

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2018

Community Networks



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This edition of GISWatch came into being alongside a brand new baby boy. Welcome to the world, Ronan Diga!

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Introduction

This report is not going to be on community networks. In Peru community networks are rare, and are not resilient or sustainable. This is because of a conjunction of reasons.

Firstly, while laws do not prohibit community networks, regulations and bureaucracy make it almost impossible to create a community network able to openly provide telecom services to citizens: legal procedures need to be done in Lima, most of the technical requirements such as tests or security procedures have been established with big telecoms in mind, legally authorised professionals do not live in rural areas, and so on. What has existed until now are local communication systems able to deliver communication services to an organisation's network, as in the case of the Huaral Valley Agrarian Information System. This is a Wi-Fi network connecting more than 10 agrarian organisation offices in the Huaral Valley, giving some of the settlements their first and for some time their only telecommunication service, consisting of a telecentre and a phone terminal.¹ However, this is not a community network in the strict sense, since the system cannot openly provide services to other organisations, institutions or the public at large.²

The second reason is financial: the equipment is expensive and far from a community-based organisation's financial capabilities.

Thirdly, telecom services – especially mobile – have grown very fast in recent years, reaching most rural and deprived settlements by now, even though the availability of the service does not mean that it is also accessible and affordable, which would be necessary in order for it to be useful for social development.

Recent studies by DIRSI,³ a Latin American research network on the social impacts of information and communications technologies (ICTs), show that on average, the *quality* of internet usage is diminishing while usage is growing. Use of the internet for things other than entertainment or communication is on average less common now than years ago (i.e. a lower percentage of internet users are accessing educational services, e-government services and so on), and even less common in demographics with fewer resources or less education, which are typically groups which access the internet only through a mobile phone.⁴

Privately owned public internet access points called “cabinas públicas” – a Peruvian model of cybercafés – have been the main internet access points in Peru over the past 20 years, since their popularisation among students and young professionals in the 1990s, up until the moment when mobiles become the main way to access the internet in Peru in 2016. Telecentre projects and strategies seem to be old fashioned now, both in Peru and Latin America more generally. Different factors have contributed to this, one of the most important being the extension of mobile access.

During the 1990s and the beginning of the century, universal access policies promoted rural access through subsidies. Nowadays, public policies in Peru and most Latin American countries favour market solutions for increasing access to ICT services, but access does not seem to be the only issue to look at.

1 See the case study on the Huaral Valley Agrarian Information System at https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/APCProPoorKit_CommunityModule_CaseStudy_HuaralValley_EN.pdf; Belo, R. (2004, 15 December). Wi-fi web reaches farmers in Peru. *BBC news*. [bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/4071645.stm](https://www.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/4071645.stm); Bossio, J. (2018). *From an Information System and Telecenter Network Project to a Community Network: Building Financial Sustainability through Social Sustainability*. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/238777579_From_an_Information_System_and_Telecenter_Network_Project_to_a_Community_Network_Building_Financial_Sustainability_through_Social_Sustainability

2 Nowadays, communications services (telecentre and telephone) are not provided by Huaral's system because the Huaral Valley is now covered by private services.

3 <https://dirsi.net/web/web/en/about-dirsi/history>

4 See the reports “Panorama del acceso y uso de Internet exclusivamente desde terminales móviles: El caso de Argentina, Colombia, Guatemala, Paraguay y Perú” and “Panorama general de acceso y uso de Tecnologías de Información y Comunicación: El caso de Argentina, Colombia, Guatemala, Paraguay y Perú” available at <https://olatics.net/2018/02/06/descargas>

To summarise: community networks are not common in Peru. Here access to communication services in general and the internet in particular has been growing across the country and for all social sectors, filling gaps in terms of access and availability, firstly through public services (public phones and cybercafés) and now through private services (mobile). Public policies are now moving from universal access to promotion of private access. However, a decrease in the diversity of use and the usage of the internet for social development purposes has been observed. This report presents the case of a telecentre network, and shows how it takes more than access to make a difference. It is hoped that this will offer insights into community networks, and enhance the purposeful use of ICTs in the community context.

