

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2008

Focus on access to infrastructure



Global Information Society Watch

2008



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Regional and country reports



Introduction

Alan Finlay

Making contact with the world: From forest tribes to silver surfers...

While 22 country reports were included in GISWatch 2007, this year's publication collects the experiences of 38 countries from across the globe – countries as diverse as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Brazil, Uzbekistan, Switzerland and Bangladesh. To complement them, we have also introduced six regional reports: from North America, Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa, the former Soviet Union (a convenient way to group several new member states of the European Union, as well as countries in the Caucasus and Central Asia), South-East Asia and the Pacific. The authors of these regional reports have approached their tasks in different ways, and faced different challenges: how do you deal with a region like the Pacific made up of tiny islands, some with populations of less than 1,500? The regional reports contextualise the country experiences of accessing ICT infrastructure that follow, and will be developed in future publications.

This year's country reports are loosely structured around the Real Access Framework developed by bridges.org. The framework looks holistically at the drivers or factors that impact on access to information and communications technologies (ICTs). These factors go beyond physical access to technology, or the legal and regulatory framework that shapes roll-out and take-up, to include things like political will, affordability, human capacities, local content, the integration of technology into daily routines, and trust in technology, amongst others. These are now common concerns in any developmental context considering people's access to ICT infrastructure.

The country reports did not apply the framework – which in some senses is more easily applied at the local rather than national level – but simply used some of the factors as starting points for discussion on access to infrastructure.

While many reports consider physical access to technology and legal and regulatory frameworks, others explore more indirect drivers of ICT take-up. KICTANet (Kenya), for example, highlights the significant issue of trust in technology, which includes things like the reliability and safety of technology (when that cell phone burns your ear, what does it really mean?) and the security of personal information – issues which will become more important as convergence incrementally increases our access options.

The inclusion of “developed” countries like Switzerland is crucial to us. By juxtaposing “developed” with

“developing”, we hope to foreground the sometimes radically different experiences of the information society, and the divergent challenges faced, sometimes literally worlds apart. These juxtapositions graphically highlight the assumptions we sometimes hold when we talk about the “information society” as if it were an achievable level playing field, or even a common concern, rather than an imagined sphere of activity – an ideal – that we are consciously trying to construct. Compare, for instance, this extract from the report by comunicach (Switzerland):

The share of older adults aged 50 and over who use the internet on a regular basis – so-called “silver surfers” – is still remarkably low... The Swiss Council of Seniors describes this situation as a “ticking time bomb”.

with this point made by Radio Viva (Paraguay):

Not long ago, in March 2004, there was a meeting between members of an indigenous organisation and a family from the indigenous Totobiegosode forest tribe, who had come out of the wilderness to establish contact with the modern world for the first time.

Several similar contrasts stand out in these reports, some of which suggest a trend *away* from the ideal of a global information society based on equitable access.

The mobile divide

Yes, mobile is the “miracle” technology: but some regions of the world seem doomed to play catch-up. SANGONeT (South Africa) notes that the challenge around mobile telephony in Africa lies in how to convert the ubiquity of the technology into direct development benefits. Its possibilities include the ability to transcend geographic constraints, while offering the benefits of “immediacy”, “efficiency” and “security”. A similar challenge is identified by the Civil Initiative on Internet Policy (Kyrgyzstan), while Hopeton Dunn (Jamaica) finds that mobile phones are now being seen more as tools for economic survival in his country, rather than simply being used for “useless chatter”. Yet the *potential* of mobile technology appears sharply contrasted by the actuality of take-up and advanced use of mobile phones in, for example, many South-East Asian countries. As Madanmohan Rao points out in his regional report, Thailand's five million users accessing the internet through their mobile phones account for a staggering 40% of the country's internet user base. Put differently, the five million mobile internet users are the equivalent of around 10% of Africa's entire internet user base!

