

Mali CLICs - Establishing Community Learning and Information Centers in Underserved Malian Communities

5/03-9/05

Status: Completed



Background

A CLIC is a telecenter, a public access point where the community can come to access information and communication technologies for a fee. It is more than a cybercafe in the sense that 1) it provides a range of services that cybercafes do not provide, such as training, content and customer support; and 2) it is community-driven and it has a clear development mandate to serve the community's information and communication needs.

Project Objectives

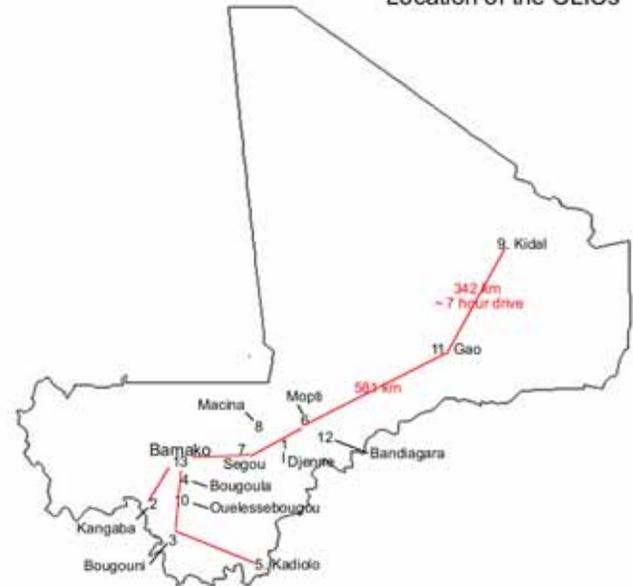
The purpose of the Community Learning and Information Center (CLIC) project was “to accelerate economic, social and political growth by providing residents in thirteen underserved Malian communities with access to easily accessible development information and affordable access to information and communication technology (ICT), high-value training and locally appropriate content.”

Implementation

Partners

The project was implemented by AED through a dot-ORG Associate Award with core funding from USAID as well as an Unlimited Potential Grant from Microsoft. In Mali, the CLIC project team led by Aminata Fofana Maiga, managed the project under the umbrella of a Malian NGO, INAGEF. Other partners included the Peace Corps, providing volunteer support in some of the CLICs, and World Links, which provided training for the CLIC managers.

Location of the CLICs



Strategies

In the broader context of the Government's goal of connecting all 703 communes of the country, the CLIC project was also a means of testing a range of organizational settings to identify viable public access models that could be expanded to the 703 communes. In that context, the project worked in some very challenging environments where local capacity, communication infrastructure, literacy and purchasing power, and even at times a reliable source of power, are lacking or in short supply. In other words, rather than pick only locations where the chances of success were maximized, the locations were picked to test different models.

To achieve this objective, thirteen Community Learning and Information Centers (CLICs) were established within new or renovated buildings and hosted by local institutions. USAID/Mali selected the 13 locations based on 1) the need to test a range of potential models; and 2) the potential to support existing USAID

strategic objectives in Mali. Two CLICs are located in IFMs (Teachers' Colleges), four are hosted by Mayors' offices, two are hosted by NGOs, two are hosted by local radio stations, two are hosted by parastatals (Office du Niger in Macina and OHVN in Ouélessébougou) and the last CLIC to be established is located within a school.

A standard model, developed based on global best practices and experiences in other countries, was applied to all 13 CLICs. The same equipment was purchased and installed, the same organizational structures were established to link the CLICs' management teams to the host institutions and the broader community and the same training was provided. The CLICs were initially provided with a connectivity solution through the national provider, SOTELMA. When this solution proved ineffective, ten of the 13 CLICs were provided with a high quality VSAT connection (either 64 or 128K depending on the CLIC) and the three remaining CLICs were connected through a different system provided by MEGASAT, a locally based provider.

A number of strategies were implemented to maximize the potential for sustainability, from marketing, capacity building, the creation of an association of CLICs and the use of vouchers to create demand.

Results and Impact

At the end of a 29-months project period, the following results and lessons can be highlighted.

Financial Sustainability

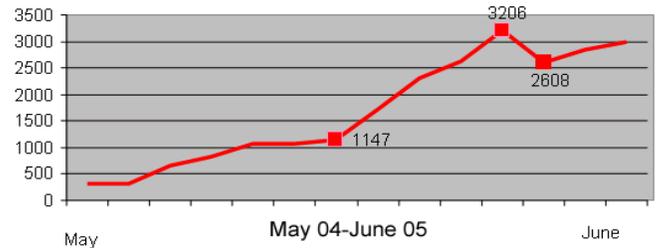
Results

- 25,000 clients paid for services at the CLICs.
- The CLICs generated approximately 22,000,000 CFA (~US\$44,000) in revenues.
- 2,015,000 CFA (~US\$4,000) were distributed to the CLICs and subsequently

