

Chapter 13

Public Access ICT in Costa Rica

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Costa Rica has a long history of democracy, and a constitution that protects the social rights of its citizens. The government, commercial, and service sectors function under a well-established economic model and constitutionally declared universal access to services for the population. Historically, Central and South American nations have sometimes undergone rapid social and political changes, and the changes have occasionally been the result of armed conflict. While Costa Rica has had an active political history, it has seldom experienced the degree of volatility felt in similar countries.

During the two decades prior to 2008 when this study was initiated, Costa Rica suffered from what some respondents who were interviewed during this study rather harshly characterized as “bad planning and the introduction of neo-liberal economic policies that have diminished the qual-

ity of services and living conditions.” Regardless of these views, the study team observed that the people generally are well served by basic services, including potable water, electricity, telecommunications, social security, and education. Costa Ricans have, however, experienced a very unequal economic growth, which has increased the social divide, contributed enormously to the widespread poverty, and caused greater social exclusion among the citizens. Under these circumstances, the research team faced the unique opportunity of identifying and studying information access venues and processes in this country that have not been analyzed previously.

The research process was conducted in two phases. In the first phase, which began in 2008, the team conducted a general overview of the country to identify the public access initiatives to be studied and analyzed. The second phase began with a general workshop in Costa Rica, where the participants discussed and reviewed how the

results of the first phase would be analyzed and establish the direction of the second phase. The workshop also focused on the literature review process and key persons identified for interviews, and enumerated ways in which the study results would be organized to guarantee the objectivity of the conclusions. The second study phase included detailed fieldwork across the three venues that were targeted – public libraries, Centros Comunitarios Inteligentes (CECIs, a type of telecenter, although it sometimes operates inside libraries), and cybercafés.

Among the findings to emerge from this investigation, the research team determined that Costa Rican libraries are commonly perceived to be used almost exclusively by students; the majority of users proved to actually be students. The funding allocated to public libraries does not cover the basic needs of these venues. A strong and effective promotional effort is, therefore, needed to bring greater attention to the potential value of the library system. Little has been done on this front, and there are no particular plans to initiate such an effort. Clearly, the librarians and staff in the libraries are not equipped to assume the task without training, adequate funds, and the support of the administrators of the library system.

Because library operating funds are low, the insertion of a CECI inside the libraries has been an excellent means to provide better overall service and to make more and better content available online. The users have been quick to say that the addition of a CECI is a welcome improvement in the libraries. Unfortunately, in several of the instances where CECI venues have been established in locations other than in libraries, municipalities, and similar sites, they frequently have not been able to maintain an adequate level of sustainability. These CECIs do not operate on a self-sustaining model, and, as a result, it is difficult for these venues to survive without the support of some form of parenting organization or institution.

The researchers observed that cybercafés represent a favorable option for users, because they offer more accessible schedules, place fewer restrictions on users, and supply a wider variety of services than users find in publicly funded venues. Consequently, cybercafés are the most popular venues among users in Costa Rica. In addition, there is reason to believe that cybercafés can improve the gender-based inequality and other inequalities that persists in the way Costa Ricans access information and ICTs. The study team noted that cybercafés have the potential to develop improved means to provide information that has great benefit to underserved communities and remote regions.

The study produced key recommendations that can improve the value of the venues based largely on the social impact to be realized when the public has greater access to information and becomes better skilled in using ICTs. It is a recommendation of the study that this and corresponding improvement strategies be part of a public policy that guarantees: 1) the continuity of such support programs, 2) the participation of underserved communities and groups, 3) the collective construction of the tools that will sustain the resultant social gains, 4) access by all the population, 5) the continuing introduction of ICTs, and 6) develop the means through education and training so users understand technologies as something that can help solve daily problems and improve living conditions.

INTRODUCTION

Costa Rica is located in Central America between Nicaragua and Panama, spans 51,100 sq km, and has 4.4 million inhabitants. The country has an enormous natural richness that attracts large numbers of tourists each year, making the tourist industry a highly profitable revenue stream that produces an average of US\$1.7 billion each year.

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