

Chapter 21

Public Access ICT in Philippines

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Philippines

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Republic of the Philippines is composed of 7,107 islands in the western Pacific region of Southeast Asia and is surrounded by the Philippine Sea, the South China Sea, and the Celebes Sea. The United States gained control of the Philippine Islands following the Spanish American War in the late 1890s and granted the Philippines independence in 1946.

With a land area of 300,000 sq km and a population estimated at 90 million, the country is the world's 12th most populous nation. Half of that total population lives on Luzon Island. The landscape is mountainous and covered by tropical rainforest, and the economy rests heavily on agriculture, although there is some mining and light industry.

Political, social, and economic issues have created a deeply marginalized society, largely the result of the unequal distribution of wealth. Corruption is commonly described as rampant. The resulting combination of these factors has

affected information access on multiple levels. The conditions that marginalize communities and groups are attributed primarily to: 1) the weak macro-economic management, 2) employment issues, 3) high population growth rates, 4) an under-performing agricultural sector and an unfinished land reform agenda 5) governance issues, including corruption and a weak state, 6) conflict and security issues, and 7) people with impairments and disabilities.

English and Filipino are the official languages, but an astonishing 180 other languages are recognized and spoken. Education is compulsory and taught in English in a school system patterned after the American model. From an educational viewpoint, the literacy rate is 92.6%. The government officially recognizes 14 regional and tribal ethnic distinctions with minor segments that have North American, European, Asian, and Middle Eastern origins.

The underserved population includes the urban poor, women, children, the elderly, indigenous people, informal workers who have no social services or health insurance, peasant farmers, fishermen, persons with impairments and disabilities,

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victims of disaster, formal labor and migrant workers, and students and young people. Collectively, these social issues limit public access to ICTs, and the nation 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.

In general, the underserved and marginalized population in the country needs information on basic human needs and fundamental social services. Although the Philippine government has fostered an enabling policy and regulatory environment for ICTs and development through various international and national policies, the implementation of these policies can be improved.

This study focused on the access to information by the underserved and marginalized population in the Philippines, particularly through ICTs. It examined the policy-making conditions in the country, including projects and programs that aim to make ICTs more accessible to the population. The study also reviewed the status of ICTs to identify the information needs of the country, and to offer recommendations for improving the implementation of programs and services related to ICT development and accessibility.

To study the information needs, the public access venues were reviewed to identify the most accessible and prevalent ICT sources available to the marginalized and underserved people. The researchers selected public libraries, government-funded Community e-Centers (CeCs), and privately owned cybercafés, and then identified the specific venues to be examined during the study.

The venues were examined to establish accessibility, physical infrastructure, and human

resources. The researchers considered information content and service-usage patterns, communication and knowledge production, and relevant environmental factors that included governmental policies, geography, ethnic and linguistic differences, and inequity variables. The research methods included interviews, surveys, field observations, and site visits.

The venues were found to be generally affordable and accessible to users. In public libraries, information barriers include obsolete and small collections, as well as the absence of Internet access. In CeCs and cybercafés, users who were interviewed identified limited services, slow Internet access, and limited workspace as the primary information barriers. Public libraries and cybercafés are accessed more frequently than CeCs, which are relatively new government-sponsored information sites. If the identified information barriers are addressed, these public access venues can be important information and education sources for the underserved and marginalized communities and groups.

Further research is highly recommended, especially to examine methods for sustaining CeCs and mechanisms for monitoring the development of public access venues. There is a need to standardize and coordinate policies, programs, regulatory controls, and initiatives to ensure optimum use of these venues.

COUNTRY OVERVIEW

Introduction

The Republic of the Philippines is a developing nation composed of 7,107 islands in the western Pacific region of Southeast Asia and is surrounded by the Philippine Sea, the South China Sea, and the Celebes Sea. With a land area of 300,000 sq km and a population estimated to be 90 million, the country is the world's 12th most populous nation. Half of that total population lives on Luzon

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