A telecentre network in the Amazon

Rural and poor areas have less access to ICT services in Peru, and the Amazon is the geographical zone with the worst access to communication services in the country. As a result, rural Amazon settlements are an important focus when it comes to those with fewer opportunities to get connected. *Red de Telecentros de la Amazonía* (RTA, Amazon Telecentres Network)⁵ was a project promoted by CEDRO,⁶ a Peruvian NGO, which included 39 centres catering for community access to ICTs. The telecentres were first set up by CEDRO and are now owned and maintained by district-level local governments. Most of them are in really small and rural localities (14 have less than one thousand inhabitants) and had been the first way for the communities to access the internet.

These purpose-oriented telecentres train users and provide information useful for development such as market and product information for farmers. The network has also organised hackathons and teleconferences.⁷ A recent evaluation shows that 33% of the users have had contact with a government officer through the internet, 32% accessed information for their businesses, 16% promoted their products, and 87% used online education opportunities. Nowadays, telecentres from the RTA are participating in a new project by CEDRO on small-scale financial services. They collaborate on the organisation of training workshops on savings, budgeting, debt management and the selection of financial service companies.

It is interesting to mention here that the project has drawn the attention of a Peruvian communication provider that would like to offer services to the remote areas included in the project. Yachay,⁸ an internet service provider (ISP), is going to offer private service in 70 localities using part of the project's installations and equipment. Yachay is part of the RCP group (RCP is an NGO which was the first ISP in Peru).

Telecentres in the Monzón Valley

This report is based on the experiences of RTA telecentres in the Monzón Valley, which is the territory of a district with the same name. The Monzón District comprises 1,521.4 square kilometres, situated in the high jungle (mountainous jungle), and is part of the Humalies Province and Huánuco Department. It has an estimated population of 28,605 people, chronic malnutrition affects 44.3% of kids under five, and around 80% of adults work in agriculture.⁹ This valley was one of the bigger producers of coca plants, which are used to make cocaine, until the beginning of this decade. Thanks to its complicated geography and lack of transport infrastructure, it was ruled for around 25 years by Shining Path and drug traffickers. Since 2011 it has been mostly brought under the control of the state; far from doing this through police action alone, the government found that the best strategy to sustain control was a social and economic one: crop substitution. Peasants are now cultivating other crops besides coca, such as cacao and coffee.

María Teresa Delgado is the coordinator of a CEDRO project on digital inclusion being implemented in the zone, which includes the Monzón Valley, with six telecentres, four in settlements with less than one thousand inhabitants. She started to work with telecentres in 2012 and says that one of most important outcomes of the RTA was to become sustainable by getting the support of local governments and the participation of the community through the "Allies Committee". The Allies Committees (ACs) are community-based organisations (CBOs) promoted by the RTA project in each rural settlement that has a telecentre. ACs are independent from both CEDRO and local governments, the latter of which operate from the central town of each district and not the rural settlements where the telecentres are located. ACs look after the day-to-day administration of the quality and provision of services. They help telecentre operators when it comes to organising training and other activities,

5 <https://telecentrosamazonicos.com>

6 <https://www.cedro.org.pe>

7 Videos on these and other activities are available at <https://www.youtube.com/user/TelecentrosAmazonia>

8 <https://yachay.pe>

9 <https://www.inei.gob.pe>

organise fundraising activities, and help spend these funds on small expenses such as computer accessories or peripherals. Delgado said that the local government is in charge of the area of social and economic development at the telecentres.

Richard Clemente is now CEDRO's digital promoter on finance for the Monzón Valley telecentres, but has been working for the project for some years. According to him, the most important effect of the project is that trainees always want to learn more. He also mentions some cases in which one would find a direct impact on the living standards of users, such as the case of a young hairdresser and stylist who states that she learned much about her business through the internet.

Sachavaca

Sachavaca is a small rural settlement in the Monzón Valley. It has 300 inhabitants. Its telecentre was launched in January 2014.¹⁰ Katherine Alvarado, the telecentre operator, has been working at the telecentre for just a few months. She was trained by the former operator. She describes her duties as training new users and helping other users to find information. The telecentre offers some training programmes with certificates for those students that complete them.

Kids and teenagers visit the telecentre to look for information related to their studies; peasant farmers visit the telecentre to find out about cocoa cultivation and trade – diseases, prices, places to sell and so on; school teachers and other state professionals go there for digital training; housewives go to help with their children's homework; and small entrepreneurs look up information on a range of topics, from cooking to hairdressing to handicrafts. People from other settlements close to Sachavaca also visit the telecentre.

