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Community networks newsletter: Why we need to rethink financing for connectivity to bridge the digital divide

By APCNews -- 29 April 2024 | Updated 10 June 2024

Image from the Internet Society's collection on the Mamaila Community Network (South Africa). Photo: © Nyani Quarmyne

"The digital divide is not a problem the market alone will solve; we need to think differently to really expedite its closure." The quote from lawyer Adriana Labardini laid the issue out clearly, and the diverse experiences of community-centred connectivity around the world have been proving her point. Yet, evidence shows that these alternatives have historically struggled to access the capital they need and that there is only limited grant funding available.

This issue brings together instances that show the success of community networks, but also some indicating that currently there is a gap, and help from a range of stakeholders is needed in order to successfully support communities to bridge the digital divide. Information about ongoing grants and funding opportunities is also summarised below.

Welcome to the 68th monthly round-up of developments impacting your local access networks and community-based initiatives.

Routing for Communities podcast

- Community-centred connectivity alternatives are offering reliable services at affordable costs in areas ignored by large telecommunications companies, such as those featured in the first season of the Routing for Communities podcast. But their journey shows why rethinking financing for connectivity is an important step towards bridging the digital divide. Read more.

- In this podcast, we invite you on a journey to discover community-led experiences and listen to the life stories of those connecting themselves while defending the fundamental rights and well-being of their communities. The entire season is available on the podcast page, and also on Google Podcasts, Apple Podcasts and Spotify.

Community networks news and stories

- Community networks in Africa stand as beacons of innovation and resilience. Through a series of four webinars, the Tanda Community Network, along with APC and Rhizomatica's LocNet initiative, helped with capacity-building and studied such networks' challenges and triumphs. Read more.

- In Kenya, WACC is partnering with the Kenya ICT Action Network (KICTANet) to spur economic empowerment among people living in Nairobi's Mathare Valley through dependable and cost-effective community-run internet. Read more.

- Have you ever stopped to think about how technology is changing the lives of persons with disabilities? In a two-part article, KICTANet reflects on how community networks can support inclusion. Read more here and here.

- This inspiring video takes us on a journey through the community networks of Salta, Argentina. Watch now. [Available in Spanish.]

- The Institute for Social Entrepreneurship in Asia (ISEA) is is implementing a project, "Model Building of Community Networks linked to Social Enterprise and Local Economic Development, in Bangladesh, China and the Philippines. You can find out more and check out some beautiful pictures of visits to partner communities on ISEA's social media here and here.

Gendered experiences

- A project run by the Woman of Uganda Network (WOUGNET) and supported by WACC is strengthening community-based connectivity in the rural north of the country, with a particular focus on bridging the digital gender gap. Read more.

- Connecting the Indigenous women of the South American Chaco: learn more about the connectivity hubs developed by the NANUM Mujeres Conectadas (NANUM Connected Women) initiative. Led and managed locally, this community network is unlocking new economic opportunities. Read more.

- From Colombia, the civil society organisation Colnodo celebrated the inauguration of the first community network in Montes de María region. Called Red Almagrande, its deployment is part of the initiative, Connecting Opportunities for Rural Women Entrepreneurs in Colombia. Read more. [Available in Spanish.]

- The Global Digital Inclusion Partnership (GDIP) launched a new research report, Connected Resilience: Gendered Experiences of Meaningful Connectivity through a Global Pandemic, which provides a comprehensive overview of the challenges and opportunities in achieving gender digital inclusion. Read more.

Enabling policy and regulation

- The digital development strategy 2024 to 2030 sets out the UK government's plan to work with developing countries for an inclusive, responsible and sustainable digital future. It includes the promotion of international collaboration in support of local solutions like community networks. Read more.

- To discuss policies for digital inclusion in rural, indigenous and quilombola areas of Brazil, the country's Ministry of Communications received representatives from the Community Networks Committee. One of the points under discussion is the use of the Brazilian Telecommunications Services Universalisation Fund to support community connectivity. Read more. [Available in Portuguese.]

- The project Connecting People: Implementing Community Networks with IMT spectrum held its the first learning camp in Colombia from 26 February to 2 March 2024. The project aims to contribute to the creation of a regulatory environment that enables communities to establish their

own networks using IMT (International Mobile Telecommunications) technology. Read more. [Available in Spanish.]

Publications, research and toolkits

- The Brazilian Network Information Center (NIC.br) just launched the report, Meaningful connectivity: Measurement proposals and the portrait of the population in Brazil. While tracing the achievements and challenges in the country, the report points to the promotion of community networks as an alternative to bridge digital divides. Read more. [Also available in Portuguese.]

