Reframing the Role of Telecentres in Development

Telecentres – public locations for accessing ICTs – have formed an important part of "e-development" strategies for donors, NGOs, governments and the private sector in recent years. At one time, they were a centrepiece of such strategies but more recently have somewhat fallen from favour. Where do we stand today on telecentres?

A simple schematic identifies three different categories of location: high, medium and low telecentre e-readiness. We can define this e-readiness index in terms of factors that include incomes, ICT infrastructure and skills[i]. There is no simple correspondence to geography but we can say quite a number of high telecentre e-readiness locations are urban; many medium are peri-urban; and many low are rural.

Experience suggests we need three different strategies for the three different categories:

- *High telecentre e-readiness locations*: the private sector can and will cater to this market location largely unaided. The development focus should not be on the telecentre infrastructure but on "development value-added": ways to support outreach from the telecentres to more marginalised local groups; ways in which public information goods and services can be delivered through these private sector telecentres.
- *Low telecentre e-readiness locations*: there are very serious questions about the value and sustainability of telecentres in such locations. A whole set of recent experiences in such locations reports failure, impossible economics, and massive underuse. A few samples will illustrate. Of nine rural telecentres set up in Mongolia in the late 1990s, only one still survives[ii]. A key Peruvian rural infocentre project found the centre was not financially sustainable and hardly ever used by the poor who were its target[iii]. The ePabelan project in Indonesia set up a telecentre to serve the information needs of poor farmers; on average, just one farmer per month visited the centre[iv]. The conclusion? Once you're in a hole, stop digging. eDevelopment priorities lie elsewhere.
- *Medium telecentre e-readiness locations*: it is here that more "traditional" development interventions should focus. Various models – and any of the three sectors – may be involved. The bottom line, though, is that the market will not yet fully deliver to these locations; yet there are potentially-sustainable development benefits from investment in telecentres.

Beyond these locational strategies, however, there is a need to reframe our view of telecentres, adding in two new perspectives:

a) *A Production Orientation*. To date, there has been too much emphasis in the planning and evaluation of telecentres on consumption: on the ways in which telecentres support the use of information and communication by telecentre clients.

Such a perspective often shows telecentres having only a marginal impact on the livelihoods of community members: there is not yet a general and overwhelming case that information is a transformative factor in development livelihoods.

There needs to be greater emphasis on telecentres as productive entities; looking from the perspective of the telecentre as an IT sector business. This does not mean an exclusive concern with profit. But it does mean recognising a telecentre's greatest impact may be in the jobs, incomes and skills it creates for those who run the telecentre, and those who use its technology as the core of a micro-enterprise, be it word processing work, web design, IT training, etc.

b) *A Space Orientation*. To date, there has been too much emphasis on the technology of the telecentre, and too little recognition of the physical and social space its building provides. Evidence from India shows this to be just as important. Young men in Bangalore use telecentres as a location for direct interaction with peers[v]. From this they learn about IT trends, about job opportunities, about ways to pass job entrance tests. Less tangibly, they also learn what it is to be part of a modern, urban, middle class: gradually being inducted into all the subtle signs of class like language, action, and dress.

Muslim women from poor communities in New Delhi also use their telecentre as much for its social space as its connection to cyberspace[vi]. It provides one of very few places where they are freed from the gaze and control of family. It is particularly valued because its association with ICTs legitimates the women's presence at the telecentre in the eyes of family members.

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[i] See for example, the business model used by Indian company Drishtee: www.drishtee.com/nd/content/downloads.asp

[ii] Johnson, C.A., Britz, J.J. & Ariunaa, L. (2005) 'Challenges in promoting access to ICTs in remote regions', UK DSA conference, *Connecting People and Places*, Open University, 7-9 Sept

[iii] Talyakhan, S. & Grimshaw, D.J. (2005) 'Connecting the first mile', UK DSA conference, *Connecting People and Places*, Open University, 7-9 Sept

[iv] Robinson, A. (2005) 'Square pegs for round holes?', UK DSA conference, *Connecting People and Places*, Open University, 7-9 Sept

[v] Nisbett, N. (2005) 'Growing up connected', UK DSA conference, *Connecting People and Places*, Open University, 7-9 Sept

[vi] UNESCO (2005) *Women and ICTs: Mediating Social Change*, film, Roop Media for UNESCO, Paris