Katherine has attended local CBOs meetings and visited the school and other places to talk about the telecentre and its services. Finally, she coordinates with the AC and meets with them on a regular basis.

As mentioned, the AC is the main link to community – it is critical for sustainability in several ways, and ensures that the telecentre is community-driven. Milton Sánchez Gopia is the coordinator of the AC of Sachavaca. He was mayor¹¹ of Sa-

chavaca when the installation of the telecentre started. He was part of the first groups of local people trained in the telecentre and was invited to join the AC together with four other members of the community. Milton explained to us that the AC coordinates with the telecentre operator (Katherine) and oversees the quality of her work. They organise activities held in the telecentre, such as Mother's Day activities in May, buy small stuff needed for day-to-day services, ask the district local government for other things they need, and hold fundraising activities.

But these are just the "formal" things they do. Through talking to Milton, one realises that a critical function for members of the AC is to act as champions of the telecentre – promoting its benefits and "spreading the word" about the telecentre from a community member's perspective. Members of the AC share contact details with local CBOs because most of them are also part of those organisations. These include the local mothers' club, soup kitchen ("comedor popular"), or the producers' organisation. They promote the use of the telecentre by the school because their children go there; they appreciate that school teachers and other public servants enhance their capacities using the telecentre, because those professionals work with and for them.

They get to know about impact on productivity or trade from farmers themselves, because they are their friends, relatives or neighbours. By using the telecentre, organising fundraising or promotional activities, and sharing information or anecdotes, they encourage the rest of the community to use the telecentre too.

Milton says that the telecentre contributes to the social, cultural and economic development of his locality. He says that some young people trained at the telecentre are now working outside of the community, thanks to the certificate that they received in the training. There are women-driven small enterprises, whether involving *bijouterie* or cooking, that have been created after getting information through the telecentre, and several peasant farmers have accessed information on pest control, cropping and trade issues. He mentioned the case of Teófilo Cierto, a fish farmer and banana grower who is offering and selling his products on the internet. Last but not least, Milton outlines the videoconferences held between different telecentres who are part of the RTA. During these events, peasant farmers from different localities in similar regions share their views and experiences growing and selling their products so that they may learn from "others like them".

¹⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/TelecentroIDSachavaca>

¹¹ In rural areas there is a kind of local government in small settlements ("centros poblados") that serves as local representation at the district-level government which would be many kilometres away. However, this local government does not have any significant budget or capacity to take important decisions.

Reload telecentres strategies

As this case clearly shows, telecentres may be a way to enhance purposeful and useful usage of the internet, making access a real tool for local development. Sachavaca had no mobile service when the telecentre started. While it now does, the kinds of things the population uses the internet for would not have happened by itself: young people and some adults would be using social networks, but we feel that hardly anybody would be using the internet for development purposes. The growth in mobile access in countries with big social inequalities such as Peru is closing a divide, but opening another: the constructive use of that access for bettering the socioeconomic well-being of communities. Markets and technologies will not close this alone.

Because of this, and because community networks are difficult if not impossible to sustain at this point in time in Peru, it is important that policies promote community-driven telecentres to encourage the community appropriation of technology for socioeconomic betterment.

To end this report, it would be fair to restate its opening thoughts. This report was not about community networks in Peru, but it was about a case that outlines a series of lessons that would serve community network projects in other countries: the need to promote the useful application of ICTs, that is, the importance of getting community members to champion or promote purposeful usage of the internet. It also points to the value of engaging local public offices in local access projects, among others.

Community Networks

THE 43 COUNTRY REPORTS included in this year's Global Information Society Watch (GISWatch) capture the different experiences and approaches in setting up community networks across the globe. They show that key ideas, such as participatory governance systems, community ownership and skills transfer, as well as the "do-it-yourself" spirit that drives community networks in many different contexts, are characteristics that lend them a shared purpose and approach.

The country reports are framed by eight thematic reports that deal with critical issues such as the regulatory framework necessary to support community networks, sustainability, local content, feminist infrastructure and community networks, and the importance of being aware of "community stories" and the power structures embedded in those stories.

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