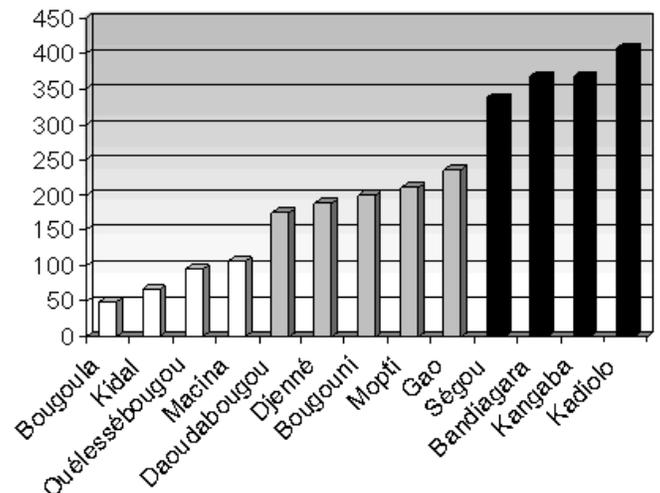
used as vouchers by members of the community to pay for CLIC services.

- Seven out of 13 CLICs have the potential to become financially sustainable - perhaps more if bandwidth sharing is deployed successfully in more locations.

Progression of the Number of CLIC Clients over Time



Average Number of Clients per Month (1/05-7/05)



Lessons

Because of the experimental nature of the selection of the location of the sites for the CLICs, the set of conditions necessary for financial sustainability are not present at all of the 13 locations. During the project's duration, the CLICs received decreasing subsidies covering their operating costs, including the internet connection. By the end of the project, the subsidies would be eliminated and the CLICs would have to sustain themselves on their own or find other sources of funding. The VSAT connection, which is a significant cost for the CLICs, is going to be very expensive to maintain. The primary option tested at the end of the project was to collect

additional monthly revenues by sharing the bandwidth with other local institutions.

Financial sustainability is dependent on human, organizational and technical sustainability. Capacity building challenges, organizational challenges and technical issues can all contribute to financial un-sustainability or financial instability.

People – Capacity Building

Results

- The local CLIC project team, operating from Bamako under the umbrella of INAGEF, played a critical role in building up the capacity of the CLIC managers, many of whom had very limited computer skills at the beginning of the project.
- Approximately 500 individuals at the community level received basic computer training (introduction to computers, MS Word and Excel). Two hundred thirty-four (234) of these individuals used prepaid vouchers to pay for the training. The rest of the trainees paid for the training out of their own pocket.
- On average, training represents 17% of total CLIC revenues. The CLICs in Kidal (30%), Bougouni (29%) and Mopti (30%) are significantly above this average.

Lessons

Capacity building has been a key component of the project and has tried to address both the needs of CLIC managers and consultative committees on the one hand, and the needs of the end users on the other hand.

For CLIC managers and consultative committee members, training workshops were organized both at the national level, bringing all CLICs together, and at the regional level, bringing 2-4 CLICs together based on their geographic location to minimize travel and to facilitate small group sessions. The training has ranged from management issues, including financial management, marketing, and outreach, to technical matters, ranging from the basics of computer use, computer

maintenance and more advanced software to create web pages.

These efforts have been overall successful, yet not sufficient. There is a continuous need for training at all levels. Existing skills and knowledge need to be reinforced and taught to new staff to address turnover. New skills need to be introduced.

The use of a Training-of-Trainer approach has been relatively successful and should be reinforced. The capacity of CLIC staff to provide training to others at the community level is uneven, and the capacity of the community to pay for such training is also wide ranging depending on the CLIC.

The more un-anticipated benefits, brought about by the emergence of a network of CLIC managers (or peer network) who regularly communicate with each other via Yahoo Messenger and help each other solve problems, need to be reinforced as well and better leveraged.

Organizational Aspect



Photo: Bougouni CLIC, Members of the Consultative Committee and CLIC staff.

A major reason for selecting a variety of host institutions at the project's inception was to test different models. While no overwhelming

winner emerged, three types of institutions appear to have advantages.

- Radio stations and Mayors' offices have the advantage of being well-known information access points for the community as a whole.
- IFMs have the advantage of being institutions of learning with a substantial potential market among students and teachers who are on site, literate and have some purchasing power.

These advantages, however, cannot be capitalized on in a problematic location, the absence of a market, or with poor management. Within each CLIC, establishing and enforcing proper procedures and establishing clear roles and responsibilities for the staff, members of the Consultative Committee and the host institution is key to good overall management and therefore long-term sustainability.

Technical Issues

Power issues have had an impact on the operations of some of the CLICs, making it difficult to operate regular hours, forcing them to interrupt training sessions and affecting their ability to provide key services. Whether there is no grid power at all (as in Bougoula) or the power is unreliable (Djenné & Ouélessébougou), a range of solutions exist. Some solutions may require a significant up-front investment in equipment (solar panels, multifunctional platform, and battery backup systems) but others, such as adjusting the CLIC's operating hours, may be easy to implement.