Growing divides within countries and in regions

Many reports note the rural/urban divide that exists in countries, but is it the case that when it comes to ICTs, this divide is growing rather than narrowing, despite the proliferation of grassroots technologies like cell phones? As Communitique notes in its North American regional report, even there a regional digital divide is becoming apparent, and “[in Canada] one adult out of two does not have the necessary skills to access online information.” At the very least, the rapidity of technological change is an ambivalent force when it comes to narrowing the access gap. At times it appears that as many people get “disconnected” by technological change, as are boosted by its new potential. For instance, CONDESAN (Peru) notes:

[D]eveloping countries [are pushed] towards the adoption of new technologies in urban areas even when there is no service readily available for “older technologies” in underserved areas. This presents a risk as well as an opportunity: the risk of widening the gap between those who do and those who do not have access to these services, and the opportunity for the excluded populations to “leapfrog” stages of development.

The policy divide

The European Union shows how regional consensus at a regulatory and policy level has the power and authority to rapidly scale up ICT take-up – see, for instance, the reports from Pangea (Spain) or ZaMirNET (Croatia). Similar consensus have not matured in a number of other regions.

The spending divide

A number of reports note the less than efficient spending of universal access funds, and question whether the funds are effective in achieving universal access targets. Typically these funds are the result of a percentage “tax” on operator revenue, and by most accounts the coffers are swelling. Yet while India has “liberalised” its rules on spending, and focused on boosting innovations to improve rural connectivity, in Brazil conflicting legislation has effectively frozen access funds since 2002. Similarly, despite taxing operators for five years in Peru, only one pilot project was actually funded between 2001 and 2006. (In Argentina, meanwhile, operators owe the government some USD 750 million.)

The training divide (or the “interactive citizen”)

While most people in least developed countries lack basic skills to participate and compete effectively in the information society, a country like South Korea has trained some 27 million people in classrooms set up in social work institutions, educational facilities, agricultural agencies, at home and online. This includes basic computer literacy courses, as well as training in daily life skills, and online banking and shopping.

The learning divide

Somewhat astonishingly, the reports show that when it comes to ICTs for development, basic lessons learned are not always lessons learned. This is no more apparent than when it comes to implementing ICTs in the classroom. Several decades of learning somehow end up gathering dust in jaded folders in school stock rooms, as expensive e-education programmes in countries as diverse as Switzerland and Uruguay are sometimes rolled out without adequate teacher training, curricula or buy-in.

At times it is impossible to compare like with like – a point raised in the indicators chapter of GISWatch 2008. These reports cover countries like the Republic of Congo, where the installation of automated teller machines (ATMs) is celebrated, and Ethiopia, where internet users total 164,000 – a 0.2% penetration. This is a long way from Switzerland, Spain, Costa Rica, or even South Africa; far from the “cloud computing” of the North, or the possibilities of fibre piped directly into the home, as commonplace as electricity or gas.

Yet what is clear from all the country reports is that despite the plethora of these “divides”, all of the countries appear to have recognised the importance of ICTs for socio-economic development, and in one way or another are taking action. As the Fantsuam Foundation (Nigeria) notes:

The level of awareness within the Nigerian government of the role ICTs can play in national development has gone past the stage of debating ICTs versus other development challenges, such as combating disease and poverty or ensuring food security and potable water. There is now an appreciation that connectivity is essential for development... ■

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2008 is the second in a series of yearly reports critically covering the state of the information society from the perspectives of civil society organisations across the world.

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH or **GISWatch** has three interrelated goals:

- **Surveying** the state of information and communication technology (ICT) policy at the local and global levels
- **Encouraging** critical debate
- **Strengthening** networking and advocacy for a just, inclusive information society.

Each year the report focuses on a particular theme. **GISWatch 2008** *focuses on access to infrastructure* and includes several thematic reports dealing with key access issues, an analysis of where global institutions stand on the access debate, a report looking at the state of indicators and access, six regional reports and 38 country reports.

GISWatch 2008 is a joint initiative of the Association for Progressive Communications (APC), the Humanist Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries (Hivos) and the Third World Institute (ITeM).

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2008 Report

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