The State of Access and Use of Community Information Centres (CICs) in Zimbabwe

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

This report presents a study on: ***The State of Access and Use of Community Information Centres (CICs) in Zimbabwe.*** Community Information Centres are centres in rural and marginalised communities that are equipped with digital technologies such as computers, internet access, printing and photocopying, faxing, scanning, laminating and gaming services. These have become new ways in developing countries of providing telecommunication services and digital technologies to communities that have been left out.

They also provide opportunities for governments bridge the digital divide while subsequently creating systems that improve public service delivery in rural and marginalised communities. This is achieved by providing citizens with access information which further facilitates their participation in government's decision-making process. In Zimbabwe, CICs have been established in different parts of the country and this report focuses on the state of access and barriers to usage of CICs in Zimbabwe and provide recommendations on how best to make CICs more accessible, effective and relevant.

1.1 Purpose and objectives of the research

This report evaluates the state of access to Community Information Centre (CICs) in Zimbabwe and attendant barriers to their use. This will inform evidence-based interventions centred on improving access to telecommunication services in Zimbabwe and also indicate areas for collaboration among the media, civil society, government, academia and development partners.

The study was informed by the following objectives:

- To investigate the state of access to CICs in marginalised and rural communities of Zimbabwe.
- To identify factors that inhibit their usage in Zimbabwe.
- To proffer recommendations towards promoting access to ICTs in marginalised and rural communities.

1.2 Research questions

The study's main research question was: *What is the state of access to CICs in marginalised rural communities of Zimbabwe?* To provide a more nuanced understanding of the state of access to CICs in rural communities, it also answered the following sub-questions:

1. What is the idea behind CICs?
2. What other sources of information are available in rural communities of Zimbabwe?
3. What is the nature of CICs development initiatives and what can be done to promote their usage in communities?
4. How have these been received?

1.3 Methodology

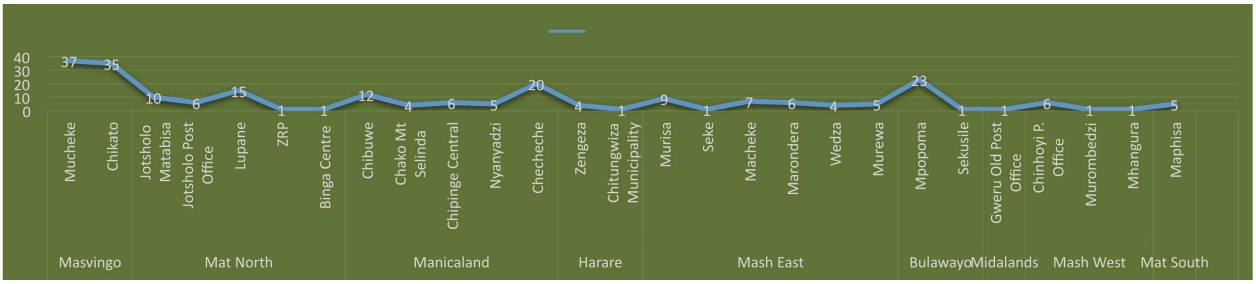
The study adopted a mixed method and relied on both primary and secondary data sources. Secondary data was obtained through a desktop review, which formed the initial part of the assignment. This was complemented through primary data collection, achieved through a community survey.

Data for the survey was collected using Google forms, with respondents either answering online or offline using the printed form. Data analysis was done using Statistical Packages for Social Sciences (SPSS) and Microsoft Excel. Respondents for the survey were purposively sampled, drawing from existing networks between MISA Zimbabwe and community-based organisation (CBOs) in each of the areas where the survey was conducted.

Geographic dispersion and framework for fieldwork

To obtain a representative sample of respondents, participants were drawn from nine national provinces: Manicaland, Mashonaland East and West, Masvingo, Matabeleland North and South, Midlands, Bulawayo and Harare, as shown in the graph below.

Graph 1: CIC Visited by Province



The survey was conducted in all the provinces except Mashonaland Central. Mucheke in Masvingo Province, had the majority of respondents per CIC with 37 respondents followed by Chikato in the same province with 35 respondents. In Manicaland, Checheche, had the highest number of respondents with 20 while Chibuwe had 12 participants. For the metropolitan provinces, Bulawayo had Mpopoma with the third largest number of respondents while Harare had respondents from CICs in Zengeza, Chitungwiza. In the Midlands, only one respondent was recorded at Gweru Old Post Office.

2.0 THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY BASED INFORMATION CENTRES IN DEVELOPMENT

Access to information is important as it is a driving force of modern society in developmental projects for the development of both individuals and communities.

It is also a fundamental right protected internationally by Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and locally by Section 62 of the Zimbabwean Constitution. In Zimbabwe, the right is also enforceable through the Freedom of Information Act which was gazetted in July 2020 to repeal the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) and to also give effect to the right to access to information as provided for by the Constitution[1]. The exercise of this right is fundamental to a functional democracy. Independently verifiable information increases transparency, enables accountability, builds citizen capacity and helps fight misinformation. Importantly, as MISA points out, access to information allows citizens to "exercise other crucial rights such as the right to vote, the right to a clean and healthy environment and the right to make informed choices"[2].

