

Sustainable Telecentres for Local Development

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Michele Cocchiglia

E-Government for Development Technical Unit, Government of Italy, Italy¹

INTRODUCTION

The telecentre movement is not at all old, having been born only in 1985 in Velmdalen, a small farming village in Sweden (Gomez et al., 1999). The concept is recognized and known by a large number of very different names: telecentre, telecottage, telekiosk, phone shop, telehaus, telestugen, cabinas publicas, multi-purpose access centre, multi-purpose community telecentre (MCT), community media centre (CMC), community learning centre (CLC), cybercafé, and so forth.

Telecentres were initially introduced with the purpose of fighting against the marginalisation of remote rural places, where the lower quality of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) facilities was seen to be an obstacle to participation in the information society. In the mid 1990s, telecentres experienced a rapid growth in Western European and other industrialized countries, to the point that by 1994 more than 230 telecentres had appeared in Australia, Austria, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Japan, Norway, Sweden, the UK and the U.S. (Latchem & Walzer, 2001). At present, telecentres are increasingly receiving considerable attention and support, both in developing and industrialized countries, from the international development community, a number of national governments, public telecom operators as well as private telecom service providers.

As it is clear from the foregoing, however, the form and functions of telecentres throughout the world still vary enormously in terms of size, facilities and services provided, and according to their rural or urban location. This is not only understandable, but in some ways also to be expected, since the telecentre phenomenon is still in discovery and its final form is constantly shaped by the very different contexts of implementation (Etta & Parvyn-Wamahiu, 2003).

As many authors agree, its adaptation and mutation is far from complete, and perhaps never will be (Colle & Roman, 2002; Whyte, 1999). As a result, attempts to classify the currently existing types are still relatively unsophisticated. Despite these important differences, however, common telecentre experiences and lessons are emerging from the field, highlighting critical issues and guiding the practical implementation of these projects.

For the purposes of this article, a telecentre is regarded as a centre that provides a broad range of services concerned with information and communication technologies, and which aims to promote educational, personal, social and economic development. Services provided typically include: access to the Internet, email, education and training, photocopying, fax, telephone facilities, and so forth. Furthermore, the approach adopted in this article rests on the assumption that telecentres are systemic entities, in which various interrelated social and technical elements play a relevant role (White, 1999).

Further assumptions, which generally underpin the so-called “telecentre movement”, are made into the article. As evidence suggests, for example, it is reasonable to assume that relevant information, if provided through appropriate information and communication technologies, has the potential to contribute to development, and that carefully implemented telecentre projects are a viable way to link communities with ICT (Etta & Parvyn-Wamahiu, 2003; Fuchs, 1998; Latchem & Walzer, 2001).

This article is organized into four sections, and proceeds as follows. The next section is an introduction to the sustainability concept, aimed at providing a better understanding of the assumptions underlying the article. The third section provides an analysis of a wide range of telecentres’ issues, outlining the author’s opinion on the required conditions and pre-conditions to telecentre sustainability. The final section is a conclusion to the article, summarizing the major findings of the study and identifying potential areas for further research.

It is the hope of the author that this article will provide some answers to the many questions that are currently being asked, or those that will be asked in the future about this area of development action.

THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT CONCEPT

Literature about telecentre activities is increasingly making reference to the concept of sustainability. The wider debate on ICT and development in general is laden with the need for sustainability, yet the concept is rarely examined closely nor is related to the specific development activity that is being discussed.

The concept of sustainable development was first introduced in 1987 by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED, 1987), known as the Bruntland Report:

Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Sustainable development focuses on improving the quality of life for all of the Earth's citizens without increasing the use of natural resources beyond the capacity of the environment to supply them indefinitely.

Therefore, the sustainability discourse is not limited to the need for development to “pay for itself”. Sustainable development is also concerned with the need for equity and fairness, and is characterized by a long-term view. Sustainable development is thus a much more complex goal to achieve, requiring the integration of conservation and development, satisfaction of basic human needs, provision and achievement of equity and social justice, and maintenance of ecological integrity (Gamble & Weil, 1997; Holmberg & Sandbrook, 1992).

However, while there is a general agreement around the world about the meaning of the concept, some authors have pointed out that sustainable development is likely to be specific to local conditions and possibilities (Parayil, 2000; Veron, 2001). For many years the Kerala Model of Development in India, for example, has met most of the above-mentioned criteria of sustainable development. Despite its poverty in terms of economic indicators, the state presents a set of very high social indicators of development that are outstanding if compared to the rest of India. This has led, therefore, to the idea that sustainable development, by its very nature, should be regarded as a global community-oriented concept rather than a nationally-oriented one (Veron, 2001). It must have local relevance, complement the specific values and capacity of the community or society in question, and be appropriate from a cultural, social, economic, technological and environmental perspective.

TELECENTRE SUSTAINABILITY: A MULTIDIMENSIONAL APPROACH

As argued in the previous section, the telecentre is a relatively new institution in developing countries and much still remains to be learned about its nature and role as a development tool. The development community is still uncertain with regard to the conditions that are required for telecentre success, and despite the intention to contribute to social and economic development, a relatively high failure rate of telecentre projects has been

experienced so far. A World Bank policy paper, describing an unsuccessful rural telecentre project in Mexico, comments: “Problems encountered included insufficient maintenance funding, inadequate political interest and will, and cultural constraints which hamper community interest in the projects” (Wade, 2002). Indeed, although interest in telecentres is now widespread, no comprehensive information exists, as yet, on what conditions are required in order to assure their sustainability and positive developmental impact.

To date, unfortunately, the debate about telecentre sustainability in developing countries has mostly focused on the financial aspect, and has often produced unsatisfactory results. It is only recently becoming more clear that, in order for telecentres to survive, sustainability has to be assessed taking into account its multiple dimensions (Mayanja, 2002; Stoll, 2003). Indeed, telecentre sustainability cannot be viewed on the basis of financial sustainability alone, particularly if the telecentre has as its aim not only the provision of ICT services but also community development.

This is not to say that financial sustainability is not important. Undeniably, although it is only one of several dimensions, it remains the most questioned and possibly the most problematic. Telecentre initiatives in developing countries have mostly been financed and supported by external donors, and often struggled to become financially independent. Private sector involvement has been rather limited so far, and usually restricted to donations and contributions. A number of experts and practitioners have stressed the importance of involving the private sector, assuming that if not operating as a commercial and profitable organization, telecentres will simply encourage incompetence and dependency, eventually leading to losses and failure (Best & Maclay, 2001; Proenza, 2001).

On the other hand, it has been argued that if telecentres have to serve and match the needs of communities, they should in some sense be considered as a “public good”, worth supporting regardless of commercial viability, for the benefit of current and future generations. The evident weakness of this position, however, is that the conceptual validity of this argument does not necessarily ensure or lead to financial sustainability, nor to the achievement of positive developmental results.

As mentioned previously, a solution for telecentre sustainability is therefore likely to emerge only by thinking about the conditions needed for telecentres to be sustainable from different perspectives. Following this approach, additional factors have recently been associated with sustainability, including the operating environment, ownership and management styles of the telecentres, community participation and relevance of services and content (Etta & Parvyn-Wamahiu, 2003; Roman & Colle, 2002).

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