

## Chapter 15

# Public Access ICT in Dominican Republic

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Dominican Republic is a small country in the Antilles Archipelago with a population estimated to be approximately 9.6 million, most of whom are under the age of 35. Nearly half of the population lives in poverty, and the number has grown steadily since 2002. The extensive poverty and a concentration of young citizens hold broad national implications. With so many of the population being both young and poor, a higher social vulnerability is problematic regarding such issues as child labor, commercial sexual exploitation and abuse, school desertion, homelessness, and addictions. The situation becomes even more complex as these problems further increase the country's poverty level, which in turn makes even more people vulnerable. This resulting cyclic evolution creates a condition that rapidly erodes the entire national political, economic, and social structure.

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The unemployed population in 2000 was estimated to be 13.9% of the total productive population; that figure rose to 18% in 2004 and 2005. This situation was ascribed to the 2004 economic crisis. However, since 2005, there has been some improvement, reducing the number to 15.6% in 2007.

The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has increased since the economic crisis in 2003-2004. Although the GDP in 2003 reached negative numbers (minus 1.9), it increased to a positive 9.3 in 2005 but fell back to 5.5 in 2006.

The overall social, political, and economic conditions in the Dominican Republic are severe. As a consequence, the Dominican Republic was selected to participate in this international investigative study to assess the ability of the public to access information and communication venues. The researchers also reviewed the role of information and communication technologies (ICTs) across the nation's overall economic, political, and

regulatory framework. The researchers assessed how the venues function, how they serve user needs, how they meet operational constraints, how they realize successes, and how they meet the needs of underserved communities and groups.

This study provided insight into the state of access to public information venues, and specifically considered public libraries, telecenters, and cybercafés, with a special focus on the social and economic inequities that affect the country regarding access to information sources. Consequently, the researchers set out to understand the information needs of underserved communities, public access to information and communication venues, and the role of ICTs. This study aimed to contribute research that would be a tool for policy and decision makers to plan, design, and develop projects in the field of information and ICTs.

The methodology used combined quantitative and qualitative techniques to obtain data. A user survey was applied in selected libraries, telecenters, and cybercafés among different kinds of populations living in urban and non-urban areas. The research team also interviewed approximately fifty stakeholders and users familiar with the subject matter. The people who were interviewed included researchers, venue staff, information and ICT professionals, and community leaders. The study team performed a detailed literature review, field observations, and conducted focus group discussions to validate the research process. The following is a listing of the most important findings:

- The available information-related resources are usually more abundant in urban venues than in rural venues, including more updated collections and a greater ICT presence. There is a significantly larger percentage of young female users in libraries and telecenters than in cybercafés.
- Access to information is limited not only by the existing infrastructure, but also by the lack of capacity to search, process, and appropriate the information. The country's unreliable power supply and distribution issues also limit access.
- An increase in digital literacy and connectivity are interrelated; however, the number of computers per person and the capacity to use software packages does not guarantee the solution to the long-standing social problems. For example, increased digital literacy and ICT capacity have not resolved the migration trends from agricultural zones to tourist centers and urban zones, or the migration out of the country.
- The use of libraries is closely linked to the formal education system. Telecenters are used as one way to build the capacities individuals who need to improve their ability to obtain employment. Cybercafés are more closely related to academic, entertainment, and social activities.
- Sustainability and maintenance are important challenges for libraries, telecenters, and Internet centers when the facilities need to be updated and repaired, and when the equipment must be replaced.
- The content and activities in the libraries and telecenters are not always coordinated with the local development possibilities, especially in rural zones.
- There is a need for future studies that will focus on information and knowledge processes related to migration. The Dominican Republic is a destination for large numbers of people from Haiti who seek employment while the country loses many of its own local workers to Europe and the United States.

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