However, the state of access to information is not the same across communities. Some people, particularly those living in affluent urban centres, can choose from abundant sources of information. In contrast, people who live in poor communities are frequently denied access to the information that they need to improve their lives[3].

CICs are therefore an intervention to address the gaps by providing digital technologies and access to the internet as aforementioned.

According to Hurbert (2006), the purpose of having CICs in rural communities is to enable them to access relevant information and access to means of communication[4]. The CICs offer a kind of enforced passage point for the objective of reform programmes and the latest trends in the international development agenda, for instance, bridging the digital divide as well as achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)[5].

1 Media Institute for Southern Africa Zimbabwe (MISA). October 20, 2021. Unpacking the Freedom of Information Regulations Zimbabwe.
2 MISA, Access to information. Available at: *https://misa.org/issues-we-address/access-to-information/*
3 S. Ndide. (2014), The Role of Community Based Information Centres in Development: Lessons for Rural Zimbabwe, Vol 4, No 19.
4 Hurbert (2006)
5 M. Mushunje, (2020) Customer Perceptions of Community Information Centres in Zimbabwe. *PhD Thesis*, University of Pretoria, p. 30.

They are crucial tools for promoting development in African countries, especially where internet access is extremely limited[6]. They also have the potential to provide benefits such as improvement in education, health, agriculture and in business entrepreneurship in deprived African communities.

2.1 Media Landscape in marginalised communities in Zimbabwe

The rural media landscape has been evolving - this is mainly due to evolving changes in technology, political economy and destruction of key national communications infrastructure. It is now composed of traditional media, radio, television and new media, scant presence of the print media as well as open view HD satellite TV. Previously, there used to be private bags and postal boxes, public telephone booths, newspapers, magazines and fixed landlines which played a key role in exchange of information, linking town and country. CICs are targeted to provide ICT services and bridge the digital divide between rural and urban areas. In most rural areas, this infrastructure is now almost non-existent or marginally present. Only traditional media has proved to be resilient and managed to integrate itself with the new rural media landscape.

Table 1: Available Media in rural and marginalised communities in Zimbabwe

MEDIA	CONTEXT
Radio	• Radio is the most accessed form of media in rural areas. About 2,339,823 households had access to the radio: 997,929 lived in urban areas while 1,341,894 live in the rural areas. • National radio stations in Zimbabwe include ZBC radio stations such as *Radio Zimbabwe*, *National FM* and *Power FM*. Regional/Provincial Radio Stations such as *Skyz Metro FM* -Bulawayo, *Diamond FM* - Mutare and *Nyaminyami FM* - Kariba and *Hevoi FM* - Masvingo and Community Radio Stations such as *Vemuganga* in Chipinge and *Chimanimani FM*, *Madziwa FM* and *Avuxeni FM* in Chiredzi. Alternative /Private Radio Stations like *ZiFM Stereo*, are also available. • However, radio has the following limitations: limited coverage due to poor signal or infrastructure deficit; it is lopsided (and biased), as it does not provide room for listeners to determine programming content; it is captured by ruling political elites and biased towards the ruling party/government and its politically connected business people; it has an urban- biased and limited in terms of language diversity; programming is scant on news and current affairs while dominated by music (which covers 57% of airplay)[7].
Television	• The GeoPoll Media Establishment Survey Zimbabwe 2019 Report, shows that up to 68% of the respondents surveyed indicated that they had a working TV.

[6] S. Buhigiro. (2012). The Role of CICs in Promoting Socio-Economic Development in Rwanda. Available at: *:http://wiredspace.wits.ac..za/bitstream/handle/* (Accessed on 15 October 2022) .

[7] MISA-Zim, (2020) Access to media and media usage in rural communities of Zimbabwe – Final Report.

