

## **Lessons learned from experience with community telecentres**

1. Diversity.
2. Support for local processes.
3. Their impact extends beyond the local sphere.
4. Sustainability involves more than economics.
5. Operators are a strategic resource.
6. Continuous training is key.
7. Gender relations are important.
8. Community telecentres strengthen self-esteem.
9. Monitoring and evaluation are learning tools.
10. Connectivity is an important but not sufficient condition.

# **COMMUNITY TELECENTRES FOR DEVELOPMENT**

**LESSONS FROM COMMUNITY TELECENTRES  
IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN**

KARIN DELGADILLO  
RICARDO GÓMEZ  
KLAUS STOLL



**Community Telecentres  
For Development**

**Lessons from Community Telecentres  
in Latin America and the Caribbean**

© Karin Delgadillo, Ricardo Gómez, Klaus Stoll,

IDRC Canada

First edition  
November 2002  
32 pages: 28 X 22cm

ISBN: 9978-42-666-3

Illustration: Omar M. Mondeja  
Graphic Design: Omar Mondeja  
[email:allimagen@hotmail.com](mailto:allimagen@hotmail.com)

This publication is supported by the  
International Development Research  
Centre, IDRC, of Canada



Canada  
[www.idrc.ca](http://www.idrc.ca)



Available online in English, and Spanish  
[www.tele-centros.org/tcparaguai](http://www.tele-centros.org/tcparaguai)  
[www.idrc.ca/pan/publications](http://www.idrc.ca/pan/publications)



**COMMUNITY TELECENTRES  
FOR DEVELOPMENT**

## Table of Contents

Introduction -----	7
What is a community telecentre? -----	8
Basic principles for community telecentres -----	10
How are community telecentres useful?-----	12
Sustainability is more than just an economic question -----	14
Avoiding the downside risks -----	16
Some examples of community telecentre experiments -----	17
Lessons learned from experience with community telecentres -----	20
The Somos@Telecentros network in Latin America -----	22
Providing mass access and connectivity -----	24
Future challenges for digital inclusion -----	26
Useful resources -----	28

*"Information technology, together with the ability to use it and adapt it, is the critical factor in generating and accessing wealth, power and knowledge in our time"*

Manuel Castells

## Introduction

This document is the result of several years of research into community telecentres in Latin America and the Caribbean, coordinated by Fundación Chasquinet of Ecuador and supported by the PAN Americas program of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) of Canada.

In an ever more globalized world, communication and access to information is not a luxury but a basic right that people must have for achieving integral human development. By integral human development, we mean strengthening democracy with social justice, fostering economic prosperity with equity, and realizing the human potential in all its dimensions.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, as in other regions of the world, digital technologies offer great opportunities for human development. Yet the costs and the conditions of access to these new technological resources are such that the marginalized and poor people who make up the great majority of society have very little ability to use and appropriate them. If we do nothing to change this, digital technologies will be no more than a tool at the service of a tiny minority.

Community telecentres, which have been multiplying throughout the region, represent a new approach that seeks to narrow the so-called digital divide. Yet, since the digital divide is really nothing more than an expression of social, economic and political inequalities, the solution involves far more than simply setting up telecentres. What we really need are ambitious strategies for digital inclusion.

**Digital inclusion seeks to foster not only broader access but also the social use and appropriation of digital technologies to meet the needs of communities, and to encourage the establishment of public policies, the creation of appropriate knowledge and contents, and the strengthening of individual capacities.** In this way, digital inclusion can help to improve the economic, social, political and personal lives of the vast majority, particularly among the poorest and most marginalized sectors of society.

## **What is a community telecentre?**

Community telecentres are a powerful tool for supporting community development through the use of digital technologies and greater digital inclusion.

