

South Africa's ICT-to-the-poor Policy: Does it Reveal the Potentials of a Developmental State?

Einar Braathen¹ and Jenny Schaanning²

¹Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research (NIBR), International Department, Oslo, Norway

²University of Oslo, Department of Political Science, Oslo, Norway

einar.braathen@nibr.no

New South Africa's 1994 'Reconstruction and Development Programme' was comprehensive and included telecommunications and information technology, with the aim "to provide universal affordable access for all as rapidly as possible". Several instruments were designed by the ANC government to redistribute resources in order to extend services to poor people and previously disadvantaged communities, such as the Universal Service and Access Agency of South Africa (USAASA, responsible for the Universal Service and Access Fund). Under Mbeki the fast development of the ICTs was emphasised as a key to achieve growth through increased integration to global markets. More than 10 years on, South Africa can see universal access to telephony thanks to the market-driven 'cell phone revolution'. However, the access to computers and the internet has stagnated in absolute terms and relative to other developing countries. In 2009 only 8.8 per cent were classified as internet users, against 11.4 per cent in the crisis-ridden poor neighbour, Zimbabwe.

The paper, first, tries to explain the failure of the ICT-to-the-poor policy in South Africa. The paper is based on a recent case-study of USAASA and its interventions towards poor communities in KwaZulu-Natal. Policy transfers from abroad, through international NGOs and donor agencies, is one factor discussed. USAASA has stuck to the ideology of 'community-based development' and public-private cooperation through 'local entrepreneurs'. Other policy options such as universal delivery of ICT networks, services and skills through the public education and library service delivery have not been prioritized. The understaffing and ineffectiveness of the public agencies involved is another factor. These factors may result from the turn towards neo-liberal and market-oriented policies after 1996. Second, the paper links this sector analysis to the discourse on the developmental state with particular reference to Peter Evans (1995 and 2010) and Edigheji et al (2010). The assumption is that development in the social area as much as in the economic-technological area requires certain state qualities such as an enlightened and coherent policy leadership, effective bureaucracy and fruitful cooperation between state and society. Rather few of these qualities can be observed in the case of South Africa.