# Telecentre 2.0
## Beyond piloting telecentres

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*This APDIP e-Note is the first in a sub-series of accompanying e-Notes, dealing with telecentres. It presents telecentres as a mature development mechanism. The second APDIP e-Note examines models for financing telecentres to ensure sustainability, while the third focuses on free and open source software applications in telecentres.*

## Summary

*Telecentre 2.0 is a general model of a mature telecentre that does away with the need for any further piloting of telecentres as a development mechanism. Now that several countries are forging ahead with national telecentre programmes, those that lag behind can learn from the early international experiences and they can implement national telecentre programmes without conducting further experimentation. There are sufficient learning opportunities and experienced agencies to provide assistance for them to accelerate their progress towards widespread telecentre deployment, thereby achieving national e-inclusion and contributing to the international development goals. Telecentre 2.0 exists in the **telecentre ecosystem**, a network of telecentres, information providers and support institutions that serves to strengthen the movement towards widespread enjoyment of the benefits that telecentres bring.*

## What is a telecentre?

A telecentre is a community centre that offers shared access to Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) for the purpose of community level development and poverty reduction. Telecentres are being promoted as an answer to the problems of the digital divide, whereby large sections of society do not enjoy access to ICTs and are therefore at risk of being excluded from the socio-economic benefits that such access brings. Typically, telecentres contain computers connected to the Internet, along with a variety of other technologies, and they are located in communities where domestic ownership of such equipment is not affordable. They are staffed by people who help the community use the equipment for a range of purposes, but especially for improving its well-being, in terms of better education, health care, agriculture, and enterprise opportunities. Telecentres are known by different terms such as telecottages, community e-centres, multipurpose community telecentres, multimedia community centres, village information shops, info-kiosks and community knowledge centres. Telecentres are, by their development focus, distinguished from cyber cafés, which exist only for profit, without concern as to how the technology is used.

Telecentres are springing up across developing Asia, in response to the development opportunities that the early experiments with them have revealed. Yet the pace and spread of telecentre development is highly uneven. In some countries e.g., India, Malaysia, and Philippines, governments are progressing with national telecentre programmes involving hundreds or thousands of centres. In other countries e.g., Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, and those of Central Asia, there is little activity or just the beginnings of a few pilot telecentre projects. Moreover, outside the global community of telecentre and ICT-for-development protagonists, there is little understanding of how telecentres contribute to development or even skepticism that they are capable of doing so sustainably.

Within the countries that are moving ahead with a national telecentre roll-out, the early pilots never envisaged such an eventuality. Yet their experiences offer valuable learning opportunities to those that lag behind. Telecentres that are part of a scaling up programme are different from the early pilots and experiments as they are more mature. One difference relates to the impact of networks of telecentres and the telecentre ecosystem, consisting of telecentres, information providers and support institutions. Telecentre scale-up and long-term sustainability are strengthened when such an ecosystem is mobilized. The term Telecentre 2.0 is used to characterize the second generation of telecentres that are part of such an ecosystem. Understanding Telecentre 2.0 will help the lagging countries in targeting national programmes from the outset, thereby accelerating them through the piloting stage.

## What are the characteristics of Telecentre 2.0?

### Policy

With Telecentre 2.0, government policy recognizes the role of ICTs in poverty reduction. Telecentre 2.0 is an instrument for achieving national e-inclusion, which goes beyond mere access to technology and addresses the underlying socio-economic disparities of the poor and under-served. e-Inclusion means employing ICTs to address the problems of social exclusion and promoting opportunities for the economic and social empowerment of all citizens. It implies delivering digital public services to all and allowing universal exercise of the right to information, with the help of telecentres. It also encapsulates the contribution that ICTs can make towards achieving the international development goals. Targeting e-inclusion implies the adoption of key socio-economic development objectives by ICT programmes in areas such as health, education, agriculture and enterprise development. There is a risk that without such a focus in policy-making, efforts to close the digital divide will benefit the better off, by making more ICTs available to them, without having a significant improvement in e-inclusion.

### Regulations

Telecentre 2.0 is a product of a deregulated telecommunications environment, in which increased competition is encouraged and licensing requirements are relaxed. Universal service obligations give rise to a fund for subsidizing infrastructure development in poor rural areas previously considered un-commercial. The fund is maintained by a levy on the profits of telecommunications companies. It is used to encourage new entrants into the industry, especially in rural areas. Telecentre 2.0 is part of a franchising scheme in which government partners with local entrepreneurs who operate the centre and deliver access to online public services in the form of e-government at the same time as making a profit.

