



## Chapter XIII

# Community Impact of Telebased Information Centers

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## Introduction

Telebased information community centers or just telecenters have been seen as the killer application to empower local communities in developed and developing countries to meet the challenges of the information society.

The point of departure has been different in various parts of the world, and a number of quite diverse models for development of telebased information centers have been applied. While centers in developed countries, with an almost universal coverage of telephony services, have been focussed on enhancing IT capabilities and access to IT-based communication services, developing countries have also focussed on provision of basic telephony.

This chapter presents the approaches taken in Scandinavia, Hungary, Western Australia and Ghana in order to reach these objectives, and discusses the experiences with the different models and the national strategies used for setting up telebased information centers with special attention to their applicability in developing countries.

## Perceptions of Telebased Information Centers

The first telebased information centers established in Scandinavia were termed telecottages. They had much focus on provision of IT facilities and dissemination of knowledge on technology to the public. Since then the concept has developed, and telecenters are now in operation in most parts of the world.

The UK has also a fairly long tradition for telecenters and the number of telecenters is still increasing. However, the distribution of centers among regions is

very uneven (with the highest concentration in Wales) and reflects variations in opportunities for public funding. Most centers function as telework centers and provide facilities for teleworkers. Eighty percent of the companies provide facilities for teleworkers coming from more than one company (Cogburn, 1998).

Germany has also a long tradition for telecenters. Telecenters were established in East Germany in 1992, to improve the access to telecommunication facilities after unification. Telecenters are also operating in the Western part of the country (Cogburn, 1998).

In France teleworking plays an important role in the creation of telecenters, the most successful centers act as IT service companies with little or no emphasis on local development objectives. Telecenters are a recent phenomenon. The telecenters are generally very large, but the number of centers was by the end of 1997 less than 10.<sup>1</sup>

In Southern Europe only very few centers have been established, but most countries have announced plans to become more actively engaged in this area. Italy had in 1997 only two rural-based centers but has announced a plan to create 57 new centers. Spain has about six centers all established quite recently. Also there more centers are planned. Training and upgrading of IT-related working qualifications are important ingredients in the centers operating in this region.

The concept of telecenters has also been used to promote rural development in Eastern Europe, most notably in Hungary. Estonia has also quite an active telecottage movement, which has received support from Sweden. More than 50 centers are operating in each of these two countries (CTI, 1998, 1, and CTI, 1998, 2).

Australia provides, as one of the few high-income countries with a very sparse population, a unique experience of operation of telecenters in remote areas. Both in Australia and in Hungary and Estonia, a very broad range of activities is included in the concept. The most important is that the activities contribute to development of the local community, and some of the services provided have very little relation to IT or to telecommunication.

In the U.S. many telecenters have teleworking as their primary activity, in particular California has established quite a number of teleworking centers. However, there is also a number of community-based technology centers employed in training of marginalized people.

Telecenters have also been established in many third-world countries. Many of these are essentially phone shops, sometimes also offering fax or other supplementary services. In the Indian state Punjabe more than 10,000 such centers have been established on a franchise basis. In Senegal, 12,000 such centers are established as private franchises initiated by the national public telecom operator Sonatel. Similar centres are planned in Thailand (ITU, 1999).

In addition to this, telecenters have also been established through a local initiative by small entrepreneurs as a result of a growing market demand for IT and telecommunication services. As described below, Ghana provides a prominent example of this. Although their primary services are related to basic telecommunication services, they may also offer other business services like photocopying and typing. So far, these types of centers are mainly located in urban neighbourhoods, where a large population of customers without residential access to basic telecom services exist.

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