



## CHAPTER 7

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# THE GASELEKA TELECENTRE, NORTHERN PROVINCE, SOUTH AFRICA

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### LOCATION AND CONTEXT

The Gaseleka telecentre is in South Africa's poorest province, Northern Province. Gaseleka, which in Setswana means "the place of the chief," is a remote rural area about 80 kilometres from the nearest town, Ellisras, and about 40 kilometres from the border with Botswana. The area is very arid, nearly desert. To get to the telecentre you must go along a 15-kilometre stretch of very bad dirt road and, because it is in an area called Phalala, it is actually known locally as the Phalala Telecentre. The local police station, health clinic and offices of the Departments of Justice and Water and Forestry are nearby.

There are 34 villages surrounding Gaseleka and, according to the 1998 Census, the area's population is 85,000. There are three chiefs in the area. Unemployment is around 60%. Some people have retail or cleaning jobs in Ellisras, where they commute by minibus, or kombi; some work in the government offices in the area; and others, though not many because of the poor soils and aridity, work as labourers in the few commercial farms in the area. There are few local small businesses other than a number of informal shops, or spaza.

### HISTORY

Gaseleka was the very first telecentre to be established by the South African Universal Service Agency (USA) in 1998. The USA was established by the Telecommunications Act of 1996 to provide the access to ICT (information and communications technology) services denied to the majority of people by the brutal years of Apartheid. In 1996, 89% of white households had telephones in their homes as compared to 11% of black households. This shocking imbalance clearly required a concerted national effort — and thus the formation of the USA. Since providing a telephone in every household is unachievable for many years, the goal of Universal Access has had to be providing public telephones for all in the country. In 1996, when the importance of computers and ICT was becoming clear, the main focus of the USA's work became the provision of telephones and computers through telecentres.



*Computer class, Gaseleka Telecentre.*

The USA's first Chief Executive Officer was Mlungisi Hlongwane, who was also president of the South African National Civic Organisation (SANCO), the major community-based group allied to the African National Congress (ANC) which formed the majority in the new national government. In May 1997, the USA advertised itself through community media, mass organisations such as SANCO, and the women's movement, describing its plans for telecentres and inviting communities to apply for support and advice. The key criteria were that the applicants should be in an area without services, able to demonstrate community support for the centre, have an understanding of small business, and be willing to make the telecentre's services available to women and disadvantaged groups. Around 500 applications were received by the August 1997 cut-off date, mostly from community groups but some from individuals. From these, the USA chose the first 30 sites.

Gaseleka was chosen for several reasons. It was in a very remote and poor area. The Northern Province, with the worst access to telecommunications of any province in South Africa, was already a top priority for the USA. The hosting organisation was well respected locally. The application had the support of the local authority, chiefs and community groups. And the fact that the centre would be run by the local branch of Mlungisi's organisation, SANCO, certainly didn't hurt in the selection either.

These first sites for telecentres were decided upon in September 1997. In November, two people from each centre, including Gaseleka, underwent training (as detailed later in the chapter). It took a few more months to finalise the funding and contractual arrangements for the Gaseleka centre, fit out the building and install the equipment. The first time the telephone — the very first in the region — was tested, one of the volunteers was scared by the ring and ran out of the centre. The centre was finally completed just one week before the launch.

On March 22, 1998, Gaseleka became the first of the USA-supported telecentres to be officially opened. The launch was a major event, with 50 dignitaries flown in by plane, chartered by the USA, and 80 less fortunate guests arriving by bus. The then Minister of Communications, Jay Naidoo, was the main speaker at the ceremony, together with the

Premier of the Northern Province, Mr. Ramathlodi. The three local chiefs were shown great respect at the launch. Other “suits” came from Telkom, the parliamentary Communications Committee, and other telecom organisations. And a few thousand people in the region came to hear the speeches, admire the new telecentre and enjoy the huge meal, which included six cows.

## **AFFILIATIONS AND STRATEGIC ALLIANCES**

The Gaseleka telecentre is owned by the local branch of SANCO, which has established a special sub-committee of 15 people to manage the centre. The chair of this committee and the most influential person in the telecentre’s directions, Masilo Mokobane, is an important person in the area, being the general secretary of SANCO, a local councillor and an employee in the Department of Justice. The strength of the community links through SANCO, and particularly through Masilo, have been crucial to the success of the centre.

