms. There is usually a telecentre (one of the Universal Service Agency telecentres that has been given start-up funding obtained from social responsibility levies in the telecoms industry), as well as separate offices for the GCIS staff, the centre manager, and each of the government departments that provides services at the centre.

The third model is usually found in disadvantaged urban or peri-urban areas, and consists of separate buildings or structures for the government service departments involved, but all within easy walking distance of each other.

A serious problem found at the first two types of rural centres is that many of them have been erected in areas with no telephone lines, and also with a small likelihood of such services becoming available in the short-term.

This means that no online government services or Internet information provision can be offered and therefore telecentre activity is limited. Staff providing government services have to make manual notes of what transactions clients need, then travel to the nearest government service point that has the needed connectivity to carry out the transactions there. Also, clients usually have to make a second visit to the MPCC at a later date in order to obtain the processed documents.

The result is a protracted process in which the needs of the community member are met with some difficulty. At a few of these MPCCs the situation is even worse as there is no grid electricity available, and alternative sources of energy such as solar power panels are the only short-term solution.

Another problem often found at the first two types of centres is that the government departments at the centre only have budgets for their own activities, and there is a lack of funds for vital ongoing activities of communal concern, such as cleaning, security and





maintenance of the community centre as a whole.

Interviews conducted among communities using the third type of MPCC centres show that locals understand the possibilities and advantages offered by ICTs, and would like to make increased and more integrated use of such facilities.

### The challenges

The South African government's initiative to use MPCCs for providing services and information to disadvantaged communities faces several major challenges. These include: connectivity, funding, governance and integrated service delivery systems.

The overseeing National Intersectoral Steering Committee (NISC) is involved in various fundraising actions that could see telephone and electricity links arriving in the remote centres.

In addition, the Universal Service Agency, an active participant in the NISC, is at an advanced stage of negotiations with a local service provider to connect its deep-rural telecentres, and therefore ultimately also many of the rural government MPCCs, with a year's free telecommunication connectivity via satellite.

The problem of MPCC governance is linked to the problem of funding, for it raises the question of who is ultimately responsible for the MPCCs, and who should therefore budget for the overall running costs. Government has recently decided that this responsibility should in future be carried by local government structures. This in turn presents a short-term financial problem, because no funds have been budgeted locally for this type of activity.

A detailed action plan to address the challenges facing MPCCs, as identified by a report of the Department of Public Service and Administration, has recently been developed. This is to be followed up by a memo to the Minister of Public Works and discussions with relevant stakeholders, and promises to contribute positively to the MPCC process in South Africa.



*Pieter Conradie is the Research and Development Professor of the Faculty of Social Development Studies at Technikon Pretoria. [conradiep@techpta.ac.za](mailto:conradiep@techpta.ac.za)  
Wiida Fourie is a lecturer in the faculty's Journalism Department. [fouriew@techpta.ac.za](mailto:fouriew@techpta.ac.za)*



*For further information see [www.gcis.gov.za](http://www.gcis.gov.za) and click on MPCCs.*