Television	ZBC TV staunchly dominated viewership in November 2019 reaching 61% of the respondents thus being ranked the first. It was trailed by *SABC1* and *eTV* at positions 2 and 3 respectively[8]. However, both Satellite and Analogue have very limited access - this is due to low coverage and reception. In addition, the cost of television sets and power shortages remains an inhibitor. However, there are enclaves of the rural elite with access that end up feeding information into traditional or social media[9]. More so, extra-terrestrial broadcasting is accessed in borderline areas - this couples with linkages of linguistic and cultural norms between communities near the border on both sides. It has limitations of urban bias, political capture, lopsided reporting and poor infrastructure as is the case with radio.
New media	• The most visible form of new media on the rural landscape are WhatsApp, Facebook, SMSs and voice calls (mobile) - this has given rise to citizen journalism and space for communities to create / produce their own content. • According to the Postal and Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe (POTRAZ) Postal and Telecommunications Sector Performance Report, third quarter of 2021, Zimbabwe's active mobile subscribers increased by 3.4% to record 13.9 million in the third quarter of 2021, from 13.5 million recorded in the second quarter of 2021. The mobile penetration rate increased by 2.2% to reach 93.5% from 91.3% recorded in the second quarter of 2021. Secondly, the total number of active Internet and data subscriptions increased by 1.2% to reach 9.3 million in the third quarter of 2021 from 9.2 million recorded in the previous quarter. The Internet penetration rate increased by 0.3% to reach 62.6% from 62.3% recorded in the previous quarter. Thirdly, that same report revealed that mobile Internet and data traffic increased by 10.4% to record 25,882TB in the third quarter of 2021 from 23,436TB in the second quarter of 2021[10]. • However, they also face challenges of limited coverage due to poor signal or infrastructure deficit, high cost of data and airtime and also access to compatible gadgets (smartphones). CICs are meant to address these challenges by providing communities with computers and data in order to access the internet. There is lack of baseline information on depth, growth, breadth, scope, reach and quantum of influence of the new media. Its proliferation has also given rise to fake news, creating challenges for credibility of information[11] .
Traditional	• Traditional media remains the anchor of access to information in rural communities - it retains currency as it is largely integrated within the socio-economic dynamics of rural communities. It plays a dual role of receiving and creating information and therefore, presents an opportunity for communities to influence content production. In addition, it is heavily integrated with other sources of media noted above. However, it faces the challenge of regimentation largely for political ends. It is also very prone to distortion and manipulation of information by competing political interests[12].

8 GeoPoll Media Establishment Survey Zimbabwe Report. Available at: *https://internews.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/GeoPoll_Media_Establishment_Survey_Zimbabwe.pdf*

9 MISA-Zim, (2020) Access to media and media usage in rural communities of Zimbabwe – Final Report.

10 POTRAZ. (2021) Abridged Postal and Telecommunications Sector Performance Report, Third Quarter 2021.

11 MISA-Zim, (2020) Access to media and media usage in rural communities of Zimbabwe – Final Report

12 Ibid.

2.2 The concept of CICs in Zimbabwe

CICs are the brain child of the Postal and Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe (POTRAZ) under their Universal Services Fund (USF).[13] The USF, established through the Postal and Telecommunications Act[14] is a pool of funds derived from various sources including contributions by all operators licensed by POTRAZ - mobile operators, Internet Access Providers and the fixed line operator.[15] Operators are required to contribute 2% of their annual gross turnover to the fund[16]. One of its purposes is to finance or assist in financing the extension of postal and telecommunications services to underserved areas and community centres within or outside such areas.[17]

The CICs project is reported to have been officially initiated in November 2016 by POTRAZ[18].

However, the idea of CICs is not new to Zimbabwe as its evolution can be traced to the late nineties. World Links Zimbabwe, which is part of the international network of World Links organisations, had been actively involved in the establishment of ICT centres in Zimbabwe since mid-1999. Twelve centres were established by 2015, in collaboration with the World Bank and the then Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture in Zimbabwe. The centres were established near schools where they could service both the schools and communities[19]. This saw the birth of school-based CICs. World Links also established the "Blue Bus" which had computers installed and which drove to rural communities to encourage access to ICT services[20].

Since then, the government has made drastic changes in line with its policies, such as the Presidential Computerisation Programme and the Zimbabwe Agenda for Sustainable Socio-Economic Transformation (ZIMASSET). ZIMASSET was adopted in 2013 as an "economic blueprint aimed at growing the economy through the creation of jobs, improving health, social service delivery and providing affordable housing". The policy treated communication in general and ICTs in particular, as one of the pillars for economic growth.

It is reported that the establishment of CICs took place in response to Goal 2 of the Connect Africa Summit, which highlights the aim of ICT as follows: "Connect African Villages to broadband ICT services by 2015 and implement shared access initiatives such as CICs and village phones"[21]. The Master Plan, once fully rolled out, is expected to see the country achieving the digital economy aspirations of the National Development Strategy 1 (NDS1) which intends to have internet access at village level by 2030[22]. It will completely transform government processes, services and management, and make information access and service delivery to the general public more efficient, raise the country's competitiveness and align the country in line with vision 2030's[23] digitisation agenda.