The centre is well networked throughout the area. All three local chiefs have given their support to the project and close links are maintained with the local government. The telecentre maintains such support by allowing the chiefs and some senior councillors to make free phone calls and photocopies. This usage is monitored every month, and so far has not been abused. This has obviously made the telecentre very popular among these key local officials. And the strategy has paid off in another way too: it receives its water and electricity free from the local authority!

## **FUNCTIONS**

Like many of the other USA-established telecentres, Gaseleka started out by only offering access to equipment. It has since developed various other services according to need and opportunity, and most of these have been led by Masilo Mokobane.

Most of the people still come to the centre to make phone calls, as it is just about the only usable pay phone in the area. Although there is a Telkom card-operated phone near the police station, the nearest place to buy the phone cards is Ellisras, 80 kilometres away. Many people also use the centre for sending faxes and photocopying. The local schools are major users, bulk-copying question papers and reports and typing up curricula, reports and schedules on the computers. Computer training is another major activity.

The centre is currently used on average by 50 people a day, 60% of whom are women. People come from up to 20 kilometres away to use the centre, many on foot. A few kombis ply along the poor main road, but few of the surrounding settlements are served by any form of public transport. Since the telecentre opened, a new RDP (Reconstruction and Development Programme) government housing development has been built nearby. This has brought 300 families closer to the telecentre and means that it has become the de facto community centre, a place to hang out and chat.

Formerly, there was no post office in the area. In 2000, the telecentre successfully applied to become a “postal service point.” A bank of 1,000 post boxes was installed next to the telecentre, and deliveries and pick-ups are usually every other day. The telecentre makes a small amount of money from selling stamps, registering mail and performing similar postal jobs, but really the major benefit is that just about every family comes in regularly to check the post.

Many organisations within the area make use of the centre. SANCO uses it heavily, as do the local schools, Community Policing Forum, Department of Health and Welfare, small businesses and local political groupings such as the African National Congress and the Communist Party.

The telecentre has also arranged for two officials from the Department of Home Affairs to come to the centre every Friday morning to save people from having to go to Ellisras to attend to such matters as applying for identity documents, birth and death registrations, passports and such like. Again, the major motivation here has been to increase the number and range of people coming to the centre, and about 30 people a week now come in just to use this service. The telecentre has invested R4,000 (US\$600) in a camera for taking ID photos and makes about R700 (US\$105) a month from this service alone.

There is no local newspaper or radio station in the area. Many people in the community have expressed a desire for these, and a team was set up to develop the area's first newspaper, which was launched in August 2000. The more ambitious proposal, to start a local radio station, is currently under discussion. Radio is an important medium in an area with an illiteracy rate of 70%, but this project will take much longer to achieve and will need considerably more funding than the newspaper did.

The real success story of the centre has been its computer training provision. The centre approached Ellisras Technical College, which seconded one of its graduates, Godfrey Gijone Hlongoane, as a full-time computer trainer at the centre. In 1999, Godfrey taught 46 people on the Technical College-certificated Introductory Computer Practice, a course that introduced them to the computer, typing to at least 15 words per minute (some got up to 40 wpm), file management, and use of the operating system, word processing (Microsoft Word) and spreadsheets (Microsoft Excel). The course lasted two hours a day for 15 weeks. The cost was a surprisingly high R1,265 (US\$190), which represented a major investment for the families of these students. Of the 46 graduates, all were under 35 years, 31 were women, and at least 10 have subsequently obtained computer-related jobs, mainly in Ellisras. In 1999, this course represented 55% of the centre's turnover and about 70% of its profit. In 2000, Godfrey was given training by the University of the Witwatersrand to run a more in-depth Information Literacy course at the centre.

Some local businesses use the centre for producing leaflets and advertising. Godfrey also helps some of the local businesses with their formal invoices and payrolls.

The telecentre also supports 34 local students of UNISA (the University of South Africa) and Technikon SA, South Africa's two main distance education providers. Most of these students were encouraged into this mode of study by showing them the UNISA and Technikon course brochures. The telecentre is currently talking to UNISA about its becoming a "learning centre," which would enable it to receive some of the course books for a training library and earn a percentage of the course fees.

