

## R/NRENS as Catalysts for Development: Learning from Eastern & Southern African Networks

Education and research are critical for social and economic development. Consequently, there is a great need for appropriate research and a skilled workforce that can utilize ICTs to compete in the global digital economy: effectively harnessing Africa's human capital and natural resources for sustainable growth. However, insight into the use of ICTs in education and research in Africa remains scant because of a lack of institutional infrastructure, sufficient bandwidth, and limited employment of ICT in the classroom. Universities report bottlenecks, inadequate funding, poor management and infrastructure, resistance to change, inadequate training, and high costs associated with effective ICT use (Kituyi & Tusubira, 2013). This is compounded by broader social barriers; less than 6% of the secondary school graduates have access to higher education in Sub Saharan Africa. Ahmed and Nwagwu (2006) suggest that much of this can be overcome by twinning agreements, consortia, outsourcing, and partnerships with e-learning providers. Regardless, there is little movement toward a cohesive strategy toward implementation, or use, of ICT in education that may impact the development needs of the continent.

However, the presence and proliferation of national and regional research and education networks (R/NRENS) have the potential for impacting the development of cohesive policy frameworks, based on the reporting of their outcomes. Foley (2016) reports the most significant challenges RENs face are funding and the awareness gap among important policymakers:

“[The] challenge is to persuade [NREN members'] institutional leadership and, in turn, their governments, of the need for a dedicated network that can respond to the special needs of researchers, teachers, and students, and that this is a far more complex issue than simply providing Internet access. Possibly the greatest challenge faced by these pioneers and champions is the lack of awareness among decision makers of how the Internet works and what value added an NREN can bring to higher education” (p. 15).

What is suggested here is that the promise of RENs to support development is not being realized due to a lack of understanding and familiarity with the purpose and potential of the research and education network on the part of policymakers. So despite a burgeoning presence, RENs have yet to substantively impact broader development goals in Africa. The full integration of ICTs and leveraging the Internet for education, innovation, research, and development requires strategic interactions between policy makers, the private sector, and national and regional RENs. This paper will explore how R/NRENS can play a catalytic role in development by offering evidence based tools and examples emanating from the Southern and Eastern African networks.

### References

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