Apart from addressing the rural to urban divide, it also seems that interventions are underway to also address the age divide, especially the marginalisation of elderly people or those commonly termed 'digital refugees. In May 2022, at the commissioning of community information centres at Murombedzi Primary and Secondary government schools and Murombedzi business

13 *https://www.potraz.gov.zw/?page_id=411*
14 Section 73 of the Postal and Telecommunications Act
15 Section 75 of the Postal and Telecommunications Act
16 F. Mudzingwa, (2018) Since 2009 POTRAZ Has Collected Over $120 Million For The Universal Service Fund *https://www.techzim.co.zw/2018/06/potraz-rakes-in-120-million-from-universal-service-fund/#:~:text=What's%20USF%3F,telecoms%20infrastructure%20in%20the%20country.*
17 Section 74 of the Postal and Telecommunications Act
18 T. Pikirayi, 2018 What Are These Community Information Centres (CICs) Being Commissioned by POTRAZ All About???. TECHZIM. Available at: *https://www.techzim.co.zw/2018/01/what-are-these-community-information-centres-cics-being-commissioned-by-potraz-all-about/.*
19 N. Rajah, (2015). E-Government in Zimbabwe: An Analysis of Progress Made and Challenges Ahead. *Journal of Global Research in Computer Science.* 6 (12) 11-16.
20 M. Mushunje, (2020) Customer Perceptions of Community Information Centres in Zimbabwe.
21 F. Machivenyika. *The Herald,* 12 June 2014. President launches information Centre.
22 National Development Strategy1 Document 2021-2025. The Government of Zimbabwe 2020.
23 Vision 2030 is a National Development Plan approved by the government of Zimbabwe in September 2018. It seeks to build Zimbabwe into an upper middle income society by 2030. It is composed of two strategies: NDS1 (2021-2025) and NDS2 (2026-2030).

centre in Zvimba, POTRAZ Director-General Gift Machengete said:
"We have been leaving behind older persons as we focused more on other groups but now I am happy as Potraz we have programs which are meant to capacitate the older persons to be able to use technology available to them"[24].

In line with these policies, the government, through POTRAZ and funded through the Universal Service Fund (USF), partnered with its parent Ministry of Information Communication Technology, Postal and Courier Services, as well as the main Postal Service Operator (ZimPost), to implement the pilot programme to install 210 Information Communication Technology Centres across the country in 2016[25].

As of January 2020, POTRAZ claims to have established 170 CICs or Containerised Village Information Centres (CVICs)[26]

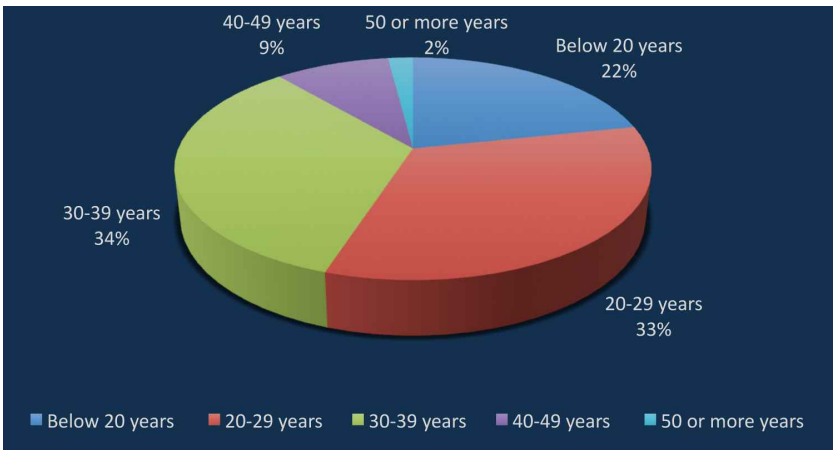
The acceleration and commitment to CICs in Zimbabwe was a response to one of the key strategies of the Geneva Action Plan, which Heads of States agreed and signed during the World Summit on Information Society (WSIS) in December 2003, promising to connect villages with ICTs and community access points. The CICs seek to aid communities in accessing e-government services and information. In 2016 ZimPost became a partner in the CICs project as POTRAZ sought to leverage on the already existing underutilised post office infrastructure[27].

3.0 FINDINGS FROM THE STUDY

3.1 Majority of users of the CICs are youths

Of the 247 respondents, the majority were between 30 - 39 years old constituting 34 % and the 20 – 29-year age group at 33%, was the second highest. Those below 20 years were 22% as shown in the chart below. This shows that the majority of CICs users are the youth. In line with the needs of the youth many respondents highlighted that they rely on CICs mainly for the purposes of research and education.