There are many kinds of telecentres in Latin America and the Caribbean, ranging from the most basic ones – those that spring from community initiatives and in which connections to the Internet may not be very good – to multipurpose technology centres that combine various advanced digital technologies with wide-band connections to Internet services. We can find experiments involving telecentres in schools, cultural centres and local government offices, while others operate in community or nongovernmental organizations. In some cases, telecentres have their own, independent facilities, in shopping centres or tourist sites. These tend to be run by small businesses that offer computer and connection services for a fee, frequently combined with a cafeteria or restaurant.

Although we may lump all of these under the generic term "telecentres", in this paper we distinguish three kinds of experiments for providing public access to digital technologies:

### **Community telecentres**

Community telecentres represent an experiment in using digital technologies as tools for human development within a community. The stress here is on the social use and appropriation of the technological tools and the information that can be accessed through them, as part of a project for social change

aimed at improving living conditions. Technology and connectivity are important but not sufficient conditions for the proper functioning of community telecentres, and the achievement of their development objectives.

Community telecentres provide training for facilitators and promoters, covering not only

the technical aspects of information and communication but also the strategic uses of digital technologies for social change. Community telecentres are places for social encounter and interaction, for learning, for personal growth, and for mobilizing efforts to address community problems and needs.

### **Cyber cafés or Internet cafes**

These are for-profit businesses that sell digital technology services to the public. They frequently offer a combination of computers, Internet connection and meals, which is why there are generically called cyber cafés or Internet cafes. With or without a meal, the cyber café menu may run from basic e-mail, Web browsing or electronic games, to long distance services, disk burning, scanners, laser printers, or digital photography. They may also offer basic training in the use of these tools, if this will help them to gain new clients.

In order for cyber cafés to be profitable, they are usually located in places frequented by people with higher purchasing power, rather than in marginal neighbourhoods, and they tend to concentrate on services that yield the highest return. In these cyber cafés, then, the social or development interest, if any, is strictly secondary, or is served only indirectly.

### **Other connectivity services**

There are many projects and experiments in the use of digital technologies and connectivity that do not fall within the definition of telecentres: these include academic or school networks, government information services, electronic procurement and bidding systems and so on. Although they use digital technologies and can have an indirect impact on human development, we do not regard them as part of the community telecentres movement.

## **Basic principles for community telecentres**

Here are some basic principles for running a community telecentre:

### **Community participation**

Because digital technologies are so new, most telecentres result from an initiative that comes from outside the community. Yet participation is perhaps the most important element for making a telecentre successful and sustainable. Trying to foster community participation in the design, establishment and continuous improvement of a telecentre sometimes makes it difficult to move ahead very quickly, but it helps the community to develop a sense of ownership and commitment to its successful operation.

It is not surprising, then, to find community telecentres where connectivity is not in fact very good – telecentres without the "tele". They do have the advantage, however, that they can devote time to community needs, introducing the technology little by little.

### **Instilling a social vision**

Beyond the issue of connectivity, telecentres provide an opportunity for accessing, using and appropriate digital technologies to solve problems and to promote human development. The point of departure is not installing equipment and connections, but rather organizing the community so that it can resolve its specific problems, which may vary from one setting to the next.

The best way of instilling a social vision into a telecentre is to plan it and establish it in a way that integrates it with other spaces and communication activities that are already operating successfully within the community. These will typically be community radio stations, public libraries, cultural centres, community organizations or schools.

### **Management and use of appropriate technologies**

The management of a community telecentre must reflect a social vision of its activities, and must use the technologies and tools that are most appropriate for addressing local problems.

Today it is possible to set up and run a telecentre with basic computer equipment, using programs that run on open systems like GNU/Linux, instead of the predominant but costly commercial systems and programs.

### **Continuous training and skills upgrading.**

The "Achilles' heel" of telecentres, as with many other experiments at popular and community communication, is the training of operators and users, so that they can derive maximum advantage from the available technologies. Without training, a community telecentre will be stillborn: operators will not be able to help users, and users will stay away because they don't know what to do with the available technology.

Cyber cafés frequently offer basic training in how to use e-mail, how to surf the Web, or how to chat, so that their customers will keep coming back. In community telecentres, training goes much further, and involves helping users to understand how digital technologies can contribute to problem solving and to human development.