Connectivity was initially provided through the national provider (SOTELMA). When this solution proved ineffective, VSAT connectivity was provided to 10 CLICs and an alternative local provider (MEGASAT) provided connectivity for the 3 remaining CLICs. The MEGASAT solution proved unreliable and the VSAT solution is expensive for most CLICs to maintain beyond the period of project funding. Other providers, such as IKATEL, are quickly

expanding their reach throughout the country and may be able to provide cheaper alternatives. Other options that are already being implemented in some CLICs involve sharing the bandwidth with local partners.



Photo: Djenne CLIC, Mali.

Equipment repair and replacement is likely to become a growing challenge given the environmental conditions at all the CLICs. The CLIC Association is likely to play a key role in facilitating repairs and purchase of new equipment but the CLICs will be responsible for providing the necessary funds. This will require sound financial management and planning.

Delays in the delivery of the evaporative coolers combined with lack of familiarity with the equipment and how it should be installed resulted in their total ineffectiveness. An attempt towards the end of the project to install a cost-effective remedy using underground tubes to cool air before it enters the machine was also unsuccessful. Faulty installation and lack of familiarity with what was a new technology for the project implementers is to blame rather than the technology itself. This experience points to the importance of proper planning and technical support when introducing new technologies. This is in sharp contrast to the multifunctional platform technology that is very well known in Mali and was effectively deployed with local capacity in

Bougoula to provide affordable power to the CLIC and the community.

Content

Results

The CLICs have at their disposal a collection of 35 CDs/DVDs covering a wide range of locally relevant development-related topics in French and local languages as well as a significant collection of web-based materials on health, agriculture, governance and economic issues.

Lessons

On the surface, an analysis of the content that was collected by the project for dissemination through the CLICs would seem to indicate that the collection of relevant content was successful. The contents are very relevant and appropriate. However, the relative lack of utilization of this content points to the need for further analysis and strategies. In the end, it is likely that lack of utilization resulted from a number of factors, including:

- An approach to the collection of content that was based on assumptions rather than real data regarding the information needs and desires of communities. An approach based on principles of social marketing, which involve paying more attention to the need and desires of the population, may have been more successful;
- Insufficient guidance to the CLIC staff to help them make effective use of the materials and to establish incentives for the CLIC staff to make effective use of the materials.;
- Lack of systematic monitoring of the utilization of contents, resulting in inadequate feedback mechanisms and an inability to determine the root causes of the problem in time to take effective corrective action.

Network Power

Training

There are obvious advantages to developing and delivering training in a consistent manner across the CLICs. The training and training materials can be developed to address the need for flexibility in how individual CLICs set the prices for their services, set their operating hours, etc...

Equipment and systems

It may not have been politically feasible to give one CLIC 2 computers while giving another 12 computers even if such a decision had been based on a thorough market analysis. In the end, however, some CLICs have the potential to expand while others are underutilized. Now is perhaps the time to make hard decisions about the reallocation of equipment. The same logic applies to the internet connection. Some CLICs may be able to sustain the VSAT connection. Others may have to rely on something more affordable even if that means making sacrifices in terms of the quality of the connection.

Very few (if any) of the CLICs would be sustainable as individual CLICs. The sustainability of the network is perhaps more important than the sustainability of any individual CLIC. It is as a network that the CLICs are most likely to become sustainable. As a network, the CLICs will be able to purchase supplies at better prices, share the costs of technical support and training, build their collective expertise, and learn from each other.

Within the network, however, a one-size-fits-all approach had both advantages and drawbacks.



Photo: Mrs. Kinta Badji Maharafa, at the Djenne CLIC

Gender

Results

- 13% of CLIC clients are women.
- 50% of CLIC staff are women and all Consultative Committees include several women.

Lessons

The 13% average across the CLICs hides significant differences. In some CLICs close to one quarter of the clients are women (Daoudabougou and Kidal).

Interestingly, the three best performers in terms of total number of clients – Bandiagara, Kangaba and Kadiolo - are low performers in terms of percentage of women clients (i.e., less than 10% of their clients are women).

There are no clear patterns in terms of relationship between the gender of the managers at a CLIC and the percentage of women clients.

There is anecdotal evidence that while few women may come to the CLIC to obtain services, indirect benefits could be significant.

Literacy, purchasing power, time constraints and cultural barriers are the key impediments to women's use of public access points in developing countries. All of these are significant obstacles in Mali. Any strategy to address women's access should also pay attention to indirect benefits and approaches that would capitalize on intermediaries (health workers, agricultural extension workers, radio animators, leaders of women's associations) as key targets for contents and other CLIC services.



Photo: Ms. Astan Kayo, high school student in Bougouni who received free computer training as a reward for academic excellence.

CONTACT

Barbara Fillip
Evaluation & Communication Specialist
bfillip@aed.org

LINKS

- CLIC Project web site
<http://www.clicmali.org>
- Mali CLICs [Activity Page](#)
- [Final Report](#)



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