

# Chapter 34

## Public Access ICT in Egypt

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Egypt is a vibrant modern nation and has been a major contributing influence on the world scene for thousands of years. In addition to its prominent placement in the northeastern reaches of Africa, and its historical background there, Egypt harbors a strong relationship among the Middle Eastern Arab nations, as well as with its neighboring countries in North Africa.

The rapidly growing population is estimated to have reached 80 million. Importantly, the limited amount of arable land and the country's huge dependence on the Nile River have always exerted an enormous influence on the population, and that is no less true today as it has always been – those features of the country's arid landscape continue to cause a high degree of stress on the people and the country's resources.

During the past several years, Egypt's government has invested heavily to create a physical infrastructure that encourages economic growth and invites direct foreign investment. In that

respect, the government has correspondingly invested heavily in information and technological developments and has achieved an excellent return on that investment. As a key aspect of those advancements, the government has initiated an e-government program to help transform Egypt into an information-based society. Given this favorable political impetus, four key venues for public access to information stand out and were examined during this study: 1) public libraries, 2) academic libraries, 3) IT clubs, and 4) cybercafés. These four venues cover the spectrum of public access portals in Egypt and are perceived to be major contributors to public access to current and relevant information. Additionally, these venues have the potential to expand and more effectively meet the public's information needs. The study focused directly on how these venues function, how they serve user needs, how they meet operational constraints, and how they realize successes.

Egypt is one of 25 countries participating in this international study that 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,

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political, and regulatory framework. The study placed an emphasis on the information needs of underserved and remote communities.

## **Methodology**

From the outset in 2008, the study focused on four public access venues and was completed in two phases. The first phase aimed at obtaining a general understanding of the spectrum of activities that pertain to public access. The researchers interviewed users and key stakeholders associated with the key venues and, subsequently, conducted field visits in order to, first, gain an initial understanding of the technological landscape and, second, to collect literature pertaining to public access to information and ICTs.

During the second phase of the study, the team conducted detailed field surveys in 49 venues (seven public libraries, ten academic libraries, eight IT clubs, and 24 cybercafés), in eight governmental units covering both urban and non-urban locations.<sup>1</sup> A total of 186 surveys from operators, major stakeholders, and users were completed and analyzed. The results of several user focus groups were then used to verify the survey findings.

## **Findings**

The Egyptian political sector provides a high degree of support for public access venues, and that support serves as a favorable foundation for the success of those venues. The support of Egypt's Ministry of Communications and Information Technology for IT clubs, and for public access in general, are reflected in the rapidly increasing number of new venues that have appeared to serve the public.

- Despite the strong support from the government for public access to technology-based information and communication venues, the public most commonly accesses information through mass media

and other means, especially through television and by word of mouth. This point is particularly evident among lower-income and underserved people, rural people, and those in smaller communities far removed from urban centers.

- Public phone shops have become quite important in the way individuals communicate, although the increasing emergence of mobile phones is having a huge effect in the decreasing roles these shops play.
- The lack of appropriate sustainability models have also had a negative effect on the quality of service among the different venues, and may be due in part to internal venue-management issues.
- Capacity building programs have been widely introduced in Egypt, and have mainly targeted young adults and youth. While these programs have increased the general awareness of ICTs in various segments of the society overall, high illiteracy rates and the limited awareness of the importance of digital ICTs have contributed to the slow pace of technology penetration, especially in the low-income sector.
- Relevant content, particularly any content that focuses on local needs, is quite limited, which has further contributed to the limited adoption of technologies across all segments of Egyptian society.
- The hours of venue operation, the expense of transportation, and the cost of using the venue services all contribute to limiting access to the venues. While these limitations are seen to be changing in some urban locations (in part because of changes in the management of some public access venues), the changes have not appeared in underserved areas, low-income areas, and rural regions.
- What are commonly considered to be the two most important factors affecting access to public information venues are the

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