by Dean Mulozi

Telecenter, a tool at the service of community development Telecentres are facilities offering public access to the telephone, the internet or to a wide range of other Information and Communication Technology tools and services. They have various names, including “Community Access Points” (CAP), cybercentres, cybercafés, multimedia centers. They can include fixed and mobile facilities. Telecentres targeted in this activity are those that offer access to community development information or services, apart from the classic email and web communication, especially in rural areas.In developing countries like Zambia where citizens and organizations still face important challenges to access new information technologies, telecentres have been recognized as effective tools supporting universal access to ICTs and as key vehicles of development information, particularly in rural areas. Indeed, through its various models, telecentres have the potential to promote access to low cost communication through the telephone, the internet, and other traditional tools of communication.

Even though ICTs are more and more developed and available at individual level in Africa (SADC Region), in many countries of this region, the relevance of telecentres especially in rural areas seems undisputed. Community telecentres in particular, basically understood as non profit facilities put in place usually by government authorities or associations, NGOs and installed mostly in rural or sub-urban areas, have been playing a key role to ensure access to ICT for local communities. More than private cybercafés, they are facing sustainability and connectivity problems. Many community telecentres are closing doors because of the development of individual access to internet or voice communication, via landline or mobile phones (which is positive technological and social transformation). Where the need still exists, strategies to strengthen them have to be identified. They include networking at national and regional level for experience sharing, mutualisation of resources, etc.

As you are aware, Energy is a major concern for rural connectivity in Zambia, only 3 percent of rural households have access to electricity energy and only 22 percent of urban households have access to the National Grid Electricity energy. Currently the urban electricity consumers are subjected to relentless load shedding due to the nationwide electric power generation shortage.

It is in this context, that the idea of a phased approach to Energy Poverty Reduction for Zambia was deemed critical, with projects representing a phased approach to Energy Poverty Reduction for Zambia, consequently being established. The crucial role of this approach can be

seen in the fact that, had this phased approach been implemented at independence back in 1964, Zambia would be experiencing an energy surplus today (2011).

This is how the idea of the Chamulimba Community Digital Divide Telecentre (CCDDT) is derived. The proposed Chamulimba Community Digital Divide Telecentre has a total of about 28 villages with an estimated population of 16,000 people in the Chiefdom of His Royal Highness Chief Bunda Bunda. Chamulimba is a vibrant organic farming community. The centre will be strategically located along the Great East Road within close proximity of vital basic economic and social amenities such as Basic school, health centre, agricultural storage shed, grocery shops and the surrounding organic crop farming areas. Provision of Solar power to this Area will be seen as principal to the prosperity of Chamulimba as the area is off the main electrical grid of Zambia. It is 30km east of Chongwe, the nearest township providing electricity and communications facilities.Chamulimba Community Digital Divide Telecentre (CCDDT) will be a viable pilot for Community-Public Partnership, with various partners consolidating their resources to ensure its establishment is possible.

The benefits of the Chamulimba Community Digital Divide Telecentre to the local community will be immense. The purpose of this centre is to contribute to economic empowerment through providing Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) to the rural community and thereby advancing the interests of member groups and the living standards of the surrounding communities. Besides economic empowerment, this initiative is equally geared at promoting environmental sustainability, a concern that impinges directly on the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals.

The task is to ascertain the market potential and hence, long-term sustainability of the proposed renewably powered ICT centres within Zambia' rural environment. It will also be useful to evaluate and design effective activities aimed at eradicating barriers to the effective utilization of different renewable energy sources for commercial rural community-based ICT applications.

The anticipated results are:

- A self-sustaining enterprise to ensure continuity and growth;
- Easy up agriculture Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) Dissemination
- A growing community of Internet and computer users, who will be willing to use the telecentres services and pay for them.
- A one-stop shop for Information and Communication Technologies (ICT)-based products

Among services that will be offered at the Chamulimba Pilot Telecentre are: Telephony; Internet Access; Database Management; Organic Crop storage, Order Consolidation, and Marketing; ICT services; Entertainment: Both film (including educational); Solar Powered Battery and Cell Phone Charging; Student ICT classes; Dedicated printing services to the Surrounding schools; Adult ICT education classes and HIV and AIDS Programmes Presentations; and Distance Learning Support. Provision of these facilities to the community is seen as vital to the success of Zambia' poverty eradication efforts, particularly in as far as they relate to the empowerment of Women and Young men, who play a central role in advancing economic prosperity at national level. When women and young men are fully empowered and engaged, all of society benefits.