

Chapter 17

Public Access ICT in Honduras

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Republic of Honduras is a small semi-tropical country in Central America with a modest economy based largely on agriculture and, to a lesser degree, on import/export trading, financial services, and a small amount of manufacturing. Approximately 92% of the population is Mestizo, which is defined as a mixed ethnicity of European and indigenous origins. The remaining 8% of the population is composed primarily of indigenous groups, including the Lencas, Garífunas, Chortis, Payas, Tolupanes, Misquitos, and Tawahkas. Spanish is the official language, but five indigenous languages also are spoken.

Honduras suffers a remarkably high level of poverty, high unemployment, and a near-total absence of public policies, projects, and programs

to address the basic needs of the population. The poverty level surged to a new high following Hurricane Mitch in 1998, and the lack of social services drove a lingering migration phenomenon that continues to characterize the country. Recent estimates indicate that approximately one hundred thousand Hondurans leave the country each year, and most are believed to travel to the United States or Spain.

In addition to the socio-economic impact of the migration, Hondurans face an ongoing struggle with HIV-AIDS and reproductive health and has one of the highest levels of HIV-AIDS cases in the region. Compounding the extensive economic and health issues, Honduras has an inadequate educational system, with an estimated half million Hondurans who are illiterate.

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The Honduran government implemented its Poverty Reduction Strategy in 2001, which has the support of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). The strategy aims to: 1) Accelerate equitable and sustainable economic growth, 2) reduce poverty in rural and urban regions, 3) produce greater investment in human capital, and 4) strengthen social protection for underserved communities and groups. Although poverty is a nationwide issue, it is clearly accentuated in the rural areas, and the rural areas are strongly affected by major limitations in the coverage and quality of social services. The rural population represents 53% of the nation's population and has an 85% poverty level.

Each of these issues severely affect public access to information and communication technologies (ICTs), which is why Honduras was selected to participate in this study – because of the value that access to ICTs can bring to the country. The study 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.

The need to know and understand the information processes that are available to the people is relevant to this analysis. The assessments developed during this investigation were aimed to provide an understanding of: 1) the public access to information and ICTs in very specific cases in Honduras, 2) the social, economic, and political processes surrounding public access to information and ICTs, 3) the needs of the population with regard to information, adequate information venues, and the type and quality of the available information, and 4) the support given to existing initiatives.

The results were based on specific cases, and few nationwide generalizations.

This research was developed in phases, with the first phase based on a literature review, on-site visits, surveys, and interviews with key individuals. The second phase focused on the fieldwork.

The researchers listed a number of key findings:

- Government policies focus on regulating the access to public information and not necessarily on facilitating public access to information.
- The diverse initiatives have limited economic support from the government.
- Information and communication access venues are affected by the political preference of the users, the venue operators, and the community officials.
- Most of the venue users are children and young students because of requirements imposed by the schools.
- Cybercafés are widely used for access to information, as well as for the communication purposes for which telecenters were created.
- Access to the venues often is determined by the perception of their social attractiveness as gathering places.
- Access to information, and the determination of what is considered to be legitimate information, is controlled largely by the individual venue operators; their judgment is commonly based on subjective ideas of what the operator personally thinks is morally and socially appropriate.
- Because of the migration phenomenon, many people go to the venues to communicate with friends and relatives who live in other countries. As a result, the levels of technological appropriation are generally related to communication processes, particularly among adult users.
- Cybercafés serve an unrecognized social role regarding the way that visitors learn

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