

SNII drives collaborative rural development programme

The Seda Nelson Mandela Bay ICT Incubator (SNII) has announced it is ready to team with various stakeholders in finding solutions to reduce cost of telecommunications and internet access for people living in rural areas.



©Peter Wollinga via [123RF](#)

Phumza Mfenyana, executive manager of SNII made the announcement during the third Forum for Universal Affordable Access to Communications in South Africa held at SNII in Newton Park earlier this month. The event was hosted by the Right to Know Campaign and the University of the Western Cape (UWC) and included discussions on the creation of a coalition to work towards Universal Affordable Access to Communications in South Africa. The event held in Port Elizabeth is the third one after similar meetings which were held in Johannesburg and Cape Town.

Strength in collaboration

Carlos Rey-Moreno, from UWC, who chaired the meeting at SNII said the forum was an exploratory exercise to see whether there is a willingness between institutions and businesses in the Eastern Cape to collaborate and engage in such a coalition. For instance there are examples in the province like Zenzeleni Networks Mankosi that is offering lower call rates are charged for people living in its communities. “The Zenzeleni Network is a good example to follow where communities can replicate the model to make communication more affordable.”

Zenzeleni, or ‘do it for yourselves’ in isiXhosa, is the result of a partnership between UWC and the Mankosi community in rural Eastern Cape. The community, with help from researchers, created and owns its own telephone and internet company. The business model is designed so that local calls are free and calls to other networks cost half of what they would normally cost to other networks. Data costs have also been reduced and users pay a tenth of the market price.

Mfenyana said SNII provides services to a wide range of companies within the ICT sector. “Our strategic direction as an institution is to do things that are relevant to the industry we are working in, which include focusing on township economy supporting industrialisation, women in ICT, and access to information for rural areas. To do this we have to partner with organisations that think alike, so our services are part of a bigger collective. People here (at the meeting) can contribute significantly to the potential work similar to the Mankosi project where jobs are being created and there is access to information,” he said.

Masbulele Siya, the local person driving the Zenzeleni Networks Mankosi said there was “a lot of potential to grow from this project. There is an urgent need of internet and communication connections for rural communities. This is a project by the community and for the community,” Siya said.

Zelalem Shibeshi, a lecturer in the Department of Computer Science at the University of Fort Hare, added that universities have a major role to play in rolling out the plans of the forum. The University of Fort Hare, together with Rhodes University, runs a large and long-term multidisciplinary project called Siyakhula Living Lab. The project, whose main site is on the Wild Coast, in Transkei, focuses on deploying the internet and computing infrastructure in schools for the benefit of the schools and the communities surrounding them. The main problem addressed is to make the infrastructure financially sustainable. For that reason, a software system, called Teleweaver, is being developed across the two universities.

Fertile ground

South Africa, being among the most unequal countries in the world, is fertile ground for such projects, Rey-Moreno said: “This inequality is reflected in almost every aspect of daily life. The fact that most innovations are driven by economic purposes means that intellectual capital is directed to design solutions for those who can afford them. This is particularly evident in the access to electronic communications, where rich people are enjoying state-of-the-art bandwidth rates and services, while others cannot even afford to make a call.”

Mfenyana echoed that South Africa strives to be a competitive country in a globally competitive world but this is not possible if there are so many who are deprived from having access to communication and information services living in rural areas and some townships.

“We have to stop working in silos. Our education has to be of such a nature that primary schools are communicating and connected to universities to discuss programmes. The involvement of higher education institutions such as UWC, University of Fort Hare and Rhodes University is crucial. Because economic development and global competitiveness has to be underpinned by good research and development which higher education institutions can provide.”

It is anticipated that the Eastern Cape Forum for Universal Affordable Access to Communications in South Africa will be held regularly, provided there is funding with a commitment from SNII and Fort Hare to host it before the end of the academic year.