Chapter 23

Bringing the Internet to the Rural Area:
A Case Study of the 'KedaiKom' Project in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Malaysia aims to be an information society by the year 2020 can only be achieved if the mass population, that include those who live in the rural area, has the access to use the ICT. This is due to the uneven distribution of the basic telecommunication infostructure between the urban and rural areas in Malaysia that left the rural area to be at the disadvantage to access the ICT. Meanwhile, there are many programs that have been implemented by the government to encourage the rural population to use the Internet, such as 'Kedaikom', a community based telecenter serving the rural population. A questionnaire survey was conducted to investigate how 'Kedaikom' as a community based telecenter could assist in diffusing the usage of the ICT to the rural population. The result from the survey has indicated that the community telecenter could be used to bridge the digital divide between the underserved rural community and the well-accessed urban community. More of the rural population, especially from the younger generation and those with higher education background (irrespective of age) are using the community telecenter to be connected to the Internet.

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is one of the most progressive developing countries in the world and has been promoting the usage of Information and Communication Telecommunication (ICT) to its citizens, both in the public and private sectors. According to an Asian-Pacific Economic Cooperation study, Malaysia's e-readiness level is relatively high compared to other Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries except Singapore (Bui, Sebastian, Jones and Naklada., 2002). This indicates that the country is on the right track in the diffusion of ICT to its population at large. Malaysia's achievement in its e-readiness can be credited to the government's dynamic ICT initiative policy, specifically its 'Vision 2020 Agenda' moving the nation towards an information society by the year 2020, Based on figures of 2007, Malaysia's Internet penetration for dial-up connection is 14.3% as compared to only a mere 7.1% in 2000 (Malaysia Communication and Multimedia Commission (MCMC), 2008). As for the penetration rate for broadband connection, there is a considerable increase from only 0.08% in 2002 (when the service was introduced in Malaysia) to 5.0% in 2007 (MCMC, 2008). Data on the Internet penetration shows an increase in the diffusion of ICT to the Malaysia population.

However, there are many challenges that Malaysia has to face in order for the country to be able to fully utilize the usage of ICT by all of its citizens. Malaysia is a developing country with a very large rural population (more than 40%). The physical infrastructure in rural Malaysia differs from that of developed nations. In Malaysia, there is an uneven distribution of the basic amenities, infrastructure and infostructure between the urban and rural area, with the rural area remaining relatively less developed. The rural population also consists of generally less educated people who are involved in an agricultural based economy and have a per capita income less than its urban counterparts. They are also most likely not using ICT as much compared to the urban population.

From the perspective of the government of Malaysia, the issue is how the nation can achieve its main goal to be an information society by the year 2020 if there is a discrepancy between the urban-rural diffusion of ICT. The Malaysia Vision 2020 ICT Agenda could not be materialized if there is digital divide based on the geographical differences where the population live. What is also a pressing issue of the urban-rural digital divide is the fact that most of the rural population who do not use ICT, do so not because of choice, but as a consequence of the lack of access to the ICT facilities. They also do not use ICT because of the lack of Internet content that suits their rural lifestyle or the language and skill that they were not able to acquire. The gap of the digital divide between the urban and rural populations of Malaysia will get wider if government, private sector and the community itself do not intervene with programs encouraging the usage of ICT.

The Government of Malaysia has reacted very actively in order to accelerate the diffusion of ICT to its mass population, especially the rural population. Programs that have been carried out by the government to encourage the usage of ICT by the rural population include 'InfoDesa', 'e-Bario' in the State of Sarawak and 'KedaiKom'. All these programs aim to engage the community to get exposed and to use the ICT.

This chapter will be focusing on the KedaiKom projects that have been implemented in Malaysia as rural telecenters for the underserved rural communities. A questionnaire survey was conducted focusing on how Kedaikom, as a community telecenter, could play a role in encouraging the rural or underserved community to use ICT. The results from that survey will be presented in this chapter so that it can provide a guideline on how the public sector involvement could significantly contribute in narrowing the digital divide between the underserved rural population and the well-accessed urban population in Malaysia.

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