## How are community telecentres useful?

Here are some of the fields in which community telecentres in Latin America and the Caribbean are contributing to human development:

### Employment and microenterprises

Fostering new skills and knowledge that will open doors to jobs or self-employment and helping to strengthen microenterprises by improving their management, marketing, purchasing and advertising.

### Health

Facilitating access to information about diseases and treatments, preventive medicine, alternative treatments, hygiene and sexual education.

### Education

Supporting school activities and promoting informal education within communities, particularly among children and youth.

### Strengthening self-esteem

Helping to improve people's perceptions of themselves, of their own abilities and their prospects for the future, enhancing creativity, self-esteem and teamwork.

### Community organization

Fostering new forms of neighbourhood organization, and strengthening individual and collective capacities, encouraging new leaders, and helping to resolve concrete problems and needs in the community

### Decentralization and political clout

Fostering community participation and providing information to enhance the community's political clout, facilitating communication with local government, and reinforcing decentralization of administration and procedures.

### Information and Knowledge

Offering access to new and more diversified sources of information, and giving communities their own voice; strengthening the exchange of experiences and collaboration with groups and networks at the national and international level, and facilitating communication with emigrants and displaced persons.

### Communication and culture

Facilitating the creation and use of different forms of artistic and cultural expression, and supporting the use of other communication forms and technologies that can be useful to the community, such as video, radio, the printed media.

## **Sustainability is more than just an economic question**

Community telecentres need to design and pursue long-term survival strategies. If communication is a fundamental right, then the sustainability of community telecentres, which are important agents for guaranteeing the right to communication, is an issue that goes well beyond earning revenues to ensure their economic sustainability.

There have been many experiments with telecentres that had assured financing but that were of limited usefulness for human development, such as the so-called "smart containers" (cargo containers outfitted with digital equipment and technologies) that have been installed in some communities. At the same time, there have been experiments that started out as community telecentres, but that, in their eagerness to generate revenues, lost sight of their social development mission and became businesses of the cyber café kind, commercially viable but unrelated to the needs of the poorest and most marginalized groups.

### **Economic sustainability alternatives**

A sound business plan, stressing market knowledge, economical use of resources and revenue generating capacity, is very important for running a telecentre. But, as often happens with schools or public hospitals, community telecentres cannot always be expected to earn enough revenue to ensure their economic viability.

The activities of a telecentre can be regarded as a social service, to be financed as part of the budget for other social sectors (education, health, culture), so that its development mission can be sustained over time.

### **Social and cultural sustainability**

If the activities of a telecentre are to be lasting and viable, they must take account of the social and cultural context in which it operates, and must respond appropriately to that context. If people in the community feel themselves empowered by the telecentre, they will be more active in seeking ways to keep it running.

Men and women have different needs when it comes to telecentres, and different possibilities and interests with regard to its use. Similarly, youth and adults have different expectations, and running a telecentre in an urban setting is not the same thing as doing so in an indigenous community. If the telecentre cannot come to terms with these differences in its management, it will be neither socially nor culturally sustainable.

### **Technological sustainability**

Although telecentres do not generally need to operate with the latest technologies, it is important that they have a clear plan for insuring their technological sustainability. This is especially the case since digital technologies are changing so swiftly, which means that equipment and programs rapidly become outdated.

The cheapest is not always the best: it may be more expensive to legalize, repair or upgrade old equipment that someone has donated than to buy new equipment that comes with a manufacturer's guarantee and local technical support.

On the other hand, free-distribution programs, especially those that run on open-source operating systems such as GNU/Linux, can greatly reduce the program licensing costs of a telecentre.

### **Political sustainability**

Political sustainability refers to the importance of securing a regulatory framework that will protect, promote and support community telecentres and their activities, with special attention to the specific needs of the poorest sectors.

This can be done by offering tax breaks, access to new technologies for wireless or satellite connections, or funding for infrastructure, training and promotion of social programs, etc.