The centre went online in May 2000, initially for its own internal management purposes. It is now experimenting with Internet access for the users, at an initial charge of R30 per month. In pursuit of its aims to be multipurpose, the centre also plans to produce business cards, minutes and constitutions for organisations such as burial societies, and to use its television facilities as a mini-cinema for the new housing estate next door. As well, it proposes to become a satellite office of the Department of Home Affairs. About the only thing you can now get free at the centre is condoms, given out over the counter, under the AIDS awareness poster.

## COSTS AND FUNDING

The initial set-up costs of the centre, amounting to about R250,000 (US\$35,000), were met out of the USA's Universal Service Fund. All of the running costs have had to be met out of turnover and so far, unlike many other USA-sponsored telecentres which have made little money and been unable to pay their managers salaries, Gaseleka has proved to be financially viable. This is entirely due to the telecentre having strong management, establishing good local connections and trust — and being a local monopoly.

The charges for Gaseleka telecentres services are as follows:

Telephone	80¢ per unit
Photocopying	
<i>for schools</i>	40¢ per page
<i>general users</i>	50¢ per page
Typing and printing	
<i>black ink</i>	R3 per page
<i>coloured ink</i>	R4 per page
Computer use	R10 per hour
Fax	
<i>local call</i>	R3 per page
<i>national call</i>	R4 per page
<i>receiving</i>	R2 per page
Overhead projector use	R20 per hour
ID camera	R30 <i>for four ID photos</i>
Computer course	R1,265

In recent months, the breakdown of income has been as follows: computer courses (36%); phone (27%); photocopying (25%); fax (6%); and ID photos (6%). In an average month in 1999, the telecentre had a turnover of around R8,000 (US\$1,200) and expenses of about R6,000 (US\$860), including the R3,000 needed for the salaries of the three staff. Since its launch, the centre has accrued a bank balance of R42,000 (US\$6,000), which is held in the name of SANCO. The subcommittee is currently deciding how to use this money. It is expected that some will be granted to a women's sewing project and some towards a crèche.

However, in considering these figures, it is important to remember that all the equipment was donated. The profits would not cover these costs if the centre had had to be purely self-financing or to take out a loan for its establishment. While this is the most financially strong telecentre of the first 28 centres set up by the USA, its equipment is about two years old and many pieces are starting to wear out. Service contracts are not available in such a remote area and the photocopier has already needed R3,000 in repairs and may well require more. The photocopying service may have to be stopped if it becomes uneconomic to offer. Also, the nearby library has now started offering photocopying at a lower price (30¢ a page compared to the telecentre's 50¢). This raises the issue of future competition. Currently, the telecentre is the only usable public phone and computer centre in the area. However, with general development in the area, some people are getting phones in their homes and other public phones may be set up. The telecentre has little margin on its phone costs. New commercial services will therefore be needed if the telecentre is to continue being financially successful.

## **ACCOMMODATION**

The telecentre is housed in a standalone face brick building donated by the Department of Agriculture. It stands within the grounds of the sports stadium and is painted in purple, green and white, the colours of the USA. It is composed of one big room (12 metres x 6 metres), a small kitchen and a toilet. The windows and door are fitted with anti-burglar bars.

As you enter the centre, to the left is the counter where the records and management system is kept. In front of you is an island unit with six cubicles for telephones, although only four of these are actually fitted out with phones so far. Further into the room to the left are two islands, each with four cubicles for the computers. At the back of the room there is the photocopier and an area where the staff and others eat their food. Behind this is the kitchen. On the walls, you will see the price list, the plaque commemorating the official opening, a portrait of the country's president and pictures of local dignitaries including the chiefs (all of whom are male) and SANCO posters reminding you of the centre's affiliation.

The red dust gets everywhere. The centre's managers have to sweep the floors every morning and often again in the afternoon. The computers have to be covered with plastic covers whenever they're not in use.

## **MANAGEMENT**

The telecentre is run by two managers. They record all usage in terms of service, frequency, gender of user, and cost of use. They also log the daily expenditure and income. Every month, Godfrey uses a spreadsheet to work out the monthly profit or loss. The monthly statements are sent to the USA. The USA used to have an excellent fieldworker in the province, Aubrey Mathinjwa, who helped out with many things in the early months of the centre. Unfortunately, he left to work for the USA in Johannesburg in November 1999 and since that time the telecentre has had less contact with, and support from, the agency.

