

# Chapter 16

## Public Access ICT in Ecuador

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Ecuador is a small, sparsely populated country in northwestern South America with an ethnically diverse population estimated to be 13.8 million. The land area covers 256,371 sq km, and the diverse geography includes coastal plains, dense Amazon rainforest, and rugged highlands in the Andes Mountains. The Galapagos Islands in the Pacific are also part of Ecuador. The country is bordered on the north by Colombia, by Peru on the east and south, and on the west by the Pacific Ocean.

The capital city of Ecuador is Quito, and the nation's government functions as a presidential republic with an executive branch that includes 25 ministries. The president is elected to a four-year term and appoints the cabinet and provincial governors. President Rafael Correa took office on January 15, 2007. Provincial mayors, aldermen, and the parish boards gain office via direct elections. The land is divided administratively among

24 provinces, each of which has its own administrative capital. The provinces are divided into cantons that are further subdivided into parishes.

The population is ethnically diverse. Mestizos form the largest ethnic group (65% of the population) and are the mixed descendants of Spanish colonists and indigenous people. Amerindians comprise about 25% of the population. The white population is composed mainly of descendants of early Spanish colonists, as well as immigrants from other European countries, and account for about 7% of the population. The small Afro-Ecuadorian minority is largely based in the Esmeraldas and Imbabura provinces, and makes up 3% percent. Spanish is the official language and is also the first language of 94.4% of Ecuadorians, but several indigenous languages are spoken, the most important being Quechua.

The public education system is free and in 2006, the literacy rate was estimated to be 90.9%. Attendance is mandatory until age 14. The quality of the public school education is far below the levels needed, and class sizes are often disproportionately large. Lower-income families often

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find it necessary to pay for education, and the Ministry of Education reports that only 76% of the nation's children finish six years of schooling. In rural areas, only 10% of the children go on to high school, and government statistics show the mean number of years completed is only 6.7.

Gender is a significant nationwide inequity that owes its origins to a long-standing cultural tradition that strongly favors males. Illiteracy is higher among women (12.30%) than men (10.59%). Language, socio-economic status, education, gender, and location (rural/urban) are especially relevant to access and use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in Ecuador.

Largely because of these defining characteristics, Ecuador was selected to participate in this study. The research was designed both to assess the ability of the public to access information and communication venues, and also to review the role of ICTs across the overall economic, political, and regulatory framework. It assessed how the venues function, how they serve user needs, how they meet operational constraints, and how they realize successes. The study placed an emphasis on the information needs of underserved and remote communities and groups.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Katia Sotomayor, an anthropologist, and Juan Bossio, who has a Master's degree in Information Systems, conducted research for this study. Both have several years of experience as researchers, including ICT-development issues. They were assisted by a number of university-trained individuals who conducted field studies and surveys in the various public libraries, telecenters, and cybercafés.

The research process started with an exhaustive literature review that included academic documents and statistical information about ICTs, inequities in Ecuador, venue types, and reports about specific projects related to each venue. Then the research focused on specific venues.

## **VENUES SELECTION**

The individual venues identified for this study were selected because they met two criteria. They had to be open to the public and be distributed throughout the country. Consequently, the study was then focused on public libraries, telecenters, cybercafés. Public libraries and cybercafés are widely distributed, while telecenters were considered because they are oriented toward underserved communities and groups.

There are other information venues in Ecuador but they were excluded because they did not meet the selection criteria. For example, municipal libraries were excluded because they are located only in urban areas. Each municipal library is different depending on the support it receives from its local municipal government, and there is too little reliable information, data, or documentation about them. University libraries were excluded because they are located only in urban areas, and they are generally restricted to a limited user base.

## **Inequity Variables**

In general, venue use and the access to information and ICTs are most strongly influenced by socio-economics, education, age, and gender, and also by the location of the venue. Not many venues in Ecuador provide free access to information, especially true of venues equipped with ICT services. Consequently, the low-income population is seldom able to afford the user fees. People in the middle-income class spend very little on accessing information in the venues and prioritize more basic needs such as food, clothing, and shelter. They do not perceive access to information as a basic need, and, unfortunately, neither does the government. People at the higher-income levels are the most frequent users and have greater access to information through personal computers as they often have Internet connections at home.

There is a strong direct correlation between education achievement and income, and the education level usually defines the kind of content

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