- You can also find out more about the findings of the new report on meaningful connectivity in Brazil through pieces from civil society organisations, such as the Nupef Institute and Projeto Saúde e Alegria, that were present at the launch. [Available in Portuguese.]

- How do you build a community network to bring the internet to your community? With this "DIY Toolkit", the Internet Society has a simple approach to answer the question and provides links to additional resources. Read more.

- The Colmena open source media production software celebrated its launch in April. The toolbox allows users to record, edit, conduct remote interviews, live-stream, meet, share files and publish from almost any digital device. Read more.

Events

- Happening on 29 and 30 April 2024 in Brazil, the upcoming NETmundial+10 meeting will be an important space to ensure that civil society's priorities and perspectives are strongly represented in key internet policy and governance processes. Read more.

- On the eve of NETmundial+10, on 28 April, the event, Net Neutrality 10 Years Later: The Path to Meaningful Connectivity, will revisit prevailing challenges in light of the insights gleaned from our journey so far. Read more.

- Registrations for the WSIS+20 Forum High-Level Event, taking place from 27 to 31 May 2024, is open and free for all stakeholders. Read more.

- Call for proposals for the 13th edition of RightsCon, which takes place in February 2025, is open until 2 June 2024. Read more.

- The Wireless Battle Mesh is a non-commercial, volunteer-run annual convention that takes a deep dive into technical and political issues related to mesh networking, wireless community networks and so on. This year's edition is happening in Cyprus from 15 to 19 May. Read more.

- The forum, Telecommunications in remote areas and Indigenous peoples: Trends, opportunities and perspectives for Central America, held on 23 April 2024, analysed experiences and regulatory and public policy trends in the region. Its recordings are available on the Redes A.C. YouTube channel here and here; you can also discover some highlights and quotes on their social media. [Available in Spanish.]

- This article is a reflection on the challenges and opportunities for Indigenous communities' communication in Central America in the light of different events taking place in the region. Read more. [Available in Spanish.]

Funding opportunities

- The Free and Open Source (FOSS) Sustainability Fund is now open for applications until 17 May 2024. This fund helps ensure that the free and open source software projects critical to internet freedom and human rights have the resources and support needed for long-term maintenance, security and community well-being. Read more.

- The global 2024 IEEE Connecting the Unconnected Challenge is inviting submission of unique solutions to bridge the digital divide. Deadline is 5 June 2024. Read More.

- Safety for Voices: These subgrants are designed to support the development and implementation of holistic safety strategies, including research, advocacy and capacity-building, through initiatives that explore the intersections between technology and land and environmental issues. The deadline is just round the corner: 29 April. Read more.

- The Research Grant Program from the Internet Society Foundation supports global research collaborations that advance the understanding of the internet and its value for all. Deadline is 14 May 2024. Read more.

- The first call for applications of the ICANN Grant Program is now live, which will make funding available to develop projects that support the growth of a single, open and globally interoperable internet. The application window will close on 24 May 2024. Read more.

- The Women in the Digital Economy Fund (WiDEF) is inviting local entities to submit applications for grants and technical support to scale existing solutions that have made measurable progress toward closing the gender digital divide in their contexts, and contribute to transformative approaches to digital inclusion. The deadline for submissions is 6 May 2024. Read more.

- The Digital Infrastructure Insights Fund is a global multi-funder initiative for academics and practitioners to better understand how open digital infrastructure is built and deployed. This open call runs till 2 June 2024. Read more.

Community networks learning repository

This repository is a collective online space to store and exchange resources that can be useful in training processes focused on materials made for and by community networks.

In this issue, we would like to highlight a new report just added to the repository. It takes an evidence-based approach to describe the Internet Governance Forum's main accomplishments since the last World Summit of the Information Society (WSIS) review in 2016. One of its highlights is on how the IGF has served as a catalyst for community connectivity.

Find out more.

This newsletter is part of the Local Networks (LocNet) initiative, an initiative led by APC in partnership with Rhizomatica that aims to directly support the work of community networks and to contribute to an enabling ecosystem for the emergence and growth of community networks and other community-based connectivity activities in Africa, Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean. You can read more about the initiative here, here, and here.

Previous editions of this newsletter are available here.

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One more thing! If you have comments about the newsletter or information relevant to the topic that you would like us to include in the next edition, please share it with us here.