

Public Access: Supporting Digital Inclusion for All

Maximising The Impact of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) For Inclusive Social And Economic Development

Briefing on Public Access for The Commission on Science and Technology for Development (CSTD),
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Access to information and communications: A key issue for development

Access to information and communications supports development by empowering people, especially more remote and marginalised communities and those living in poverty, to:

- Better exercise their political and socio-economic rights
- Become more economically active and productive
- Learn and apply new skills, and find better means for earning a livelihood
- Enrich their cultural identity and expression
- Participate in decision making and address personal development and social challenges
- Enrich the collective knowledge-building process.

But inequalities in access limit the effectiveness of ICTs in addressing social needs

In this context, public access to information and communication rights have become key issues for the emerging information society. But not everyone is fully connected and those who are “connected” often suffer from poor-quality and high-cost links. Many simply do not have the economic means to connect to the internet – particularly those who do not have electricity, and those who, even if they have smart phones, do not have computers and multimedia-capable internet links. Inequities in access also affect people in developed countries due to limited access to infrastructure, or constraints related to age, economic means and gender.

As a result, ensuring that all members of society can benefit equally from access to ICTs, and take part in shaping the interconnected world, is becoming an increasingly important priority.

What Is Public Access?

While there is no commonly agreed definition of “public access”, these are usually facilities that allow any member of the public to make affordable use of computers with broadband connections, along with associated ICT tools, such as printers and scanners, as well as technical support for using the internet.

Public access facilities may be purpose-built state-supported “telecentres” or “community multimedia centres” (CMCs), or private “cybercafés”. Locating public access services in existing institutions situated in the community, such as libraries and post offices, is often a particularly effective method of deploying public access (see below).

Key Conclusions from TASCHA Research

- By a factor of 6 to 1, libraries are more likely to offer ICT training than cybercafés.
- Library users are younger, less educated, less likely to be employed, more likely to be in poverty, and less likely to have home internet.
- Library users tended to be newer internet users and they were more likely to indicate getting help, working with others, or no other option for computers as their main reason for visiting a public access venue.
- Libraries in developing countries serve more females than telecentres and cybercafés do. Other research suggests that girls and women choose public libraries over other public access venues because libraries are perceived as safe, reliable and affordable, often with trained female staff that can help in places where it is not always appropriate for females to interact with males.

The status of the digital divide

While growth in internet access has been rapid, too many people still remain outside network coverage and many within coverage areas cannot afford the high cost. In its resolution 69/198¹ on ICTs for development, the UN General Assembly expressed concern about the growing digital divide and the need to bridge it in order to harness the developmental implications of information and communications technologies. The report to the Secretary-General for this CSTD 17th session² notes that “Many developing countries, especially LDCs, risk being further impacted by the digital divide.”

At the household level in 2012, internet penetration was estimated at 77% in Europe by the ITU, compared with 7% in Africa. With regard to broadband access, the divide follows similar patterns, but inequalities are even more accentuated. Fixed-broadband penetration rates, for example, are only 6% in developing countries (and less than 1% in sub-Saharan Africa), compared with 27% in developed countries, and while mobile broadband has been rapidly adopted where available, speeds are comparatively low and costs much higher. Average broadband speeds vary by a factor of more than 40 between developing and developed nations – from 256 Kbps to more than 10 Mbps on average. Similarly, access inequalities are more visible when disaggregated by disadvantaged groups – particularly women,³ oppressed cultural groups, people living in remote small islands, and in the least developed countries generally.

1 Resolution A/RES/68/198 “Information and communication technologies for development” concerning the WSIS+10 Review process, adopted on 20 December 2013.

2 E/CN.16/2014/3 Information and communications technologies for inclusive social and economic development, Report of the Secretary-General.

3 According to the ITU, in developing countries, 16% fewer women than men used the internet in 2013.

Public access is a core component of strategies for reducing the digital divide

The CSTD report to the Secretary-General astutely notes that a broad-based ecosystem approach is needed to address the digital divide: “The success of deploying ICTs in countries depends on following an ecosystem approach that engages all stakeholders and ensures comprehensive and coordinated incorporation of all inter-related elements: supply and demand, infrastructure, access facilities, policy and regulation,⁴ applications, content, capacity-building, digital literacy, funding sources and mechanisms.”

