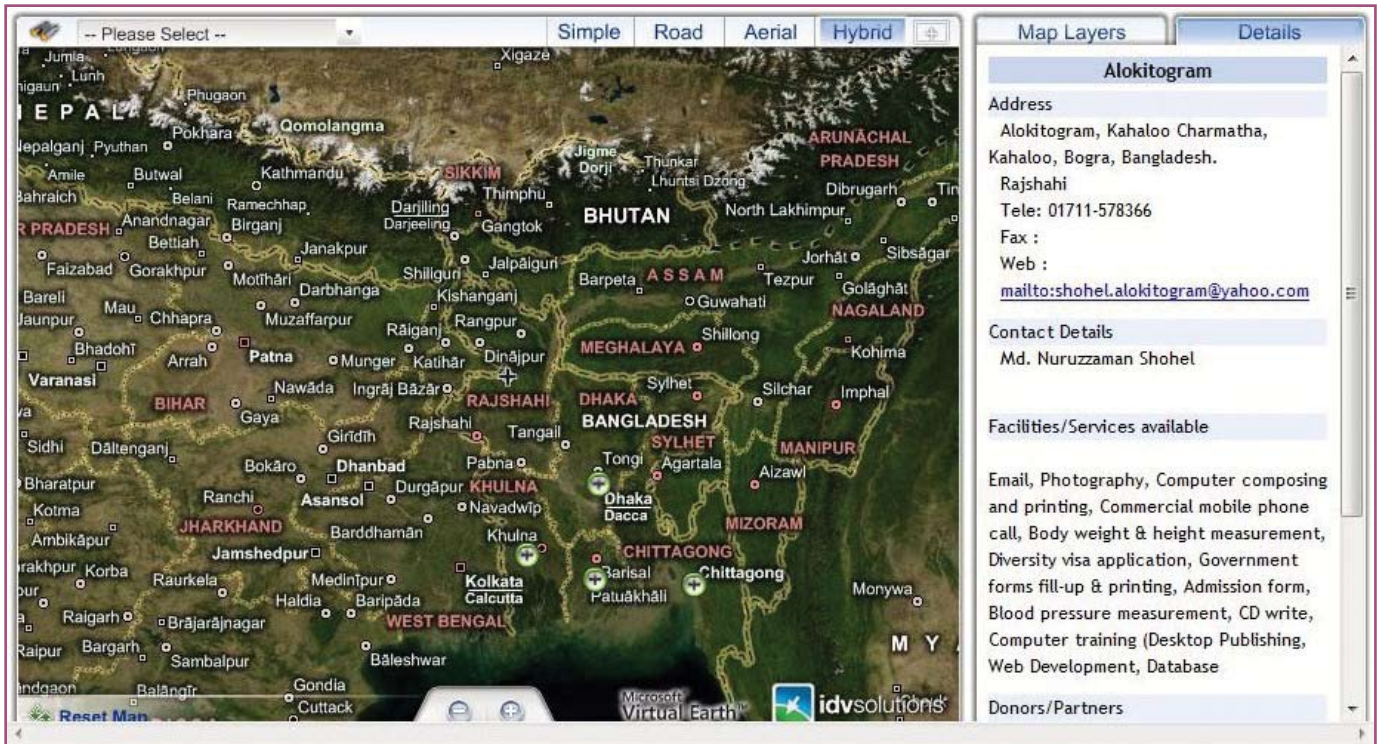




ITU Unveils Global Telecentres Portal at eIndia 2008

Sandra Pandi



The ITU Global Telecentre Map showing the details of one of the telecentres in Bangladesh

Photo Credit: ITU

Over the last two decades, there has been a steady increase in the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) for development. Those societies, which do not have the access to ICTs, have been excluded from such advancement and this has led to the digital divide, which reflects the socio-economic disparity between the developed and developing countries. As a result, a number of strategies have been developed with the aim of bridging the digital divide and further developing the information society worldwide. The development of telecentres is a part of the wider initiative to provide access to ICTs and thereby address the challenges of digital inclusionⁱ.

In many parts of the world, access to information is greatly restricted by two main factors: lack of connectivity and the prohibitive cost of access. These two factors are closely interrelatedⁱⁱ. Telecentres worldwide have one common characteristics: they offer shared access to information and communication technologies. Indeed they provide a social setting for local people to learn about new technologies.

Telecentres: key to socio-economic development

According to IDRC, telecentre is a location which facilitates and encourages the provision of a wide variety of public and private information-based goods and services, and which supports local economic or social development.

The telecentre movement is based on a 3-pronged foundation:

- Right information at the right time can contribute to development
- ICT provides a vital tool for people to access information at lower cost
- Telecentres are a viable way to link communities with the information and communication technologies

Telecentres and other community technology efforts are helping people worldwide to join the knowledge societyⁱⁱⁱ. They provide the essential foundational infrastructure upon which concrete ICT applications in healthcare, local

economic development, livelihood, rural e-Commerce, education and e-Governance can reach the people who need them most.