The Somos@Telecentros network offers free information and programs on how to operate community telecentres on a GNU/Linux platform:  
[www.chasquinet.org/linux/index.html](http://www.chasquinet.org/linux/index.html)

## Avoiding the downside risks

Here are some examples of negative fallout from community telecentres. They show that not everything that happens in a telecentre is necessarily good or will contribute to human development. It is important to learn from experience in order to avoid or reduce negative outcomes of this kind.

### Power struggles within the telecentre

There may be several players, external and internal, who want to take the lead in coordination, and power struggles of this kind can undermine relations within the community. Some community telecentres have witnessed fights among local leaders to control access and use of their facilities, while in other cases telecentres have become another source of personal gain through corruption or theft.

### Authoritarianism and exclusion

Local power groups, who are suspicious of any meeting places or information sources beyond their control, sometimes see community telecentres as a threat. In Ecuador, for example, the men of one community shut down the telecentre as a way of bolstering their power, and cases of domestic violence against women in the community increased.

### Pornography and sexual trafficking

Interactive spaces such as chat rooms can expose children and youth to psychological mistreatment and abuse. If there is no proper monitoring and training, these technologies can be used to push pornography. In some cases, this has led to new forms of sexual exploitation and trafficking, especially of children and youth.

16

## Some examples of community telecentre experiments

Here are some examples of community telecentres that are operating in different contexts in Latin America and the Caribbean.

### ASOCIACIÓN DE CABILDOS INDÍGENAS DEL NORTE DEL CAUCA (ACIN), Colombia

[www.inforcauca.org/quilichao](http://www.inforcauca.org/quilichao)

This telecentre was originally set up within the Communications Unit of the International Tropical Agriculture Centre (CIAT) in Cauca, Colombia, but it is now run independently by the indigenous Paeces people of Santander. These people, whose ancestral lands have been ravaged by political violence and drug trafficking, have formed a grass-roots organization. The telecentre has become a focal point of communication and support for resolving local disputes, and has done much to further the cause of human rights and peace in the country.

### CTC 0187, Argentina

[www.ctclapampa.radioctc.com.ar](http://www.ctclapampa.radioctc.com.ar)

The Community Technology Centre (CTC) 0187 of Santa Rosa has been operating since October 2000 in the midst of the Argentine pampa. This CTC is part of the National Program for the Information Society, and is one of the few that has managed to survive the lack of program planning and the crisis afflicting the country. Its coordinator, Juan, uses the regional network to share both good and bad aspects of life in a poor neighbourhood. This CTC is now dependent on the municipality, but it is seeking other sources of support. Its work with children from poor families has made this CTC a very popular place for learning. For the last year it has also run an Internet radio station.

17

**JOVEN CLUB - Cuba**  
[www.jcce.org.cu](http://www.jcce.org.cu)

This computer and electronics club for young people began as a social project of the Cuban government, with the objective of socializing the teaching of computers and electronics by giving priority to children and youth. Because of the special circumstances that prevail in Cuba, these "youth clubs" have to make do with obsolete equipment that is not connected to the Internet. Nevertheless, they serve as initial preparation centres where children can learn together about the use of digital technologies.

**TELECENTRO PAULO FREIRE, Venezuela**  
[www.tele-centros.org/hresp.php?p=venezuela](http://www.tele-centros.org/hresp.php?p=venezuela)

This telecentre is in the parish of San Luis in the municipality of Valera, and serves a number of strong community organizations with common needs. The telecentre is focused primarily on educational support, and has made great efforts to establish a library and keep its collections up-to-date. A youth activities group recently took over the leadership of the telecentre, and is working to democratize access, and to foster the appropriation of digital technologies and make them socially meaningful.

**TELECENTRO ITCHIMBÍA, Ecuador**  
[www.chasquinet.org/barrionet](http://www.chasquinet.org/barrionet)

This telecentre is part of the "BarrioNet" project sponsored by Fundación Chasquinet and the World Bank. Itchimbía is a poor district of Quito that sprang up as a squatter settlement. Its inhabitants have organized themselves to address their needs for housing and basic services. The telecentre provides a meeting place for several groups that are seeking to use digital technologies to meet their basic needs. They are currently engaged in negotiations with the authorities for relocation into more decent dwellings: the telecentre will also move to the new locale, where it will occupy a significant place in community life.