Masilo Mokobane, the telecentre's chairperson, usually comes by the centre every day. Informal planning meetings are held almost every week and more formal full committee meetings about once a month to consider the more major issues. However, in practice, it is Masilo who is very much the driver of most new initiatives.

## **STAFFING**

The two telecentre managers are Lettie Manameng Madibeng and Lizzy Kebawetje Mokobane, wife of Masilo. The computer trainer is Godfrey Gijone Hlongoane, on secondment from Ellisras Technical College. This trio works as a team, all earning the same salary. Godfrey is teaching Lizzy and Lettie computer skills. All three see the telecentre as their long-term job and have a strong commitment to the project.

## **TRAINING MANAGERS, STAFF AND USERS**

Lizzy and Lettie have Matric, the school leaving certificate, and both attended the initial five-week USA training course in Johannesburg in 1996. This course familiarised them with the concept of telecentres and trained them in the necessary management, operational and basic computing/Internet skills, as well as in financial management and

customer care. Their final assignment was to develop a full business plan for the centre. Lizzy and Lettie did well on this course and received the special certificate, accredited by the University of the Witwatersrand.

Godfrey has Matric, a Computing Diploma from the Technical College, and now a letter of accreditation from the University of the Witwatersrand stating that he is a recognised trainer on its “InfoLit” programme.

## PUBLICITY

The initial publicity for the centre came through the launch, which was a major event in the area.

Masilo and other telecentre staff frequently attend meetings of the school principals, community groups and the chiefs to talk about services and plans.

Recently, a network of telecentre agents was set up. Eight people were selected from various villages to advertise the telecentre, find out what the people wanted and act as links to the centre. These telecentre agents receive a 10% commission on whatever income they bring in. This is still an experiment and is working better in some villages than in others.

## ACCESS

The telecentre is open from 7:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. weekdays and 7:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. on Saturdays. Originally, the centre was closed on Sundays, but since mid-2000 it has been opening on Sundays too. The busiest times are 10 and 11 o’clock in the morning and 2 and 3 o’clock in the afternoon.

## TECHNOLOGY

There are six phone lines: four for telephones, one for fax, and one for the Internet. A Pentium computer is used for administration and four other Pentium computers (running Windows 95 and Office 97) for the computer training. Four older 386 Olivetti computers (running DOS 6.22 and Windows 3.1), donated by a local company, are used mainly for typing practice. A peer-to-peer network allows printing from all computers. The modem is currently only used by one computer. There is a Canon BJC4200 black-and-white/colour printer, a colour scanner (Mustek 1200 SP) that is not much used, and an Olivetti JP790 colour printer that is not working,. The photocopier is an Olivetti 8416 that copies both A3 and A4 with reduction and enlargement, but this is old and troublesome. The Canon fax machine works well, but once had to be fixed by a technician in Ellisras. Servicing and maintenance are major problems. It is difficult to get spare parts and, with the nearest



*Telecentre students learning computer skills.*

technical support in Ellisras, 80 kilometres away, repairing the equipment is both time-consuming and expensive. There is little or no technical support from the original equipment suppliers. Most of the equipment was supplied by a local company that went broke, and the parent company in Johannesburg has given very poor long-distance support. The USA has not been able to offer much support either after Aubrey Mathinjwa left, because Gaseleka is so remote.

The telecentre lacks air-conditioning, which means that — because the area is hot and dusty — the computers have to be under protective covers for most of the time. The electricity supply is good. However, because there was no UPS (uninterruptible power supply) until recently, lightning strikes have damaged a fax machine and a computer.

## RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

Daily and monthly financial monitoring is thorough and reported at the monthly management meetings. The committee is proactive in identifying problems and seeking advice from others in the area, but to date there has been no formal local evaluation.

In February 2000, the Gaseleka telecentre was involved in the Telecentre 2000 study conducted by DRA research. The centre was found to be well known in the area and well used. A random survey of 40 households in the wider Gaseleka area revealed that 88% of the people had used the telecentre for making phone calls, 29% for sending faxes, 85% for making photocopies and 23% for typing or using the computers. Most said they were happy with the centre's services. The more detailed results of this study may be found at [www.sn.apc.org/community](http://www.sn.apc.org/community).

