

Dr Heinrich Heinrichs
hheinrichs@gmx.net

Using the Internet as a Management Tool

The HIV and AIDS Management Unit of the Namibian Ministry of Education improves the communication within the country using the Internet www.hamu-nam.net

Introduction

Namibia belongs to the countries most affected by HIV and AIDS. The prevalences of HIV infection vary significantly between the 13 regions of Namibia: The population of the Kunene region in the Northwest of the country shows an infection rate of below 8%, whereas in Caprivi every second mother giving birth is HIV positive. Other regions will be found somehow between these two extremes with Erongo being the second with more than 30 percent infected mothers tested in antenatal clinics.

Namibia has all relevant policies and other regulatory frameworks in place. With *My Future is my Choice* and *Window of Hope* the country has two powerful and even award winning school based programmes educating the youth about life skills and HIV and AIDS. However, to manage, administer and monitor the activities remains a challenge.

The Ministry of Education has decided to set up an HIV and AIDS Management Unit, HAMU, that oversees and manages all HIV and AIDS related activities in the sector. In the 13 regions Regional AIDS Committees on Education, RACE, coordinate HIV and AIDS related activities on regional level.

Effective and quick communication channels between the national and regional level are of paramount importance for information exchange, planning and monitoring.

As a tool for improved information exchange the Internet was identified. In addition to traditional communication means (mail, telephone, fax etc.) Internet and E-mailing open further opportunities:

- Information between different stakeholders:
 - Between regional and national level (HAMU – RACE)
 - Between role-players on regional level (RACE – RACE)
 - Between role-players on national level (between Directorates of the Ministry)
 - Between national and international role-players (HAMU, RACE, NGOs, Development Partner etc.)
- Presentation of the work on national and regional level
- Capacity Building by making relevant documents available

Structures in place to build on

There are already structures in place to build on. The Ministry of Education has a network server that allows to enter the Internet and to use E-mail facilities. Also in some other regions this has been established. In particular the National Institute for Education Development, NIED, has established a well functioning information system based on the Internet.

However, not all regional offices have access to the Internet by a network. They have to use the telephone line and a modem to dial up.

This shows that the availability of Internet access is very heterogeneous in the different regions of Namibia.

Challenges

In establishing e-connectivity several steps had to be taken into account.

First of all it had to be ensured that all the regional offices are equipped with a computer. Different resources were used:

- State Revenue Fund
- Funds from the Institutional Strengthening and Capacity Building Facility (funded by the EU and SIDA)
- Global Fund

The regional offices and relevant directorates of the Ministry of Education were equipped with computers, printers and, if necessary, with modems.

The Internet access also had to be solved. For those offices being connected to a network one could fall back on the support of ITC experts of the Ministry. For those who were not connected to the Internet private service providers were hired.

To ensure access to the Internet proved to be the most challenging step. It could clearly be seen that private service providers were needed to establish a comprehensive network.

The third main challenge was the organisation of training for the respective regions. Interestingly this proved to be less difficult than expected. Most of the regional offices took up the responsibility and organised and run the training themselves. Further on most RACE members got very excited about the e-connectivity and revealed a high autodidactical potential.

A main challenge was the reluctance to use a new and modern medium for communication. Communicating via the Internet was considered as very complicated. However, this was tackled by the concept of the website.

Design of the website

A website has to meet the demands of effective information, education and communication. At the same time it has to be as simple as possible, i.e. the size of the single pages must be small minimising the time it takes to download the page, because the target group uses lines that are very slow. The experience shows very clearly: A website that takes too long to load will not be considered by a potential user. Keeping in mind that the HAMU website should be seen as a management and communication tool quick loading times are essential!

The content of the website was discussed and following sections were integrated:

- Foreword by the Minister

The website was launched by the Minister of Education who gave the full support.

- HAMU details

Addresses, e-mail, telephone numbers and fax number of the HAMU staff members are given on first opening page. This makes it possible to contact HAMU and specifically certain staff members according to the needs of the head office, regional partners, NGOs Development partners etc.

Additionally the links to the partners of HAMU are given.

- HAMU team

Every member with his/her specific role and responsibility is introduced to the visitor and gives his own vision in the fight against HIV and AIDS.

- News

On the news page new developments on HIV and AIDS within the education sector are revealed to the visitor who can in some instances learn more about a certain topic or see pictures about an event.

- Documents

Here all the relevant policies and other regulatory documents are published for downloading. Further on the visitor will find manuals on the school programmes (e.g. Window of Hope, My Future is My Choice, Module on HIV and AIDS for vocational training).

- Games and Riddles

This section contains for example crossword riddles or multiple choice tests on HIV and AIDS.

- Links

This page contains a variety of links to different organisations dealing with education and HIV and AIDS.

- Sectoral Steering Committee

The Education Sector has set up a Sectoral Steering Committee on HIV and AIDS. New developments coming out of this body is published on this site.

- Global Fund

Part of the HIV and AIDS activities within the Ministry of Education is funded by Global Fund. On this site more information is given.

- Regions

The work on HIV and AIDS at grassroot level is given under this section. All regions introduce themselves and give their details. Furtheron the E-mail contacts are given for each RACE office.

Some the regions publish regularly newsletters, which are made available from these sites. These newsletters are now available to all other parts of Namibia and indeed worldwide.

- NIED

This is a link to the National Institute on Education Development. They have established their own website and server. From this site curricula, learning materials and other important educational documents can be downloaded.

- Monitoring forms

The activities have to be monitored to ensure quality delivery of HIV and AIDS activities in the regions. At this link the relevant forms can be downloaded.

- Login to the e-mails of RACE in the regional office of the Ministry of Education

All the regional offices can access their e-mails via the website. This is a big advantage towards only relying on mail-programmes like Outlook etc., which are fixed to one computer. The RACE offices may also receive their e-mails on any computer that is connected to the Internet. This was in particular necessary, because the continuous access to the Internet from the regional offices of the Education Ministry is not always possible.

Getting all on board

The skeleton of the website was provided, but the content had to be submitted from the regional and national offices.

On national level, the HAMU staff members described their own role in the fight against HIV and AIDS and the RACE officers had the opportunity to present the work in their regions. This opportunity was used enthusiastically.

The regional offices had the opportunity to publish their newsletters and thus made them available to all regions.

Lessons learned

- Internet connectivity improves the communication between educational role-players and is therefore a powerful management tool.
- It was important to supply the relevant offices with computers and Internet access (if necessary) before starting communicating via Internet.
- A survey beforehand on the hardware, software and skills of the stakeholders proved to be very sensible: The support could be managed according to the needs.
- The website was explained in detail during a workshop on national level
- The website is programmed in such a way that it can download very quickly. This avoids frustrations of users with slow Internet connections.
- By avoiding the experience of frustration a high degree of autodidactical potential was developed.
- The content of the website was provided by the target group, therefore ensuring a high degree of ownership.
- The website is designed in such a way that it can be extended according to the needs. Therefore it could serve in future as a platform for e-learning projects.
- The website was hosted by a private service provider, it is therefore a true product of a public private partnership.
- The partnership with a private service provider ensures access to the Internet and e-mail addresses in all parts of the country.
- The way of designing the website could serve as a prototype to other developing countries with slow Internet connections and a developing interest in the Internet.

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