Figure 1: Age of respondents



N=247

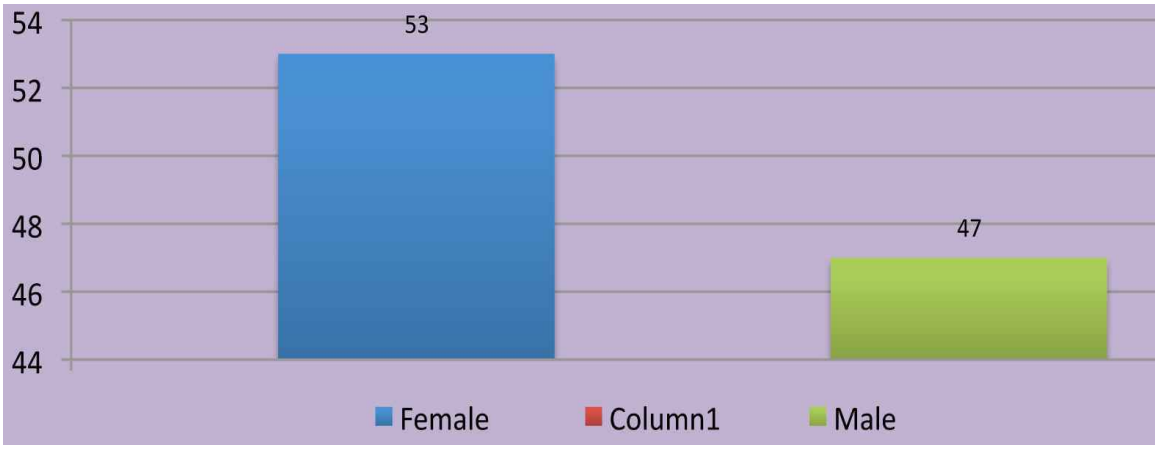
[24] *The NewsDay*, 21 May, 2022. ICT ministry commissions community information centres Available at: *https://www.newsday.co.zw/2022/05/ict-ministry-commissions-community-information-centres.* (Accessed on 20 October 2022)
[25] POTRAZ (2017), Zimbabwe. *www.potraz.co.zw*
[26] *The Sunday Mail*. (2020). Government Bridges the Rural-Urban Divide...146 Community Information Centres Nationwide Digital Gap. Available at: *https://www.sundaymail.co.zw/govt-bridges-rural-urban-digital-divide-146-community-information-centres-established-countrywide*
[27] Zimpost, 2016

3.2. 53% of the users are women

Access to internet for women, especially women in rural communities or with low income, has been limited due to various factors that include the cost of devices, cost of data, limited digital literacy skills and also societal perceptions and norms[28]. CICs have provided opportunities for women to have an equal access to information as reflected in this survey which is important in reversing gender inequalities.

Of those who responded to the survey, 53 % were women and 47% were male hence indicating the access and use of CICs by women in the communities. Providing access to the internet can promote gender equality and women's empowerment by ensuring that women are able to access information to make informed choices on elements of their lives, push their governments and other power holders to guarantee their rights, have greater agency and control over their lives, and more meaningfully, engage in public life[29].

Graph 2: % of Female and Male Respondents



N=247

3.3. Respondents with special needs

More so, Graph 3 below, shows that 9.3 percent of respondents to the survey on access to CICs also indicated that they had special needs. These included people with visual impairments and also limited mobility as shown in Table 2 below. However the available CICs are not disability-friendly as they lack specialised equipment to support their needs. For example, digital tools such as Rodger voice which uses voice to text recognition to convert voice to text so that people that are hard of hearing can hear phone calls by reading or Jaws which is a software program that enables visually impaired users to read the text displayed on their screens.

28 *The Sunday Mail*, 28 March 2021. Bridging The ICT Gender Gap in Zimbabwe *https://www.sundaymail.co.zw/bridging-the-ict-gender-gap-in-zimbabwe*

29 Available at: https://*www.article19.org/resources/tackling-gender-inequality-through-access-to-information/*. (Accessed on 31 October 2022).