**ALTERNATIVE COMMUNITY CENTER OF LIMÓN DE OCOA, Dominican Republic**  
[www.kiskeya-alternative.org/limon/comunidad/](http://www.kiskeya-alternative.org/limon/comunidad/)

In the summer of 1997, the EcoPartners Project brought two portable computers to Limón in the Dominican Republic. During the day, five students from Cornell University worked to set up a small hydroelectric plant, and at night they taught local people how to use the computer. Milo Echavarría, a local farmer organized the first computer workshops for the community, especially young people got involved and as a consequence the telecentre was created. This is how the hydroelectric project has a connection with agriculture, and the agriculture is connected with the work of the young people, and the young people with the communication and information technologies.

**TELECENTRO TOTOLAPAN, México**  
[www.telecentros.org.mx/toto.html](http://www.telecentros.org.mx/toto.html)

This telecentre was created at the initiative of an academic institution, and has gradually gained acceptance in the community of Morelos, near Mexico City. At the outset, community participation was mainly through groups and institutions with an education focus. The telecentre is being run by young people who have committed themselves to their community and to making real use of the telecentre and its services. The telecentre celebrated its second birthday in June 2002.

## **Lessons learned from experience with community telecentres**

Here is a summary of the most important lessons to be learned from experience with community telecentres in Latin America and the Caribbean.

### **1. Diversity**

There is no single or universal model – each experiment must be "made to measure". Community telecentres must respond to specific conditions, to the local culture, and to the needs of the communities in which they operate. Users also have differing interests and experiences.

### **2. Support for local processes**

Community telecentres operate within the local setting of their communities, and help to resolve concrete local problems. They are not ends in themselves: they offer tools in support of community organization and advancement, in cooperation with other communications media and tools.

### **3. Their impact extends beyond the local sphere**

Through the exchange of information and experiences (positive and negative) and the strengthening of national and regional networks, community telecentres have a scope that is far more than local, and they can influence national connectivity

agendas and the formulation of national and worldwide policies.

### **4. Sustainability involves more than economics**

Although it is important for community telecentres to earn their own revenues and not to depend on outside funding, they must also address the challenge of their political, technological and social sustainability. In some cases, these aspects can be even more important for their sustainability than money.

### **5. Operators are a strategic resource**

If community telecentres are to be socially relevant, their operators must be more than computer technicians – they must know how to promote the community, facilitate user groups, identify problems and opportunities, and manage information. Women are often more successful than men at handling all these tasks simultaneously.

### **6. Continuous training is key**

Operators and users alike need continuous training to support

their use and appropriation of the tools offered by community telecentres. Groups with special needs such as youth, illiterates or indigenous groups require particular attention and dedication.

### **7. Gender relations are important**

Men and women have differing needs when it comes to using the services of community telecentres. It is important to establish specific strategies to provide equal opportunity to both sexes, and to help overcome inequities in the relationships between men and women in society.

### **8. Community telecentres strengthen self-esteem**

People can strengthen their self-esteem, their confidence and their faith in the future of their communities through the use and appropriation of community telecentres. By stressing personal growth and community organization, telecentres can help to bring about profound and lasting changes that are essential for human development.

### **9. Monitoring and evaluation are learning tools**

Documenting and systematizing experiences with local telecentres and learning from those elsewhere can enhance the quality and relevance of the services they provide. Monitoring and evaluation provide lessons that

can be used to improve the impact of community telecentres on development.

### **10. Connectivity is an important but not sufficient condition**

The social mission of the telecentre means that working with the community is much more important than technology or connectivity. Those features help a community telecentre to do its job, but they are not enough to ensure its contribution to human development.

