

Net Gains With Somos@Telecentros



A telecentre in El Salvador, Centro de Agronegocios, Fundación Salvadoreña de Apoyo Integral (FUSA). (IDRC Photo: Y. Beaulieu)

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A four-year-old Latin American and Caribbean association that joins community Internet access centres — telecentres — across the region now has about 1750 members and is growing. Members use what organizers call "open learning circles" to improve each telecentre's ability to learn from others' experiences and avoid common mistakes.

According to Karin Delgadillo of [Fundación Chasquinet](#), an Ecuador-based nongovernmental organization (NGO) dedicated to providing Internet solutions to social change organizations, telecentres strengthen local social networks, giving them the potential to influence larger political and social dynamics. Many local telecentres are based in grassroots communities that have few resources, but which have formed in answer to local needs and issues. The telecentres help marginal groups in society to use the Internet to organize and influence wider thinking on the kinds of national policies, regulations, and human rights issues that affect them, says Delgadillo.

By way of example, she describes a project in Ecuador that Chasquinet undertook with support from Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC). A community-based telecentre was installed in a *barrio* or poor neighbourhood. In this slum area, street children use the Internet to learn to read and write, as well as for multimedia, music, and other digital work. Some have developed their artistic abilities, says Delgadillo, and are using the computer to design cards and postcards that they can sell. Others, more technically minded, have set up a small business maintaining computers for NGOs and other organizations.

Delgadillo admits there are still many challenges. "How do we certify them and give them real work opportunities, so that what they have learned on the computer can be validated and recognized by the university?" she asks.

Building a virtual community

[Somos@Telecentros](#), sponsored by IDRC, began in 1999 as a way to build regional and national communities through the Internet, as part of a virtual community called Telelac2. While it has elements of technical support, many of its aims are social and political. For example, the Telelac2 project, now sponsored by IDRC's [Institute for Connectivity in the Americas \(ICA\)](#), has put

together governance templates and directly supported some newly established telecentres. It has also built up a Web-based resource centre for members, containing a wide range of documents on different facets of telecentre operation. Chasquinet has also assembled a bank of stories and data about how communities have been able to set up their own telecentres, and has assembled a toolkit to help newly developed telecentres become financially sustainable.

Telelac2 will eventually include an upgraded support network for Somos@Telecentros — part political, part technical — for local practitioners, with a national help desk for both types of issues. A resource centre will produce kits to help women and people with disabilities go online, and others to help local users put together their own online content. A "virtual research consortium" will study issues facing the telecentres, and an open software network will give them the tools to link up via radio and video, as well as email.

Strength in numbers

The network also provides a number of electronic discussion forums on the general issue of telecentres and on such specific and varied problems as 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.

"The national networks are the dynamics that are strengthening the capacity-building of the local networks, in such a way that we learn from each other," says Delgadillo. "We have already learned that we learn from the failures as well as the successes. Then we have liaison and advocacy with companies, organizations, and governments. We cannot be isolated. We need to continue to develop relationships to be effective as a network within global forums and to influence decisions there."

A manifesto written at a conference in Papallacta, Ecuador in 2000, advocated universal Internet access in Latin America and the Caribbean. It garnered 50 000 signatures, and became a significant political bargaining chip for the Somos@Telecentros network. That meeting was only one of a series of conferences and workshops that led to national meetings in eight countries — Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru, and Venezuela. These resulted in their national networks joining Somos@Telecentros.

Overcoming vulnerability

The community-based 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, obsolete technology, and the lack of meaningful links to local cybercafés, as well as the existence of government Internet centres that have no clear social vision or any link with their communities.

Yet the most serious problem may be the lack of public policies 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. Through this network, community telecentres can share experiences and gain access to resources. This also gives them a collective voice and credibility that enhances their participation and their influence in the discussion and formulation of broader public policies.

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