FRAMING ICT ACCESS IN RURAL AFRICA

Gertjan van Stam, gertjan.vanstam@worksgroup.org

Scientific and Industrial Research and Development Centre, Harare, Zimbabwe

SIRDC

TILBURG UNIVERSITY

INTRODUCTION

Providing ICT Access in rural Africa is constrained by environment, skills, and culture.

Exogenous framing masks disconnect between (local) needs and (foreign) solutions.

To *whom* do academics make suggestions? Local practitioners need rooting in definitions and framing aligned with local reality.

The ongoing study of 'ICT access in rural Africa' includes 14 years of ethnographic observations in rural Zambia and Zimbabwe.
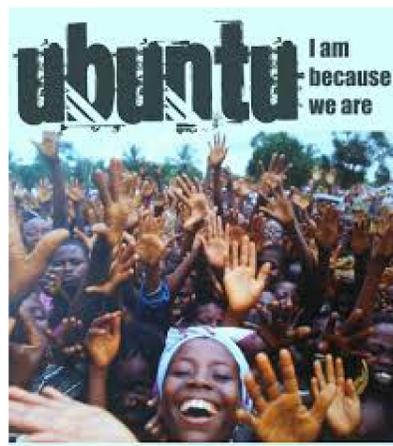
FRAMING

Need to overcome coloniality, colonial ethnology and epistemic positionality in the West.
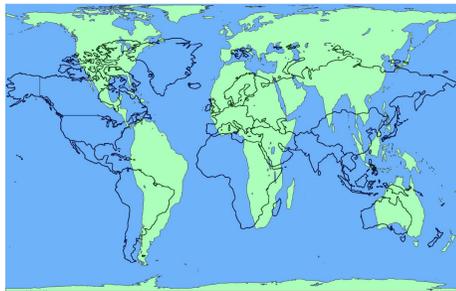
Obstacles include foreign language, unfamiliarity of research with indigenous understanding of meaning, framing, concepts and narratives.

African reality contains, for instance, Ubuntu, pervasive orality, and economies of giving.


'INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES'

Current ICTs do not necessarily align with day-to-day experience in rural Africa.
Engineers might be experts on mechanisms, the community is expert on needs and impact.
ICTs emerge from non-inclusive research and design processes, mostly outside of the continent.
Interventions often involve foreign agents that bring ICT *to* rural areas instead of *with* rural areas.

Needs:
ICT to incorporate relational expressions of technology
Definitions embedded in context
Understanding the subjectivity of needs
Provisioning of holistic functionalities

Skills:
ICT experts to live and work in rural areas, not to drive in from town (only)
Integration of subject, object and functionality
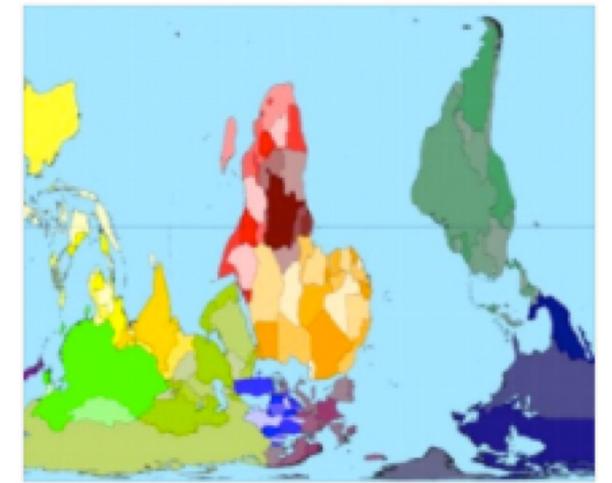
'ACCESS'

Meaningfull access to ICT involves complex physical, digital, and human aspects, and relationships. It is not about the 'have and have-nots', but about the gradation of access.

Access statistics are urban-dominated. Although most people live in rural areas, rural realities are not substantiated.
ICTs supporting One-to-One or One-to-Many do not align with indigenous culture.
Local framing involves relational aspects, e.g. power distance, judgment of character and assessment of behavior.

'RURAL AREAS'

No standard definition of rural areas exists
– Zambia: rural = "not urban area". Government reports 61.2% of Zambians live in rural areas & 6,268 out of 7,576 schools are in rural areas.
– South Africa: rural area = "under-serviced area", can be a peri-urban high-density area.

Context of African philosophy, if such could be depicted, does not align with Western philosophy.

Culture frames acceptable behaviour. Physical presence of foreigners influences environments.
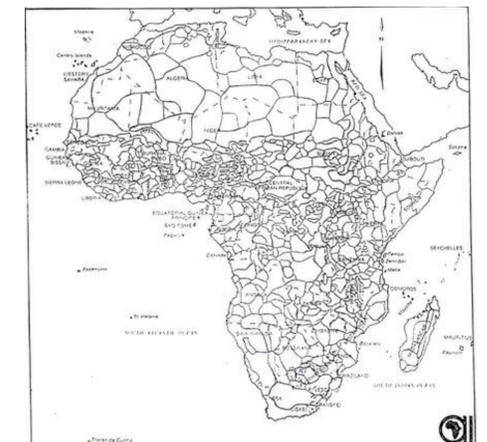
'AFRICA'

Demarcation is legacy of colonial past, geared towards domination and exploitation. The lopsided geography of information masks a dominant framing inspired by imperialism.

Indigenous people bear strong alliance to ethnic groupings.

Major lack of knowledge about indigenous intellectual property rights and local framing relegates local knowledge to sub-alternaty.

ORIENTATION

CULTURE

MAP 2: SUPERIMPOSED ETHNIC MAP OF AFRICA
(Source: Africa Institute and De Blij, 1977: 102)

CONCLUSIONS

The availability and functionality of physical ICT infrastructure and equipment does not suffice for ICT access in rural Africa.

Definitions, understanding of meaning, and epistemology are contextual.

Perspectives embedded in African paradigm and social systems must be understood.

Pan-African critique of ubiquitous and invidious influence of Western values and research is necessary.

Research from an African community perspective, incorporating African worldviews, helps to de-colonialise and de-marginalise African academia.