

## Chapter 29

# Public Access ICT in Sri Lanka

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Sri Lanka is making a concerted attempt to move into a knowledge-based economy. As an important aspect of this strategy, the government is using ICT as a lever for “reducing poverty, promoting growth, and fostering social integration and peace.” Sri Lanka has faced protracted political and ideological conflicts for twenty-five years that, at times, have turned violent, but the people and the economy have been resilient, even though progress has often been slow.

In 2004, Sri Lanka initiated its national program to expand digital technology applications through institutional reforms, regulatory changes, infrastructure development, and streamlined government processes. Given the purpose of the program, Sri Lanka was invited to participate in this study.

The governing objective of the research was to assess the public venues that provide access to information, and to determine the purposes for which these venues were used and how ICTs are being used to meet the information needs of underserved communities. It is expected that the

findings of this study will feed into policy and make individual venue operators consider possible ways that might serve to improve the information services they provide.

### Methodology

The study, which was initiated in December 2007, was divided into two phases, beginning with a workshop hosted by the Technology & Social Change Group (TASCHA, formerly known as CIS, Center for Information and Society) at the University of Washington for the researchers from the 25 countries selected to participate in the study. The first phase of the study aimed to build a broad overview of the information venue landscape in each country and featured literature reviews, discussions with key stakeholders, and visits to different types of venues. In a second global workshop, the TASCHA team presented feedback on the analyses of the data obtained in the first phase. In addition, the workshop participants discussed research instruments and the performance of the second study phase, which featured surveys and focus-group discussions.

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## Findings

The study results reveal a number of positive developments in Sri Lanka:

- Prominent among the people who access information from the venues in underserved communities are micro- and small-scale entrepreneurs, small farmers, low-income households, and those people who lack the skills to benefit from emerging economic opportunities and programs.
- Public libraries are increasingly reaching out to underserved communities by providing access to information, especially by offering print materials to a clientele, which has long formed the traditional library user base. Students are the most active library users. The Nenasala centers are centers that focus on providing connectivity and non-connectivity-based ICT services, while the specialized information centers adopt a different model to disseminate information through a network of intermediaries. Wireless broadband deployment, in conjunction with the EasySeva initiative, is becoming a franchise model for last-mile connectivity and as a means to encourage and support ICT entrepreneurs. EasySeva venues introduced “new members” from underserved communities to the information networks through targeted interventions.
- The introduction of Nenasala centers to underserved communities has opened a window of opportunity to acquire computer skills, especially among the young people of poor households.
- Mobile telephony has spread rapidly, and the comfort level among the public in using mobile technology appears to be high.
- The ongoing e-government projects that focus on providing public information services have benefited underserved commu-

nities. This picture is particularly true with regard to venues such as the Nenasala centers that provide 1) localization through the development of UNICODE fonts that allow local languages to be used for transmitting and accessing information, and 2) the availability of a web-page translation tool, such as a Firefox plug-in in Sinhala and Tamil.

- Alternative media and citizen journalism websites in local languages have emerged and experience a relative freedom of expression. The convergence of technology has fostered citizen journalism, and increasing numbers of bloggers are online.

## Constraints

Throughout the course of the study, the research team observed several constraints to the ability of the public to access information:

- The sites selected for many of the venues are poor. Resources and staff skills needed within the new information environment are noticeably inadequate, and this issue is compounded by a distinct lack of organized location and community-specific information.
- Users typically lacked information literacy, and the new ICT-enabled venues are poorly used when compared with public library use.
- The staff at the venues rarely have an adequate understanding of the information needs of the community they serve and of their role in providing appropriate services to meet those needs in a proactive manner.
- Venues function as “stand-alone” entities without collaboration and networking. Furthermore, the majority of the respondents use only one facility.

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