Complexities of Access to the Internet: Examples from Sweden & Uganda

Majority of the world’s population does not have access to the internet.

Several initiatives underway to address this situation

Is there a best approach to finding solutions for the billions with no access?

And what is access?

Imagine different layers affecting access channelling into each other to create moments of what may become access or non-access.

Not all the layers may apply to a given access situation, sometimes the presence of two layers is adequate and other times the absence of just one may be what impedes access.

Looking at the graph, there is one central intersection but there are several other intersections which add to the reality of access.
The presence of the technology does not translate into automatic access

The access graph shows the concept as an intersection of the social and the technical

For example:

During field research in Uganda Caroline Wamala met Nora who lives in a rural area. Nora says that she does not know how to use the computer or the Internet. But Nora regularly uses the Internet to communicate with her son who is overseas, “I ask others to do it for me”. Nora’s indirect access requires an additional human node that enables what could have been non-access for her.

A similar example is provided by Fritz-Åke Kuoljok field test manager of N4C in Sweden, who informed of a scenario where a father relied on his child to help use the internet. Even though the father himself can not use the technology his access is not impeded by this limitation, but he acquires indirect access through his child.
• On the other hand Caroline experienced moments of non-access when conducting the field work in Uganda. Her user characteristics include having the financial ability and technical know-how (see access graph).

• Yet, her ability to use the technology could not help when the infrastructure did not work. Caroline is regarded as having access, where Nora is not, and yet the situation for either is not static but involves perpetual negotiations with different layers of access.

• The N4C project, in addressing non-access for the rural remote areas in Europe in its approach considers the social (community life-style) jointly with technical solutions in developing a working-solution for communications challenged areas.

• A socio-technical approach (Cummins 1978) to providing internet access where there is none, takes into account access in its complexity; what does the community in question want how are they organised, etc. simply providing ‘technical’ access does not guarantee use.