

Chapter 5

Success Factors in Public Access Computing for Development

Ricardo Gomez
University of Washington, USA

ABSTRACT

An exploratory, qualitative study in 25 countries around the world identifies success factors for centers that offer public access to Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). The study considered public libraries, telecenters, and cybercafés, and grouped the findings into four types of success factors: (1) understand and take care of local needs first, (2) train info mediaries and users, (3) build alliances with other venues and collaborate with other community services, and (4) strengthen sustainability. Results corroborate the findings of previous studies of libraries and of telecenters which identify success factors that include the four themes presented. However, this is the first systematic comparison across multiple countries to identify success factors in different types of public access venues. The findings highlight critical variables to be considered in policy decisions, funding allocations, and program implementation to reach underserved populations in developing countries with equitable access and meaningful use of ICT. They also provide valuable direction for future research to better understand the interactions between libraries, telecenters, and cybercafés as venues that can contribute to community development through public access to ICT.

INTRODUCTION

Public access to ICT can help marginalized communities gain access to new tools and sources of information that are critical to life in the 21st Century. What does public access to ICT look like in developing countries, and how can it be strengthened in order to make a better contribution

to community development? This research identifies four key factors that contribute to the success of venues such as public libraries, cybercafés and telecenters. It is based on a qualitative study in 25 countries. The goal of the study was to better understand the landscape of public access to ICT across selected developing countries, inform policy and funding decisions, and contribute to

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public knowledge about the importance of public access ICT for community development. By offering a better understanding of success factors, these findings can help strengthen venues that offer public access to ICT, and strengthen their contribution to improve the quality of life of marginalized communities around the world.

The last decade has seen an exponential growth of initiatives that offer public access to Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in libraries, government and community centers, schools, cafés, and other small businesses. People visit libraries and other types of centers to use a computer, access the Internet, look for information, communicate with friends and family, play games, learn new things, or conduct business. Public access to ICT can play an important role in social and economic development, especially in underserved communities (Castells, 2007; Unwin, 2009; Warschauer, 2003). Although access to ICT alone does not automatically result in human development, it does enable new opportunities for human development beyond economic growth and western-style modernization.

Development is regarded as an activity to promote empowerment rather than economic modernization, as early development theories suggested (Servaes, 2008). “Empowerment is the mechanism by which individuals, organizations and communities gain control and mastery over social and economic conditions, over political processes, and over their own stories” (Melkote & Steeves, 2001, p. 366). This notion of development as empowerment is increasingly being adopted in the field of ICT for Development (ICT4D or ICTD). As noted by Unwin, “for many in the early 21st century, development is primarily seen as being concerned with economic growth, and identifying the ways in which the economic systems of poor countries can be made more effective... however, this is only one perspective, and others prefer to emphasize the importance of participation and empowerment in effective development... ICTs can have a key role to play in delivering both of

these contrasting interpretations of development” (Unwin, 2009, p. 1). Furthermore, “researchers have also argued that the impact of ICTs extends well beyond the economic domain, having positive spillover effects on numerous dimensions of social life. For example, these technologies have been harnessed to enhance learning [...], improve health [...], empower marginalized women [...], promote indigenous knowledge [...], and maintain good governance” (Ngwenyama & Morawczynski, 2009, p. 238).

This research project gathered detailed data regarding the current status, challenges, and lessons of public access computing across a broad spectrum of developing countries and emerging economies: Algeria, Argentina, Bangladesh, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Egypt, Georgia, Honduras, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Malaysia, Moldova, Mongolia, Namibia, Nepal, Peru, Philippines, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Turkey, and Uganda (see country selection rationale below). Local research teams in each country conducted the study using a shared research design and rationale to examine how and why people use public access venues, with a particular emphasis on the information needs of underserved and marginalized populations. One of the salient results of the research project is a detailed analysis of the common factors that contribute to the success of public access ICT centers in 25 developing countries.

The next section will explore some of the most salient literature relevant to this topic, followed by a brief description of the research methods in this study. Research findings are then presented and discussed, ending with a final conclusion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There have been many previous studies about ICT in public libraries, especially in the U.S. (Bertot, McClure, & Jaeger, 2008; Rutkauskienė, 2008; Walkinshaw, 2007), about telecenters for com-

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