However, support for public access needs to be made a more explicit part of this ecosystem.

Support for provision of public access has unfortunately fallen off the agenda in most countries as a result of the rapid growth of internet-connected mobile phones, along with views that public access is just a stepping stone to private access. However, there is now a growing realisation that there will continue to be a need for public access and alternatives to mobile broadband for the foreseeable future. Large-format screens and high definition multimedia provide a more immersive learning, professional or entertainment experience, but may be too slow or costly via a mobile connection.

In-depth research carried out by the Technology & Social Change Group (TASCHA) at the University of

4 The report states that “developing countries typically experience less competition in broadband provision. In this context, establishing regulatory institutions that guarantee economic competition and encourage universal coverage, convergence, quality and access, is vital. Regulatory mechanisms such as open access to backbone infrastructure, infrastructure-sharing and cost-based interconnection can also play important parts in enhancing competition and reducing prices.”

Washington supports this view.⁵ Conducted over the last five years in low- and medium-income countries, the project found:

- At least one-third of the users had no other means of access to the internet, and most users (55%) would use computers less if public access were not available.
- Public access venues are the first point of contact with computers (50%) and the internet (62%) for most users.
- More users developed their computer (40%) and internet (50%) skills at a public access venue than at home or school.

These and other data support the conclusion that while public ICT access can function as a substitute for private access, it also acts as a (potentially permanent) complement to private access. It may take decades for some countries to reach high levels of home connectivity, and therefore public ICT access will remain a critically important service, which is likely to continue to have relevance even when higher connectivity has been achieved.

5 Connecting people for development: Why public access ICTs matter. <http://tascha.uw.edu/publications/connecting-people-for-development>

“More than 230,000 public libraries (73% of the world’s total) are located in developing and transitioning countries. Worldwide there are 13 times more public libraries than hospitals.”

--From Beyond Access, on the opportunities of existing infrastructure

The role of libraries in providing public access to ICTs

TASCHA research⁶ also showed that public libraries play a critical role in extending the benefits of ICTs to a diverse range of people worldwide, particularly for marginalised populations and those who face challenges using and benefiting from computers and the internet.

The data also show that libraries provide a unique public value, with both users and non-users reporting positive impacts and a willingness to pay to maintain the existence of public libraries.

Libraries are specifically referenced in WSIS Action Line C2 as institutions to be provided with connectivity as part of a national e-strategy, and can be seen as an important way of realising universal access objectives in rural and remote locations, where the majority of people in developing countries live.

