IMPORTANCE AND SUSTAINABILITY OF TELECENTRES

The world has witnessed a phenomenal rise in information and communication technology (ICT) over the past two decades. In part, this expansion was due to the increased availability and affordability of ICT equipment, the simplification of use and support of equipment, improved access to electricity, more affordable internet and the growing use of ICTs by donors and NGOs themselves. A number of studies by the World Bank and other organisations also affirmed the importance of access to information for improved health and social well-being, and the role of communications in economic development.

A telecentre/public access centres/community technology center offers resources to help bridge the digital divide, primarily through the public accessing computers and the internet. These centers are a key part of what is now being referred to as digital inclusion programs. Many centers provide training that ranges from basic computing skills to digital media production as well as applied skills (e.g. online job searching). While some telecentres are freestanding operations, many others are located in public libraries, schools, social service agencies, neighborhood centers, and religious centers. Many organizations that provide their participants and local community with technology access and training do not think of themselves first as “telecentres” but share common services and needs.

Telecentre programs increase residents’ self-sufficiency and capacity to learn, develop their skills and talents, and help people more fully participate in community and civic affairs. The result is a more educated community, more able workforce, safer and better connected community. These programs also help develop consumers of information technology products and services.

DEFINITION

Telecentres are publicly accessible places where people can get help to access computers, the internet and other digital technologies that enable them to gather information, create, learn, and communicate with others. Typically they are Public Libraries, Education Centres and Voluntary or Community Organisations. Telecentres promote e-inclusion, serving a broad clientele, including the elderly, disabled and immigrant or other challenged communities; provide support services or advice to SMEs and the community.
DIFFERENT ROLES OF TELECENTRES

The overall goal of telecentres is **narrowing the digital divide**. This aim is being achieved depending on local situation and needs (see table Digital divide), so we can define different roles of telecentres depending on current situation in each region/state:

1. **Telecentre as Technology Access Point**

Origin of the community access points, (telecentres), dates back to 1980s, when the first telecottages were established in Scandinavia and Community Technology Centres (CTC) in the United States of America. With the advancement in technology, personal computers gradually came to be a household item in many countries.

At this stage, Telecentres provide public as opposed to private access to Internet and computers. This has allowed better access to information and knowledge to remote and rural areas. Conceptually, telecentres should be accessible and affordable to those who are marginalized and unable to afford the facility individually. At present the differential adoption of the Internet facility has created a digital divide within nations and between the developed and developing nations.

Provision of telecentres is expected to bridge this gap.

Hence, public access to computers became only an alternative solution. However, this function of telecentres **will remain important for the long period** since in some region (in rural and small urban communities) access to the Internet and information will remain difficult.

2. **Telecentre as Educational Centre**

A knowledge centre is defined as a vibrant centre regularly accessed by the community for their development and livelihood needs. Transforming ICT access points to knowledge centres involves, revitalizing ICT access points, developing new functions, connecting to global networks and activating partnerships. However, in the current context many telecentres have not satisfied all these functions but they are in the process of meeting few or all of the functions. The degree of transformation depends on many factors like, financial resources, political commitment and community participation.

Some of the basic criteria for establishing knowledge centres are: number of existing telecentres in a country or location, size of the target group, number of knowledge hubs relative to the poverty situation in the country etc.

In this process, the ICT access points with access to phones, computers and Internet are value added with knowledge, information, training and services. Many telecentres currently functioning in developing countries have successfully incorporated knowledge and information into their area of operations.

Knowledge hubs constitute of many other knowledge functions like, education, employment, agriculture and health besides providing conventional ICT facilities to bridge the digital divide. Many of the value added services have empowered rural community to access information and knowledge to improve livelihoods and attain sustainable development.

Digital divide

INTERNET USAGE. Situation in four countries active within a project is very different. Usage of Internet goes from

- 30,0% in Moldova
- 35,5% in Romania
- 55,9% in Serbia
- 67,8% in Latvia
3. Telecentre as Virtual Social Centre

The next step in the development of telecentres is transforming their function into Virtual Social Centre. What does it mean? Virtual means that all (or almost all activities) of a telecentre will be virtual i.e. “somewhere on the Internet”. There will be no (or very small) physical space, telecentres will be in the cloud and communication with telecentre users will be based on online communication. Social means that they will be virtual public locations where members of a community tend to gather for group activities, social support, public information, and other purposes. Also, telecentres will be renowned as virtual places where users can obtain (free) reliable, up-to-date and relevant education, trainings and information resources adjusted to the need of local communities. Also, these centres will promote new tools and organize campaigns focused on new technology tools relevant for community. To achieve this function of telecentre the digital literacy and use of Internet should be at least 80% of population i.e. at this moment only in highly developed countries.

All three roles are important, depending on local needs and situation, and one telecentre can provide all three roles simultaneously. However, it is more expected that the function of a telecentre will be moving from the first stage to the third stage following development of the country/region and adjusting to local needs.

So currently the telecenters’ mission in less developed countries (like Moldova, Romania or Serbia) is more inclined towards the first or second stage, and in more developed countries (Latvia) is more focused on the second or even third stage. In Moldova, Romania and Serbia, especially in rural regions, there is a very large digital divide. Many people do not use technology in their professional activities. Many employees working in public services do not use information technology. There is also a large informational generation gap. This process could possibly involve volunteers with experience and access to informational facilities (students and other youth within the community) to help train the older generations within the community, possibly including their own family members, such as parents and grandparents. At the same time telecentres in Latvia are shifting its activities more towards online courses and support.

SUSTAINABILTY

From the donor perspective, one of the major drawbacks of the ICT4D initiatives has been the inability of these centres to persist without the continued intervention and financial support of donor organisations. In other words, they have been unsustainable.

Given that the telecentres were established in the first place and located where they were precisely because the local population was for the most part poor, isolated, and otherwise marginalized i.e. not in a position to pay for their own computers, Internet access etc. seems to have escaped the attention of those leading the demands for “sustainability”. That this sustainability was a more or less complete
pipedream which any realistic assessment of the circumstances of Telecentres would have determined seems to have been overlooked as both funders and Telecentres themselves chose to hope somehow that the future reckoning in terms of funder expectations/Telecentre commitments would never arrive.

The broader purpose of Telecentres was and remains to add value as social initiatives by governments or others by providing free or very low cost Internet access, education, trainings, information to low income populations, in remote regions, or for those with other forms of social disability that prevent broad participation in an increasingly digital society. If governments (or others) choose to de-fund existing Telecentres on the basis that they are saving them from the evil of “dependency” (or whatever) they should know that they are choosing to penalize precisely those whom they have otherwise identified as requiring support because of their social and economic circumstances.

We can conclude that telecentres could not be 100% self-sustainable. However, there is always space to achieve some level of sustainability through commercial activities, while other part of sustainability should be compensated through the support from local/regional/national authorities and other donors.

The challenge is to design and develop Telecentres which are embedded (“owned”) by local communities and which provide those communities with the variety of services and supports (as for example e-government, e-health, small business development and support) which they require and which otherwise, in the absence of the Telecentre, would be much less accessible and much more costly and difficult to obtain (and to deliver).

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