## The Somos@Telecentros network in Latin America

The year 1999 saw the beginning of a regional telecentres network in Latin America and the Caribbean, called **Somos@Telecentros**, sponsored by the Fundación Chasquinet and supported by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) of Canada. By the end of 2002, the network will have some 800 members and more than 2600 affiliated telecentres. Although not all of these are community telecentres in the strict sense (see the definition on page 2), the network has been established as a virtual meeting place and a forum for exchanging experience with telecentres in the region, and it has helped to strengthen the activities of the community telecentres participating in it.

### A growing network

Under the auspices of Somos@Telecentros, there have been eight national meetings and a regional meeting of telecentres, and these have laid the basis for a Latin American telecentres association, which is now in the process of legal incorporation.

Somos@Telecentros has an online resource centre with more than 200 items of interest to the telecentre community,

such as training manuals, articles, collections of photographs and programs that are useful to the telecentre community. As well, the network provides a number of electronic discussion forums, on the general issue of telecentres and on specific problems (for example, training, association governance, GNU/Linux technical solutions, and lessons learned). The resource centre and discussion forums are expanding in number and substance, as the telecentres movement gains momentum.

One of the most valuable tools is a free package of programs that allows the telecentre to run with the GNU/Linux open-source operating system. This not only means significantly lower costs but it helps to strengthen the international open-source programming movement as an alternative to the dominant commercial operating system and programs.

### Seeking strength through unity

The community telecentres of Latin America and the Caribbean face a series of problems that make them highly vulnerable: these include isolation, growing demand for connection and computer services, inadequate funding and obsolete technology, the intrusion of cyber cafés and government Internet centres that have no clear social vision or any link with their communities. Yet the most serious problem may well be the lack of public policies for regulating and promoting the use of digital technologies for community development purposes. The great majority of existing regulations tend to favour private and commercial interests over community and social interests.

A stronger and consolidated Somos@Telecentros network could play a key role in providing information and exerting pressure for the adoption of public policies in support of community telecentres and other activities aimed at digital inclusion.

Community telecentres acting individually have neither the strength nor the credibility that they could gain by associating and pooling their efforts on behalf of human development in their locality, the country and their region. Thanks to the Somos@Telecentros network, they can share experiences and gain access to useful resources, achieving in this way a collective voice and credibility that will enhance their participation and their clout in the discussion and formulation of broader public policies.



### The Somos@Telecentros network is growing and gaining momentum as a place for:

- Sharing experiences and resources that are useful for managing telecentres.
- Expanding the scope of their activities and forming new alliances.
- Supporting joint monitoring, evaluation and learning.
- Cooperating in the production of tools and information resources.
- Developing training materials for users and operators.
- Promoting the community telecentres' role in formulating national and international policies.

## **Providing mass access and connectivity**

The first pilot experiments with community telecentres in Latin America and the Caribbean began around 1996 under the impetus of civil society organizations, and they opened a whole new field for democratizing digital technologies. The road has not been easy, and many lessons have been learned along the way. Yet in less than a decade the environment has changed significantly.

The innovative and experimental nature of the first wave of community telecentres has been changed with the arrival of new players. Latin American cities are filling up with Internet cafes that offer public access wherever the market can support it. As to governments, nearly all of them have launched national connectivity programs that include some kind of public access to computers and the Internet, as part of their policies to promote universal access to information technologies.

### **Cyber cafés are taking over in the cities**

The explosion of Internet cafes has made it relatively easy to access digital technologies in the larger cities and some of the smaller towns. Quito, Ecuador, for example, has as many as 800 cyber cafés and while not all of them sell coffee they do offer access to computers, games, e-mail and

Internet for a cost of US\$ 1-2 per hour (remembering that the minimum wage is about US\$120 per month). They sometimes offer long-distance telephone service over the Internet, as well as scanners and CD burners, laser printing and photocopying services.

The demand for Internet cafes is so great that in the centre of Buenos Aires, for example, they are open 24 hours a day, while in San Jose, Costa Rica, McDonald's offers "McInternet", where people who buy hamburgers enjoy free access to computers and games.

