



# PRINCIPLES FOR COMMUNITY-CENTRED CONNECTIVITY INITIATIVES



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Editors

Alan Finlay

Carlos Rey-Moreno

Proofreading

Lori Nordstrom

Layout and design

Cathy Chen

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The Local Networks (LocNet) initiative is a collective effort led by APC and Rhizomatica in partnership with people and organisations in the global South to directly support community networks and to contribute to an enabling ecosystem for their emergence and growth.

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# THIRTEEN PRINCIPLES FOR COMMUNITY-CENTRED CONNECTIVITY INITIATIVES

## Preamble

Community-centred connectivity initiatives are set up and evolve in many different ways, depending on the needs and opportunities that exist in communities, and the cultural, socioeconomic and political contexts in which they occur. They are, by their very nature, responsive to their context and environment. They grow out of and are both constrained and catalysed by that context.

The principles below take this as a starting point.

Community-centred connectivity initiatives are complementary to the internet access offered by commercial service providers and state-sponsored public access networks. They help to diversify internet access markets, offering affordable and locally relevant content and service alternatives for communities. However, we also believe their social values make them different from traditional stakeholders in the ecosystem. The principles presented here identify what makes them different from those traditional operators.

While one aim of developing the principles was to help communities have a conversation about their priorities when setting up an initiative, we consider some of the principles fundamental to any initiative that considers itself a community-centred connectivity initiative. For example, being focused on the community's needs and interests, being participatory in approach, even if the levels of participation may vary, working with supportive external stakeholders, and focusing on strengthening the well-being of the community (an initiative has to have a "social mission") for us feel like essential principles that define a community-centred initiative differently from other internet service providers. Other principles we consider to be more aspirational, or only achievable over time. Some also might not be at the core of how an initiative goes about its work. For example, some may operate using a

social business model, offering select services to a community, and not have community ownership as a key goal. Others may be strongly oriented towards enabling community members to become actors in their own development and aim for community ownership and participation in the governance and management of the initiative, and as a result are likely to provide the kinds of transformational services that respond to the principles set out below. In reality, community-centred connectivity initiatives operate on a sliding scale between initiatives that offer limited participation and specific community-orientated services, and initiatives that are owned and operated by communities, with the community's vision, needs, aspirations and values at the heart of those operations. We believe it is with the latter that the social and economic benefits of community-centred connectivity initiatives are most likely to be retained in the community.

But whichever legal, governance or ownership model is used, or type of services offered, all community-centred connectivity initiatives are aimed at the same thing: to strengthen and improve the well-being of communities that are unserved or underserved so that they can flourish in a way that they want to. In this way, community-centred connectivity initiatives are “meaningful” in that they respond to the needs and interests of a community, as defined by the community.

These principles have been developed through an extensive consultation process with community-centred connectivity initiatives working in different communities across the global South, with participants and partners in the Local Networks (LocNet) initiative run by the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) and Rhizomatica, and with APC members, all of whom have internet rights at the core of their activities. The process included a survey, a face-to-face group discussion, and email and online consultations.

Over time, new principles or ideals may become apparent, or others may need to be emphasised more, or differently. However, where we stand now, we collectively believe these principles should be the bedrock considerations for setting up any community-centred connectivity initiative in unserved or underserved communities across the world.

# THE PRINCIPLES

## 1. ADDRESSES COMMUNITY NEEDS

Provides meaningful internet communications infrastructure or services to communities in urban, rural and remote locations that respond to the diverse needs and interests of communities so that they can be empowered to participate in their own development.

## 2. PARTICIPATORY

Enables the community to shape the infrastructure or services, by participating in developing its community-centred vision and its deployment, operations and use.

## 3. SUPPORT

Works with different stakeholders to achieve its vision in ways that encourage the community's autonomy.

## 4. WELL-BEING

Improves the personal, social, political and economic lives of people living in the community, particularly for those who are structurally marginalised, such as women, the youth and elderly, refugees, racial and ethnic minorities, and disabled people.

## 5. HUMAN RIGHTS

Enables the communications rights and other rights of community members, such as the rights to education and health care, as well as the collective rights of communities, including racial and ethnic minority communities, and communities living in marginalised or threatened territories.

## 6. GENDER

Actively seeks to understand the gender power dynamics and the different lived realities within a community to encourage the participation of women in the governance, management and use of the infrastructure or services, and to integrate a gender perspective in its operations.

## **7. LOCAL CULTURE**

Sustains local cultures, traditional activities and languages, particularly those that are under threat, and provides relevant meaningful content in local languages in an inclusive and accessible manner.

## **9. SAFETY**

Ensures the online safety of the community, especially vulnerable users and those most at risk from online and tech-facilitated harms such as women, the youth and elderly, refugees, racial and ethnic minorities, and disabled people.

## **11. CAPACITY BUILDING**

Builds technical capacity in the community to maintain and operate the infrastructure or services, and the digital capacity of users to make informed decisions about their internet use and to benefit from social and economic opportunities online, as well as to strengthen the community's resilience to external shocks such as climate change and pandemics.

## **13. CONNECTED TO OTHERS**

Recognises that it is a part of an ecosystem of similar ownership across the world, seeks to share experiences to help strengthen these initiatives, and supports collective, multistakeholder action to build awareness of their potential for environmentally and socially sustainable internet access solutions.

## **8. ENVIRONMENTALLY AWARE**

Designs the infrastructure or services in a way that contributes to the preservation of the environment and biodiversity of the territory, and with care for communities in those territories.

## **10. SUSTAINABILITY**

Sustains its operations considering local economic practices and values.

## **12. OWNERSHIP**

Strives for community ownership of the infrastructure or services through open and inclusive participation in its governance and management.

