

Chapter 20

Public Access ICT in Nepal

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Republic of Nepal is a landlocked country in South Asia bordered by China to the north and India to the South. The modern Nepali state was formed in the mid-eighteenth century and existed as a kingdom until 2006 when it transformed into a federal democratic republic. With a population of 28.3 million, Nepal faces acute challenges with regard to development. About 31% of the population lives in deep poverty on an income equivalent to US\$1.00 per day. With a literacy rate of only 56%, access to critical information related to education, health care, and employment has always been a matter of utmost importance for the majority of the people in Nepal.

Public access venues, such as public libraries, community libraries, telecenters, cybercafés, and community radios are expected to provide access to information. This study was aimed at examining different aspects of such venues while reviewing the access, capacity, and environment associated with the venues. The research was expected to

focus on the overall scenario regarding public access to the venues while exploring the opportunities for further enhancement of the sector as a whole. The specific venues selected for the study were the public libraries, community libraries, telecenters, and cybercafés.

The research was conducted using a framework designed by the Technology & Social Change Group at the University of Washington. During the first phase of the research, the study team consulted with subject matter experts in telecenters, community libraries, public libraries, cybercafés, and information and communications technologies (ICTs). A particular emphasis was placed on the information and communication needs of underserved and remote communities and groups. In the second phase of the study, information and data gathered from other primary and secondary sources were further validated and updated by conducting field surveys of venue operators and users among all four of the venue types. The researchers also conducted several focus-group discussions to further validate the findings.

Although the venue types that were studied have been successful to some extent in enhancing

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access to information, a formal coordinating and networking mechanism needs to be explored to enhance knowledge sharing and provide more effective ways to delivery their services. To exploit the sustainability and maximum impact of the venues, the venues can also be integrated with ongoing development initiatives at the local level. To take advantage of the favorable policy environment in Nepal, it is extremely important to focus on program implementation of development initiatives. The various segments of the political, commercial, and social sectors of the country should make an ongoing effort toward this end to ensure that policies can be functionally implemented.

The research has revealed the importance of public access to communication venues for empowering people with appropriate information and creating a knowledge-based society. Community libraries are deep rooted within the communities and have been able to create a positive impact on society. Public libraries seem to cater to the information needs of most of the population and have great potential to be especially beneficial in the underserved communities, if the libraries receive proper planning and coordination from the various governing agencies.

Telecenters, as ICT-enabled venues, are seen to have great promise for accelerating access to information by the underserved communities. Cybercafés are found mostly in urban areas and have become very popular as ICT-enabled communication venues. But for the most part, they cater to the information needs of urban youth and do not appear to reach the underserved segments of society.

COUNTRY OVERVIEW

Introduction

The Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal is a landlocked country in South Asia bordered by

China to the north and India to the South. The modern Nepali state was formed after its Unification by Prithvi Narayan Shah¹ on December 21, 1768, and existed as an absolute monarchy until 2006, when it transformed into a federal democratic republic. The diverse landscape ranges from the humid Terai plains in the south to the mountainous Himalayas in the north, which makes that area a major tourist destination. The Himalaya Mountains extend across Nepal's northern and western parts and include eight of the world's ten highest mountains, including the highest, Mount Everest.

Nepal is roughly 800 kilometers (500 miles) long and 200 kilometers (125 miles) wide, and has an area of 147,181 sq km (56,827 square miles) divided into 14 administrative zones. The 14 zones are further divided into 75 districts, with a chief district officer heading each district. The administrative zones are grouped into five development regions: Eastern, Central, Western, Mid-Western, and Far Western.

From 1768 until 1990, the kingdom of Nepal was an absolute monarchy, but when faced with a popular movement, King Birendra, agreed to massive political reforms. He established a parliamentary monarchy with the king as the head of state and a prime minister as the head of government. In 2006, an interim constitution was written that established an interim House of Representatives. In April 2007, the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) joined the interim government.

On December 28, 2007, the interim parliament passed a bill that made Nepal a federal republic, and on April 10, 2008, Nepal held the first election for the constitutional assembly. The Maoist party led the poll results, but failed to gain a simple majority in parliament. On May 28, 2008, lawmakers in Nepal legally abolished the monarchy and declared the country a republic, ending 239 years of royal rule in the Himalayan nation. Voting for the election of the country's president and vice president took place in the constitutional assembly, electing Dr. Ram Baran Yadav as the first president of Nepal. On August 15, 2008,

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