### **National connectivity plans are taking off**

In late 2000, President Fox launched E-Mexico, "to ensure that the information and communications revolution will be truly national and will reduce the digital divide between governments, businesses, households and individuals, and will reach into the farthest corners of our country".

With the support of governments, and sometimes with the sponsorship of private business, these mass programs have the advantage of extending their coverage and scope much further than the first wave of pilot community telecentres could have ever dreamed. Yet their very size means that if they fail there will be a resounding crash. Argentina, for example, where few of the original 1350 Community Technology Centres survive, offers some valuable lessons for other national connectivity plans in the region.

### **The second wave of telecentres**

Experience to date with small-scale community telecentres of the first generation, that were sponsored by civil society organizations with a social rather than technological outlook, offers some valuable lessons, in terms both of their achievements and of the mistakes that were made. If they fail to heed these lessons, the telecentres of the second wave – the mass connectivity plans sponsored by governments – will be doomed to repeat the errors of the past, and will miss the opportunity to contribute decisively to the region's human development.

## **Future challenges for digital inclusion**

In 1998 there were fewer than 50 telecentres in the region. Towards the end of 2002, the number is estimated at more than 6500 -- without counting Internet cafes. This spectacular growth is due in large part to the zeal to create centres for public access to the Internet, as part of national connectivity programs, and in many cases the public announcements bear little relation to the actual existence of telecentres. There has been a great diversity of experimentation with telecentres, with differing degrees of success in terms of their community impact and their appropriation for social purposes.

The main risk involved in the mass spread of telecentres is that they will become irrelevant - that they will be nothing more than computer centres for entertainment and consumption, and will have no influence or impact on people's living conditions, and will make no contribution to human development. Telecentres run the risk of becoming mere cyber cafés, public places for people to spend time amusing themselves. There is no inherent harm in this, but it has nothing to do with community telecentres for human development.

What makes a community telecentre different from a cyber café is its social vision, its explicit support for human development, and the contribution it can make to transforming and improving living conditions. To achieve this, it is not enough to offer connectivity, even at low prices. If they are to be successful, community telecentres must have a social vision, they must be firmly rooted in the dynamics of local organizations and community action, and from that basis they must become tools for supporting social change.

## **From pilot experiments to mass planning**

The challenge that national connectivity plans must address is to ensure that the centres they build for providing public Internet access will be true community telecentres rooted in and responding to local needs and taking a social vision of human development, one that goes beyond the technological or economic vision of connectivity.

For their part, the first generation of community telecentres has both the opportunity and the responsibility to help shape mass connectivity programs, and to ensure that their policies and implementation plans respect the social vision, and that they bear in mind the lessons learned in recent years from efforts to ensure that digital inclusion really contributes to human development.

## **Public policies are everyone's business**

In addition to the need to improve connectivity at affordable prices, it is urgent to promote the adoption of public policies that will put community telecentres to work on behalf of human development. The formulation of public policies, whether for digital inclusion or any other kind of action, is not a linear process that runs straight from identifying the problem to finding a solution, nor is it solely in the hands of the state. In fact, public policies represent an arena of permanent conflict and negotiation, in which different social groups seek to influence the state in line with their own interests and viewpoints.

The weakest voices when it comes to formulating public policies tend to be those of civil society. This is due in part to the fact that society generally has great difficulty in finding effective spaces for dialogue and consultation with decision makers, but also because the private sector has much more influence in this field, and more effective ways of wielding it.

The formulation of public policies for digital inclusion offers a unique opportunity to strengthen the bonds between civil society organizations, private enterprise and the state. Only with the effective participation of all three sectors will it be possible to take full advantage of digital technologies in mass connectivity programs with a social vision that will make a real contribution to human development.

