

Chapter 22

Public Access ICT in Malaysia

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the past several years, the issue of providing equitable access to information has received significant attention by various governments as an effective means to bridge the digital gap in their respective countries. An information-based society can become an important aid when pursuing national development goals. This current study was directed toward issues related to public access to information in Malaysia and placed an emphasis on information and communication technologies (ICTs) and how the underserved communities in the country benefit from various ICT-based services.

Malaysia is a good example of a developing country that understands how ICTs are an important factor in national development. In the last few Malaysian development plans, the country placed a significant emphasis on investing in ICTs and benefiting from them as a major contribution in economic development. This emphasis has been at the core of Malaysia's development strategies and

received much attention and support in a country that has existed for centuries on an agriculture-based economy. With ICTs as a key enabler for development, various projects in Malaysia have been developed in support of this view. These projects constitute high-level ICT-based services and products that promote ICT investment and application in business and daily life. Typical examples include a "multi-media corridor", various e-Transformation and e-Government projects, and investments in making electronic manufacturing and commerce part of the mainstream commercial activities. These projects are also aimed at making ICTs widely available in all parts of the country to be used by all members of the population. The following are a few of the successful examples:

- ICT-based education is available to most people through the heavy investment in ICT applications provided in the public school system.
- The national library system is being enhanced, refurbished, and extended to many regions that have not previously had libraries, especially in rural areas and where li-

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braries either already have ICT-based provisions or are scheduled to receive them.

- A broad network of telecenters is being developed with the focus on placing them in rural and remote areas to bridge the digital divide, and, in so doing, increase the capacity of the users, enabling them to adopt various ICT services to serve their daily needs.

The examination of the information landscape and its use in Malaysia highlights two important issues that indicate how public access to information can provide positive results. The first issue is the determination of the government to exploit ICTs as a means to serve economic development. This approach creates a favorable environment in which the venues can exist, operate, and prosper.

The second issue relates to the fact that these information access venues are implemented as part of a well-devised plan that has a long-term view about applying the benefits. The importance of the venues as a long-term investment in the society is well recognized, and the venues are provided with the funds and support to operate well into future.

This chapter on Malaysia examines the issues and provides an overview of the country and the environment for ICT-based initiatives. It describes the public access venues and focuses on those established to accommodate the underserved and remote communities and groups. The chapter concludes with a number of key success factors and recommendations.

INTRODUCTION: COUNTRY OVERVIEW

Malaysia announced its independence in 1957 and has since grown to become a vibrant and modern nation in Southeast Asia. The country is composed of two regions – West Malaysia and East Malaysia – that combine to form a total land area of 329,847 sq km. The population in 2005

was estimated to be about 27 million, and most are of Malay, Chinese, and Indian origins.

The capital city of Kuala Lumpur is in the west central part of West Malaysia, and the nation is divided administratively among 13 states. The two primary national regions lie 650 km apart across the South China Sea. West Malaysia, the peninsular region, occupies the southern half of the Malay Peninsula and is bordered to the north by Thailand. East Malaysia lies along the northwestern part of the island of Borneo and consists of the states of Sarawak and Sabah.

Malaysia's culture is diverse and while the majority of the population is Muslim, much of the population practices the Buddhist and Hindu religions. Malay is the official language, but Mandarin and Tamil are widely spoken, and large numbers of the population speaks English as a second language. Overall, the literacy rate is high and education is compulsory.

The economy is relatively strong, but the country felt the effects of the global economic downturn in 2008, and a significant percentage of the population is underserved and unemployed. The economy has grown at a relatively steady pace and owes much to a strong international export trade. Historically, Malaysia has been a significant source of agricultural products, primarily rice, sugar, fruits, and rubber. There are major deposits of tin, and much of the population depends on commercial fishing. One of the most significant sources of revenue in recent years has been the burgeoning electronics manufacturing industry. Since the end of World War II, Malaysia has been a popular tourist destination.

The general economic outlook has been improving favorably except during an internal economic crisis in the 1990s and during the worldwide economic turbulence in 2008. There is a significant emphasis on ICT-based investments, and the role of ICTs is seen as a key enabler in the national economic development. This investment creates a favorable environment in terms of economic,

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