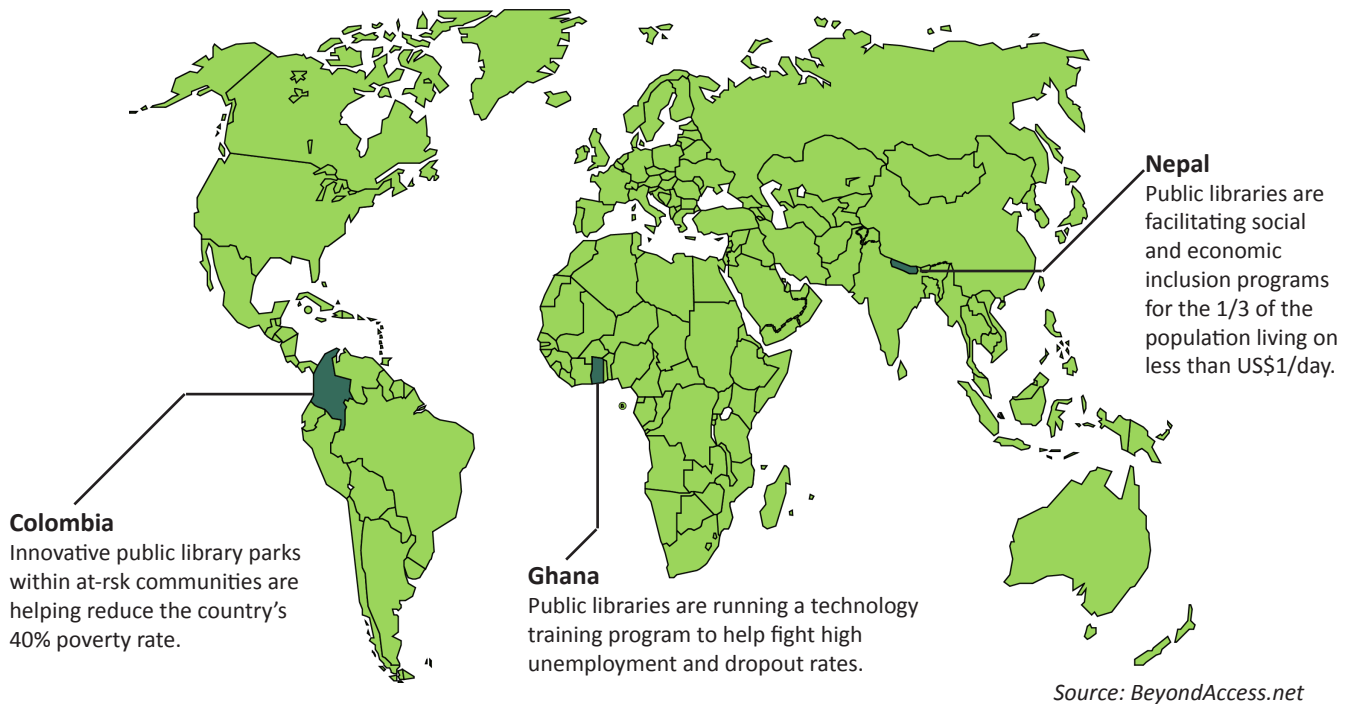
More than 230,000 public libraries (73% of the world’s total) are located in developing and transitioning countries. Worldwide there are 13 times more public libraries than hospitals.

The library is often the only place in many communities where people can use ICTs to access information that will help them improve their education, develop new skills, find jobs, build businesses, make informed agricultural and health decisions, or gain insights into environmental issues. Public libraries reach populations underserved by other institutions, and they come with the support of library staff who are on hand for advice and training. As part of many countries’ existing infrastructure, and often a key component of a country’s cultural heritage, public libraries are known and respected institutions, in many cases established and maintained by national and local governments.

The data that is available suggests that, while some level of connectivity has been established, much more needs to be done to ensure that all libraries, museums, archives, cultural centres and post offices are connected to the internet and providing public access facilities. Apart from providing internet access and relevant applications, there is also much to be done in terms of digitising information, including archived information and library and museum collections, and making it available online.

6 Public libraries connecting people for development: Findings from the Global Impact Study <http://tascha.uw.edu/publications/public-libraries-connecting-people-for-development/>

Hundreds of library innovators worldwide are already doing development work.



Checklist of action points for policy makers

As suggested by the CSTD report to the Secretary-General, an ecosystem approach needs to be taken to ensure better public access. The most important initiatives that need to be considered are:

- Build awareness and information sharing. There is generally a shortage of knowledge of the importance of public access, and on how to implement and sustain public access facilities, especially in developing countries. Knowledge of best practices and sustainable solutions using the latest technologies needs to be assembled and circulated, in print, in online fora and in training workshops.
- Improve the enabling environment – a basic requirement for public access facilities is low-cost high-speed connectivity. This requires a conducive policy and regulatory environment which ensures competitive, pervasive and reliable provision of internet services.
- Implement use of universal access funds and other public policy instruments to support public access, not only at the national level but also through provincial or local municipal authorities.
- Address human resource deficiencies. Policies need to be aimed at ensuring a sufficient number of appropriately trained people at a technical level to support public access facilities, for their staff to help in the provision of ICT services to the public, and for the public in how to make the most effective use of them, especially by women and other disenfranchised groups.
- Invest in locally relevant applications and service development, particularly e-government services. This will help fuel the demand for access and make public access facilities more sustainable. Libraries in particular can be an effective vehicle for supporting the implementation of e-government strategies at the local level.
- Set targets and monitor progress. Targets and indicators need to be adopted to enable measurement of progress in providing public access, and in assessing impact. This should be based on an objective methodology for evaluating the quality of access available to the general public.

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