Graph 3: % of people with special needs and those without

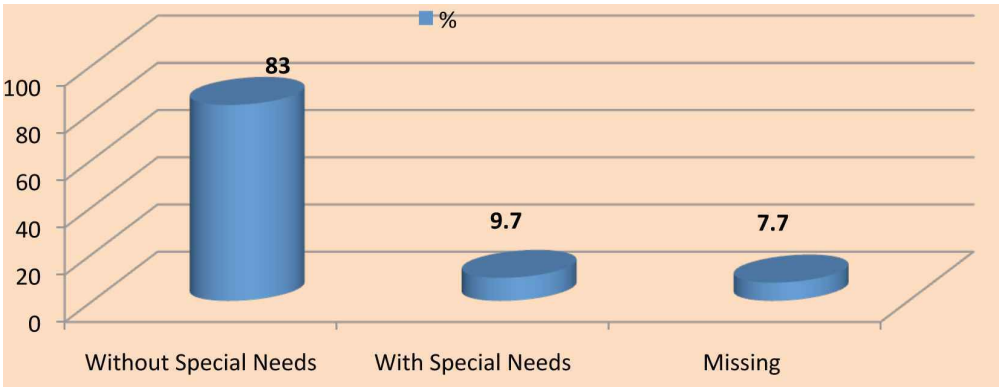


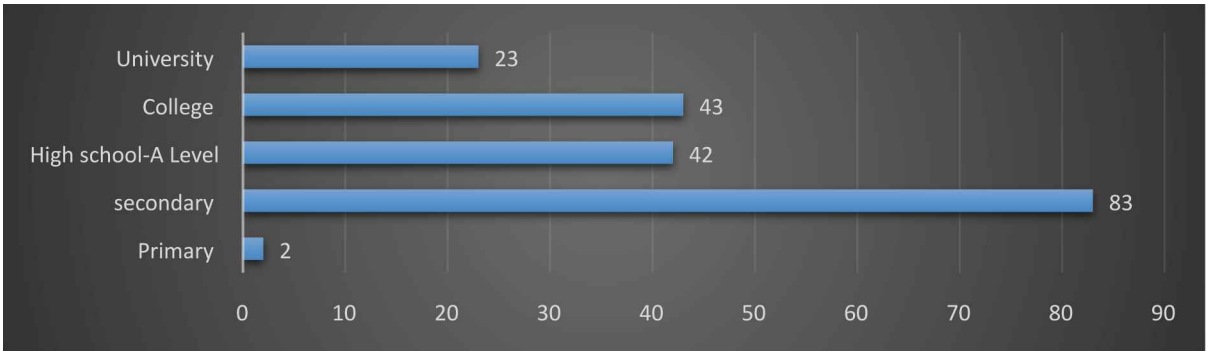
Table 2: Types of special needs

	FREQUENCY	PERCENT
	241	97.6
Asthmatic	1	.4
Can't walk	1	.4
Eye Sight	3	1.2
Lens	1	.4
Total	**247**	**100.0**

3.4. Highest Level of Education

Of the participants who responded to the survey, 83 % completed secondary school, 42% reached Advanced level and 43 % had completed college education while 23 % of the participants had university education. These statistics therefore speak to the need for basic knowledge and also digital literacy to facilitate the utilisation of community information centres. The levels of education also justify the main purpose for use of the CICs by the respondents, which is for research and education.

Graph 4: Highest level of education



3.4 Accessibility (Distance/Ease of access)

CICs are defined "as access points of information and communication technologies based on services and applications[30]. However, the survey showed that access to CICs for some respondents in areas such as Chibuwe in Chipinge, and Murehwa in Mashonaland East, is limited due to longer distances from their homes. In Macheke, respondents highlighted that they had no access to the centre as it is always closed and not open to the public.

We have a Community Information Centre which has been converted to personal use in Macheke. Equipment is there but it has been closed as we hear of squabbles between a former employee and the employer, wrote one respondent.

Likewise, in Mpopoma, Bulawayo, respondents have no access to the computer room; they are only allowed to use WI-FI while outside. They are exposed to noise pollution and at risk of attack or being verbally abused by beer drinkers or robbed of their gadgets as the centre is closer to the shops and the road. More so, those without their own computers or smartphones are not able to use the facility.

In Marondera, Mashonaland East Province, some respondents highlighted the issue of long and cumbersome processes when trying to access the centre thus, discouraging many people from using the facility. In some areas such as Nyanyadzi, Checheche, Murehwa and Marondera, respondents have access to the centre, but said the operating times posed a challenge. For example, school-going children want more time after school to complete their homework. More so, time allocated per each session per user in some CICs in Mpopoma and Lupane, where people are given tickets/tokens that are only valid for one hour, is limited.

Given that most CICs do not have power back-ups in the context of continuous power cuts and poor internet connections, the time lapses before the users finish their data or task in the event.

3.5 Use of the CICs

CICs have been established at Post Offices to offer the following services; Training facilities-equipped with computers, Internet Surfing, WIFI hotspots, Photocopying, Printing, Scanning, Faxing and Gaming services[31]. From the survey, 155 respondents, amounting to sixty four percent indicated that they used CICs for research and education.

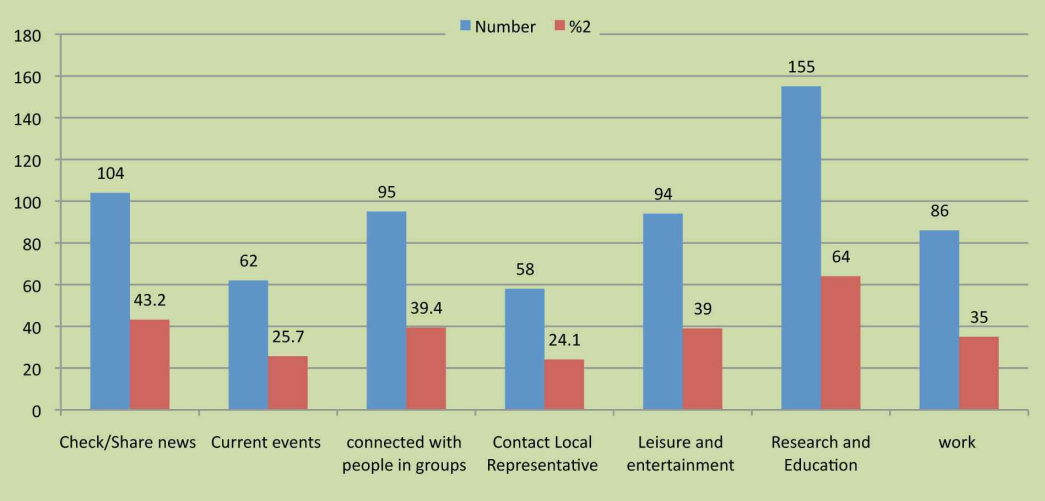
These include those doing their home works especially the Continuous Assessment Learning Activity (CALA), which is a student assessment system that was implemented in the final term of 2021 in preparation for the 2021 Zimbabwe Schools Examination Council (ZIMSEC) examinations[32] for primary students and research for university students and other professionals. Meanwhile, 104 respondents constituting 43%, used CICs to check or share news, 38% of respondents used CICs for leisure and entertainment and connecting with others. In addition, 35% reported having used CICs for work, while the lowest, was 24.1 % who used CICs to contact local representatives. More so, at the provincial level, 27% of respondents in Masvingo and 21 % in Manicaland, used CICs for education and research. This includes CALA for both primary and secondary learners. However, the use of CICs also includes learning literacy and digital skills and it is also determined by the available equipment. For example, some CICs are one-stop shops and can cover a wide range of services such as printing, gaming, and internet, among others, while some do not even have computers.

