

# Chapter 14

## Public Access ICT in Colombia

**Luis Fernando Barón**  
*Icesi University, Colombia*

**Mónica Valdés**  
*Fundación Colombia Multicolor, Colombia*

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Geography and culture make Colombia a rich and diverse country. Nevertheless, this country has a long history violence related to politics, insurgency, paramilitary groups, and drug trafficking. In spite of important human developments in the last decade, poverty, exclusion, and governability rates are still critical in this South-American country. These country characteristics have been critical to the way people communicate and access information, and they have also marked the way in which Colombians use and acquire information and communication technologies (ICTs).

The progressive nature of government public policy and investment in the communication, education, and cultural fields has favored public access venues in Colombia. Nevertheless, it's the

decision and commitment of social organizations and community-based actions that have been the real development axes of the public access venues in the country. This situation has developed because people have found ICTs an essential tool for individual and social development.

Public libraries, telecenters, and cybercafés, constitute the best training and ICT access opportunity for marginalized and vulnerable populations that still make up a high percentage of all Colombians. These access venues represent not only a communication, information, education, and leisure information alternative, the venues are also a gathering and socialization space, a locus for a changing relationships between the State and citizens, and also for enhancing daily life. They also represent an important alternative for employment, entrepreneurship, and personal and professional development.<sup>1</sup>

## **INTRODUCTION**

Even though internal armed conflict has marked recent Colombian history, Colombia shows extraordinary economic stability and steady human-capital growth, which places it among the countries that lead the region's development. Located at South-America's northwestern corner, and in a tropical zone that touches the Equator, as well as being half way between both continental poles, Colombia's location is geostrategic and favors commerce and communications. In addition to an incalculable natural diversity, as well as a wide range in climate and ecosystems, Colombia has resources for commercial development due to its proximity to the Panama Canal and to long coastlines that give onto the Pacific Ocean on the west and the Atlantic Ocean through the Caribbean Sea. All of these factors allow Colombia to be the entrance gate to South America and to have ports that face the rest of the Americas, Europe, and the Pacific Rim countries.

The effects of armed violence and internal conflict, which has extended over more than six decades, as well as drug trafficking and associated crime, have certainly had a significant influence on human lives, the environment, and the slow economic and social development. Nevertheless, foreign investment and some industries—like mining—have grown dramatically. According to the IMF Western Hemisphere Department's report, "Regional Economic Outlook: the Americas," in 2010, the Colombian gross domestic product (GDP) will be better than the performance of the continent's stronger economies (i.e., Brazil, and Venezuela, US, Mexico,).

All in all, however, the fruits of progress have not resulted in either a poverty decrease or in the adoption of a human focus on Colombian development. In fact, Colombia is one of the most inequitable countries in South America. According to data from the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (UNECLAC), government social expenditure has

failed to meet peoples' demands or protected vulnerable groups. Hand in hand with the economic-growth data are the data about poverty, which affects nearly 46% of the population, with 17.8% living in extreme poverty.

With 45 million people, Colombia has the third largest population in Latin America and a total area of 2,070,408 square kilometers (1,141,748 square km of continental territory and 928,660 square km of sea), with a density rate of 42.7 (36). As the rest of Latin America, Colombia is proud of its culture, which combines local folklore with colonial inheritance. Colombia has a long tradition of right-wing governments with a capitalist free-market system. This process — called "economic liberalization"— started in the 1990s with President Cesar Gaviria, who passed several constitutional amendments that led to a new Constitution, opening the way to a globalized market and to a progressive decentralization.

Although the internal armed conflict has not reached the status of a civil war, Colombia has suffered violence for decades: Bipartisan violence since the 1950's, insurgent groups since the beginning of the 1960's, the strengthening of drug cartels since the 1970's, as well as complex alliances between drug cartels and illegal paramilitary groups since the 1980's have marked the recent history of this South American northwestern corner.

Colombia is ranked second in the world in terms of internally displaced persons (IDP). According to official figures of the Internally Displaced Persons Information System gathered by the Colombian Presidential Agency for Social Action, 3,303,979 people have been violently displaced in the last decade. The real figures could be higher. Human Rights and Displaced Persons Consultants (CODHES, in Spanish) — a non-governmental organization — denies the accuracy of these figures, especially in the area of crimes related to forced displacements.

The UN Millennium Development Goal's last report places Colombia in the 77<sup>th</sup> place out of 182 countries; although the figures show some

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