### Partnerships

Telecentre 2.0 is formed and/or operates within a 'national alliance' that includes government, the private sector and civil society representatives. Each partner contributes their resources; the government creates a favourable policy and regulatory environment, commits to e-government and strengthens national capacity toward greater acceptance and use of ICTs for national development. The private sector opens up the ICT infrastructure and invests in telecentres. With the increased competition that arises from deregulation, most activity will be in the urban areas that provide a ready business opportunity, so that Universal Service Funds are typically made available to operators in the under-served rural areas. Civil society mobilizes communities and creates relevant content for poverty reduction and e-inclusion. Although there is no single dominant model of Telecentre 2.0 ownership or operation, all implementations fall under a form of multi-stakeholder participation that includes government, non-governmental organizations, civil society organizations, the business sector, academia and practitioners. Each partner in the national alliance, in conjunction with the communities that they work with, evolves its own model, which it finds most suitable.

### Funding

Telecentre 2.0 is funded and sustained by a mix of investment, subsidy and its own revenue. Government acknowledges its willingness to pay for services that benefit the poor, just as it does with services that also benefit the better-off, such as libraries, education, transportation and health care. At the same time, local investors are mobilized by the opportunity to make profits because this has been shown to result in telecentre services that are more responsive to public demands. Telecentre 2.0 is not donor funded, as there is no need for donor-funded telecentres where Telecentre 2.0 is being established.

### Content and Services

Internet content in Telecentre 2.0 is relevant to local needs and it promotes local development. It has been produced largely within the partnership arrangements of the national alliance. Local communities are active in generating local content, because most of the information they are interested in is local. Telecentre 2.0 is closely associated with government agencies that provide online public services. Generic applications are widely implemented and tailored to local needs. Applications for education, agriculture support, learning for livelihoods and enterprise development are widely acknowledged as important services. Additionally, Telecentre 2.0 is able to generate telecentre network value-added-services, delivering a range of services and products that the community appreciates.

### Staff

Telecentre 2.0 is staffed by local people with skills in community development. It is highly likely that they include women. They are able to organize community discussions and focus groups that reveal their need for information from the telecentre. They are able to promote the use of the telecentre for business development and other schemes that benefit the community. They have been trained in the skills necessary to perform these duties. They are supported by a network of themselves. Telecentre managers have received formal training that helps them fulfill the challenging role of social entrepreneur. This includes empowering them with the ability to make information services available to their host communities that they are able to make good use of in terms of socio-economic development, as well as imparting the skills necessary to run a commercial enterprise.

### Evaluation

Telecentre 2.0 has been, or is in the process of being evaluated, either individually or as part of a programme evaluation. The results indicate the extent to which local development has been stimulated, and in which women, the poor and other under-served groups are well represented. The results of the evaluation are used to advise further development of the programme of which it is a part. Regular monitoring of activity and achievement is used to guide operations as well as for promotional purposes.

**Networked**

Telecentre 2.0 belongs to a national and/or international network of telecentres, which facilitates the sharing of experiences and resources. Personnel gather regularly at district, regional and/or national gatherings in which they learn from each other and resolve problems of common interest.

## Conclusions

Why is Telecentre 2.0 significant? Telecentre 2.0 means that it is no longer necessary to pilot telecentres, even in countries where they hardly exist. Whilst there was little about the early experimental pilots that might have suggested they would lead to nationally scaled-up programmes, Telecentre 2.0 is a clear picture of what the lagging countries should be targeting to achieve e-inclusion. Telecentre 2.0 also sends a signal to the skeptics that telecentres are here to stay, at least until ICTs become affordable for all. Despite the problems that are sometimes experienced with telecentres, Telecentre 2.0 indicates that these are not fatal, that solutions are available and that they are worth pursuing in order to realize the benefits that telecentres bring.

Telecentre programmes can now be initiated with confidence, knowing where they are headed. This can accelerate their development by doing away with the slow experimental phases, so long as countries are willing to learn from the experiences of others. As the more advanced countries make progress with their telecentre scaling operations, so more learning becomes available for those who are behind. Moreover, there are now sufficient and adequate international forums for the new starters to learn from those with more experience, for example, the Asia Telecentre Forum. There are also highly experienced international agencies such as UNDP, IDRC, UNESCO and Telecentre.org that can provide assistance. So Telecentre 2.0 removes uncertainty for those lagging countries by outlining a target for their telecentre programmes. It therefore has the potential for accelerating global progress towards e-inclusion and for achieving the international development goals.

*~ Roger Harris, Roger Harris Associates*

## Additional Reading

Community-based Networks and Innovative Technologies: New models to serve and empower the poor. UNDP.
http://www.undp.org/poverty/docs/ictd/ICTD-Community-Nets.pdf

From the Ground Up: The evolution of the telecentre movement.
http://ebook.telecentre.org

How to Get Started And Keep Going: A guide to Community Multimedia Centres. UNESCO.
http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/ev.php-URL_ID=15665&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

Mission 2007: Every Village a Knowledge Centre.
http://209.31.179.166

Telecottage Handbook: How to establish and run a successful telecentre.
http://europeandcis.undp.org/?menu=p_cms/show&content_id=1EAEB3D3-F203-1EE9-BD0C279330992AC8

Telecentre Networks. Telecenter.org.
http://community.telecentre.org/es/wiki/Telecentre_networks

The Asian Telecentre Forum.
http://www.i4donline.net/ATF/