In May 2000, Gaseleka was one of six telecentres in the Northern Province involved in community needs research. After some special training in Participatory Rural Appraisal techniques, Lizzy and a member of the telecentre's Management Committee worked for a week with a student from the University of the North, conducting household surveys, organisational interviews and key group interviews. The resultant report had not been completed at the time of writing, but this information will be fed back into a community meeting to see where the centre can better meet local needs in the future. The hope is that this will lead to more informal six-monthly local surveys to measure impact and determine what else the telecentre can do to help people. For further information on this, readers are invited to contact the author at [peter@sn.apc.org](mailto:peter@sn.apc.org).

## CONCLUSIONS

It cannot be stressed enough that the key variables in the success of telecentres are the energy and commitment of the local owners and managers. Technical skills can be taught; local trust and drive cannot.

A simple telephone shop can be set up from outside. However, a local centre that aims to provide a range of services, information and training depends crucially on local support. Embedding the project in local organisations and systems can be a time-consuming and frustrating process. But without this, any telecentre project is very likely to fail.

So far in South Africa, whether from government, business or external donor, all telecentres have depended upon external funding for their establishment. It is highly unlikely that in rural areas these centres will be able to generate a return on this investment. Gaseleka is one of the very few South African centres making an operating

profit and paying a half-decent wage. But it also has neither to meet depreciation costs nor repay the monies invested in it.

At the risk of stating the obvious, ICTs can only offer useful services if there is relevant information and communication. Despite valiant efforts, Gaseleka has not really been able to serve as an information centre, because most of the information of interest to local people is already known and is delivered by word of mouth. The centre wishes to set up more formalised information systems, such as the community directory developed by the telecentre in Mamelodi, and even a local radio station. However, there is little in the way of local support or organisation for this kind of work. It is here that a national agency could greatly assist by distributing national information for centres to disseminate at the local level, offering guides on organising local information and providing training in information skills.

Centres to support learning, information access and delivery services are desperately needed in rural areas of South Africa and, indeed, throughout Africa. Providing access to technology is necessary if the “digital divide” is not to increase, condemning the majority to increased marginalisation in the Information Age. However, the first wave of enthusiasm for telecentres has certainly been misplaced. Gaseleka is one of the best examples out of the more than 60 telecentres set up by the USA. Over half of these are not functioning well for a variety of technical, managerial, competitive and financial reasons. In the townships, telecentres and phone shops have proved very profitable, but in the rural areas very few have even gone as well as Gaseleka. After three years’ work, no model has been found for self-sufficiency, and one suspects that to be effective in rural areas, these centres will need ongoing financial, technical and managerial support. This can be done more easily if the sites are based where supported infrastructures exist, such as at clinics, schools, libraries or post offices.

We need to be clearer on what these centres are meant to offer. If the focus is simply on providing telephony, there are many easier ways of doing this, such as installing pay phones. If the focus is on supporting information services, then investment is needed more in information than in technology. Projects to find what information is most needed and to codify this nationally or develop mechanisms for local content creation are more important than getting a computer working. If the focus is on skills development and training, then developing courses, course materials and facilitation skills are more important than the technology. As we say in South Africa: if the technology overlooks you and your needs, it is indeed a “TOY.”

But perhaps the last word should go to the person most responsible for the success of the Gaseleka telecentre, Masilo Mokobane, interviewed in March 2000:

*Q: How is the Gaseleka Telecentre doing?*

A: The telecentre is doing very well even though the profit has gone down. More people are now using the telecentre — more especially because there are RDP [Reconstruction and Development Programme] houses that have been built near the telecentre.

*Q: What problems is the telecentre presently experiencing?*

A: There is a need for proper marketing because not everybody knows the services that are offered by the telecentre.

*Q: What advice would you give to new telecentre managers?*

A: The advice is that it is important for the telecentre managers to get proper training, for example in financial management, how to maintain the equipment, how to deal with and handle customers and how to run a telecentre as a business.

*Q: If I set up a telecentre next to yours, how will you deal with the competition?*

A: I don't have a problem about that. The most important thing is to satisfy the customers and offer a good service at a good price.

*Q: What is the future of telecentres in South Africa?*

A: Telecentres have a good and promising future in South Africa. Most importantly, there is a strong need for good management, and the other positive thing is that telecentres create employment for people that were unemployed before. The other important thing is that people now have access to technology and information.

*Q: How do you see the future of Gaseleka telecentre?*

A: The telecentre can still do much better because, up until now, there has been no competition. More services will be offered and, as a result, the telecentre will make more money and maybe employ other people in their community.

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