30 Faroqi, Siddiquee and Ullah (2019). Sustainability of CICs in developing Countries. p. 113.

31 *http://www.zimpost.co.zw/bus_center*

32 *Sunday News*, 05 June 2022. What are the objectives of CALA?. Available at: *https://www.sundaynews.co.zw/what-are-the-objectives-of-cala/*. (Accessed on 25 October 2022).

Graph 5: Use of the CICs



3.6 Equipment/Infrastructure

CICs do not give the necessary tools such as data to access the internet. Computers are few yet the pressure to use them and demand is high. CICs in Chibuwe in Chipinge, do not have computers; people have to bring their own gadgets which is disadvantageous to those who do not own gadgets.

In Mpopoma and Macheke, computers are available, but the centres are always locked. In areas where computers are available as in Maphisa, Chinhoyi, Lupane, Nyanyadzi, Checheche and Chipinge Central, they are not enough, causing pressure and accusations of favouritism against the staff members.

In 2020, Minister Muswere expressed that budgetary constraints meant that the laptops and other gadgets which are supposed to be in these centres are yet to be acquired.[33]Compared to other sectors, ICT allocation as percentage of total budget was 0.5% in 2021 compared to 3.9% for the President's office and cabinet for example. However, despite the low budget allocation, in terms of actual expenditure for 2021, data for the first 9 months shows that in that time only 61% of the ICT budget had been expended whilst the President's office for example, had a budget utilisation of 111%, i.e. over budget.[34] This shows poor prioritisation and lack of political will towards policy implementation by the government. Moreover, in almost all the CICs where the survey was conducted, internet infrastructure is very poor. Though many use WI-FI, it is very slow and in some cases not available. In Checheche, users at times connect their devices to the WI-FI from the nearby school. Respondents from Maphisa, Gweru, Binga, Chinhoyi and Sekusile, among others, have all cited poor WI-FI connection as one of the barriers to CIC use.

During the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the government instructed Zimpost to ensure that people visiting the CICs have free internet access until the end of this year[35]. Other useful equipment such as chairs are not enough to accommodate all users during peak times at CICs such Chibuwe, Checheche, Nyanyadzi, Maphisa and Chipinge Central. In addition, sockets for charging gadgets, for example, in Checheche and Zengeza in Harare, are not there.

33 F. Mudzingwa. 26 May, 2020. *TechZim*. 4 Years On, What Has Become of POTRAZ & ICT Ministry's Community Information Centres? Available at: *https://www.techzim.co.zw/2020/05/4-years-on-what-has-become-of-potraz-ict-ministrys-community-information-centres/*. (Accessed on 25 October 2022).

34 L. Sengere, 31 January, 2022. *TechZim*0.36% budget allocation for ICT makes you wonder, would 'command ICT' serve us well?. Available at: *https://www.techzim.co.zw/2022/01/0-36-budget-allocation-for-ict-wonder-if-command-ict-would-serve-us-well/*. (Accessed on 26 October 2022).

35

3.7 Sustainability

According to the Zimbabwean CICs concept paper (2016), CICs would be sustained and depend on long-term commitment of key staff, the long-term stability and finance and the ability to remain relevant to community needs[36].

However, results from the survey have shown that staff members for CICs in places like Chibuwe, Macheke, Murehwa, Checheche and Mpopoma in Bulawayo, are reported to either be absent or quickly closing the centres and focus on other issues. Insights from the literature review have shown that a number of centres have been established, but a few have survived after the initial period of funding lapsed[37]. Lack of a reliable Wi-Fi and computers is also preventing other users from seeing the importance of CICs because they could not afford either smartphones or computers, hence being digitally excluded.

This is in line with Gollakota and Doshi (2011) who point out that CICs do not live up to their potential as most rural communities did not comprehend the importance of ICT[38]. A small percentage seems to be sustainable in the long term.