#### **Other related publications**

**The Internet...Why? And What for?** Thoughts on information and communication technologies for development in Latin America and the Caribbean. Ricardo Gómez and Juliana Martínez, IDRC, Fundación Acceso, 2001) [www.idrc.ca/pan/pppp](http://www.idrc.ca/pan/pppp)

**Letter to Aunt Ofelia:** Seven proposal for equitable development using new information and communication technologies (Ricardo Gómez and Benjamín Casadiego, IDRC-PAN Americas, ITDG, Fundación Raíces Mágicas, 2002 ) [www.idrc.ca/pan/ricardo/publications/Ofelia.htm](http://www.idrc.ca/pan/ricardo/publications/Ofelia.htm)

**Internet and Society in Latin America and the Caribbean** (Gilles Cliche and Marcelo Bonilla, FLACSO Ecuador, IDRC, 2001) [www.idrc.ca/pan/publications/IS.pdf](http://www.idrc.ca/pan/publications/IS.pdf)

**Telecenters for Socioeconomic and Rural Development in Latin America and the Caribbean** (Francisco Proenza, Roberto Bastidas-Buch, Guillermo Montero, IADB, FAO, ITU 2001) [www.iadb.org/sds/itdev/telecentros](http://www.iadb.org/sds/itdev/telecentros)

#### **Useful resources**

##### **Red Latinoamericana Somos@Telecentros**

[www.tele-centros.org](http://www.tele-centros.org)

The virtual meeting place for the telecentres movement in Latin America and the Caribbean. Includes, among others, the following Spanish-language sites:

**Estado del Arte de Telecentros en América Latina**  
[www.tele-centros.org/estarte](http://www.tele-centros.org/estarte)

**Centro de Recursos en Línea sobre Telecentros**  
[www.tele-centros.org/CR/contenido.php3](http://www.tele-centros.org/CR/contenido.php3)

**TOOL KIT PARA TECELECENTROS**  
[ftp://ftp.chasquinet.org/linux/index.html](http://ftp.chasquinet.org/linux/index.html)

**EL MÉTODO DE MONITOREO, EVALUACIÓN Y ANÁLISIS DE IMPACTO DE LOS TELECENTROS**  
[ftp://ftp.chasquinet.org/pub/docs/MEIA.doc](http://ftp.chasquinet.org/pub/docs/MEIA.doc)

**Comunidad Virtual MISTICA**  
[www.funredes.org/mistica](http://www.funredes.org/mistica)

A regional network dedicated to researching the social impact of information and communication technologies in Latin America and the Caribbean.

## Acknowledgements

We are grateful to many members of the **Somos@Telecentros** community, the Fundación Chasquinet team, and the PAN Americas team, for their comments and contributions. Their ideas, experiences and suggestions are what have brought these concepts to life. The final responsibility for the text, however, lies with its authors.



### Fundación Chasquinet

Fundación Chasquinet promotes strategic uses of information and communication technologies among impoverished groups, locally and regionally, and fosters economic and social policies that will contribute to humane and sustainable development.  
[www.chasquinet.org](http://www.chasquinet.org)



### IDRC, Canada

The International Development Research Centre contributes to the search for solutions to social, economic and environmental problems of communities in the developing world, by financing scientific research.  
[www.idrc.ca](http://www.idrc.ca)



[www.tele-centros.org](http://www.tele-centros.org)

Santander de Arashá  
September 11, 2002

Dear Roberto,

We have missed you greatly since you left for the north, but we are happy to know that you are well. Now that they have opened a telecentre in the neighbourhood we will be able to communicate more easily. Here we can come together and learn how to use computers and, when possible, how to use the Internet.

Your cousin Julia is already learning how to draw by computer, and Manolito is happy because of the help he is getting with his college work. The ladies from the cooperative are finding new ideas for selling their products and your father even tells me that you will soon be able to send home your remittances via the telecentre!

They say that the most fun is chatting with other people, when the connection is working, but I think that the best thing of all is to be here with my girlfriends, and to see that the boys are no longer hanging around in the streets and getting into trouble.

I hope that the telecentre will be able to help poor people like us and give us better opportunities to move ahead. We shall see.

Hugs and kisses, your Aunt,

Enriqueta