More so, the sustainability of CICs in Zimbabwe is threatened by allegations of corruption and wrongdoing at the ministry. For instance, the Ministry of ICT, Postal, and Courier Services was charged with borrowing $10 million, $194,564, and $95,000 from POTRAZ without the approval of the Treasury to purchase the government's stake in Telecel Zimbabwe and acquisition of a vehicle for the Minister and Deputy Minister (Win Mlambo)[39].

That amount of money could have been used to buy equipment for CICs thus, expanding access to information in communities.

In addition, security issues have been reported in areas such as Mpopoma where the CIC facility is not fenced and anyone can just pass-by. More so, in 2021 Chief Matthew Chitemamuswe Chiweshe, during the official opening of St Albert's Village Information Centre, called upon the Zimbabwe Republic Police to help in protecting their newly installed IT infrastructure since incidences of crime were on the rise in that area[40].

4.0 CONCLUSION

The research established that CICs are critical in improving access to information in rural and marginalised communities. They enable citizens to make informed decisions as well as participate in national development processes. Education, research, work and current affairs were found to be some of the positive roles that CICs are playing in communities.

However, the research also identified some structural limitations that are hindering CICs from playing an effective role and meeting their set objectives. In general, CICs were found to have a bias towards Growth Points (rural business centres), as this is where Post Office structures are found.

Inadequate funding of the CICs, lack of equipment, poorly trained staff, long distances to the CICs, poor connectivity or unstable network, sometimes lack of data or power, and the lack of consideration of people with

36 The Zimbabwean CICs concept paper (2016).

37 UNESCO (2013)

38 Gollakota and Doshi (2011). Diffusion of technological innovation in Rural- Areas . *Journal of Corporate Citizenship*. (41), 69-82.

39 L.S.M Kabweza June 24, 2016. *TechZim*. AG: ICT Minister Mandiwanzira got loans from POTRAZ without gov approval. Available at: *https://www.techzim.co.zw/2016/06/ag-reveals-mandiwanzira-loans-potraz/*. (Accessed on 26 October 2022).

40 Muswere, *The Standard* and *Newsday*, 10 October, 2021. Village Information Centres key in building a digital economy. Available at: *https://www.newsday.co.zw/2021/10/village-information-centres-key-in-building-a-digital-economy-muswere*. (Accessed on 26 October 2022).

special needs, were found to be some of the barriers inhibiting access to and use of CICs.

In addition, the USF and REF were identified as key in addressing resource challenges around the operation of CICs. However, the usage or accounting of these two funds were found opaque and there is little public information on them. Parliament and civil society have not paid much attention to these two streams of public funds. Therefore, CICs as constituted, are not fulfilling the objectives that they were set to achieve. There is need for advocacy to reform accountability and transparent processes around the establishment and operationalisation of CICs as well as investing in boosting the capacities and quality of services offered by CICs and expanding them beyond Rural Growth Points[41].

5.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations proffered here are based on a reading of what constitutes the major challenges towards the full functionality of CICs and their role in the development of what are supposed to be the host communities.

These are summarised below as:

1. Provision of adequate funding for full functionality: For the CICs to be fully functional, they need to have adequate provision of equipment including gadgets for accessing internet services, such as desktop computers, laptops, tablets or smartphones, as well as data. As our previous research on access to information in rural communities notes, the biggest 'game changer' in this regard remains a more prudent use of the Universal Services Fund (USF). The USF is a readily-available pool of money collected by the government annually from all corporate players in the telecommunications industry. However, the current state of affairs is that there is little transparency in terms of how this fund is disbursed, with parliament or civil society failing to provide the necessary oversight over this fund.

2. Expanding the CIC concept to basic social services provision: One of the sought outcomes of establishing CICs is enhancing access to social services in target areas through incorporating the use of ICTs. It may be prudent for stakeholders to also consider expanding the concept of CICs to include service centres such as those providing health (clinics, hospitals, etc). Beyond expanding access through these centres, this is also a potential avenue towards linking access to such services with the ICT component to access. This must be tied to an integrated system that can merge various social services offered by the government within a 'one-stop-shop' concept. For example, a person visiting a clinic is also able to check their voter registration status, or even get access to other information on weather patterns which aids their farming endeavours.

3. Devolve the CIC concept to smaller rural business centres: One of the key barriers to accessing CICs was noted as the issue of distance especially in rural areas. Having originally been developed around making use of former post offices which were not as widespread in rural areas, the current conceptualisation is limited in terms of reach. It is therefore prudent to consider expanding reach to more rural business centres. In addition, schools can also play an important role in this regard as they may already have the necessary infrastructure to provide such services.

4. Improving accessibility for People with Disabilities (PWDs): The bulk of CICs currently do not offer services that are PWD-friendly. Infrastructure development has to be prioritised so that these centres can support people with various disabilities and improve their access to services offered at the centres.

5. Staff training and motivation: Staff mandated with running these CICs need to be adequately skilled to assist community members. They also need to be remunerated commensurately such that they are motivated to carry out their set tasks.

[41] These are big rural business centers which were earmarked to be hubs of industrialising rural economies.

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