There is much evidence to show that inequitable access because of economic, social, and cultural reasons actually perpetuates poverty and consequently reduces the potential growth and development of countries. The inclusion of such marginalised groups into mainstream development is one of the main development challenges facing nations. As a result, there are a number of digital inclusion initiatives in less developed and developing countries where there is heavy dependence on public access to technology.

The role of telecentres in bridging the digital divide

Telecentres play a crucial role in increasing access to ICTs and thereby bridge the digital divide, especially in developing countries. They provide access to ICTs at a lower cost in those communities where personal ICT ownership is limited.

Some researchers suggest that rather than digital divide, it would be more accurate to instead speak in terms of social, economic and educational divides^{iv}. It would seem that telecentres are among the most visible tools in the challenge to bridge the other divides. It is these gaps, whether economic, educational or social, which contribute to the obstacles of participation in telecentre activities.

The July 2000 Okinawa Charter on Global Information Society stated that access to the information society should be provided to everyone^v. As a result, it agreed to assist developing countries bridge the digital divide through the creation of public access centres such as telecentres.

Thus, telecentres are based on the premise that connectivity (technical construct) as well as direct access (economic, social and psychological) to information will lead to empowerment, capacity building and thereby 'development'. In addition, for young people, improved access to ICTs provides exposure in important life skills which can lead to improved community development^{vi}.

Although there are a number of international organisations working in the area of telecentres including UNESCAP, UNESCO, UNDP, and numerous NGOs, most notable among them is the telecentre.org, the first reported telecentres portal.

The role of ITU in the telecentre movement

Although ITU (International Telecommunication Union) has been involved in a number of collaborative telecentre projects over the years, it has now assumed the role of an enabler in telecentre domain by developing a telecentre portal which aims to capture information on telecentres worldwide and visually display the information on an interactive map, available to all interested stakeholders.

This global telecentres portal can be used in many ways including displaying telecentre density in specific regions thereby identifying which regions are well served. It will also be helpful in locating the individual telecentres in the given country along with the contact address. So, people

could easily locate the nearest telecentre to avail the required services. Consequently, this information would be useful for ITU in advising governments and other stakeholders in strengthening the telecentre movement.

ITU, the United Nations specialised agency for telecommunications, generally plays a role of neutral convener of different partners – government, industry and civil society. This has been the approach of ITU with the Global Telecentres Portal – bringing together the efforts of many partners to create a shared and consolidated view of global telecentre information, which will be a resource for everyone to use.

The multipurpose community telecentre (MCT) and multipurpose platforms (MPP) projects should be continued and expanded, but with quantifiable, measurable and time-bound objectives based on user needs. To increase the number of services and the benefits of MCTs, especially in rural, isolated and poorly serviced areas, ICT applications should be introduced in current and planned MPP and MCT projects to extend the notion of universal access beyond basic telephony.

ITU is doing this by taking a decentralised approach by tapping into existing telecentre networks, and plans to build on and facilitate the work of those already active in the field. From this standpoint, we are particularly pleased to be working in partnership with telecentre.org that collaborates with 44 telecentres networks worldwide and believes that this is a practical and effective approach. ITU is able to implement such a decentralised model by using a powerful web-application provided by Microsoft and IDV Solutions, which reduces administrative requirements and resources.

Donors and practitioners in the domain of telecentres have been asking for more accurate information about the type of telecentres work being carried out (who is doing what and where?) in order to avoid overlap of efforts and make better use of scarce resources. They also would like to know where the remaining gaps are, in order to help focus attention and establish new partnerships which can then concentrate on the areas where the needs are the greatest.

ITU Global View Map

ITU is working with Microsoft and IDV Solutions to create a global view of telecommunications development using Microsoft Virtual Earth and IDV Visual Fusion Suite. By leveraging and further investing in Global View and ICT Eye, ITU and Microsoft aim to develop the world's most innovative and widely-used online platform for showcasing global ICT development activities, supporting decision-making, promoting public-private partnerships, and tracking progress towards the goals of the World Summit on the Information Society. This tool relies mainly on inputs from ITU's ICT Eye database, the leading one-stop-shop portal to access international ICT statistics and regulatory information.

ITU Global Telecentres Map

The ITU Global Telecentres Portal was unveiled during the Indian Telecentre Forum under the eIndia 2008 Conference



The ITU Global Telecentre Map showing the details of one of the telecentres in Sri Lanka

and Exhibition in New Delhi. Presently, it is a beta version which will be further refined and developed in the coming months. Open to the public and hosted and maintained by ITU (www.itu.int/ITU-D/cyb/telecentres/portal-index.html), the mapping platform allows users to have a Virtual Earth view of specific countries/regions.

ITU is collaborating with telecentre.org and its network partners across the globe to collect the basic data about telecentres. We have entered into an agreement with telecentre.org in this regard. After the telecentres data is received from telecentre.org and its partners, it is entered into our database where it can immediately be viewed on the Global Telecentres Map.

As users look at a particular region/country they will also be able to look at information about that telecentre on the right hand side panel. This information will include the location of the telecentre, contact person, services offered, target audience, who is actually using the telecentre, etc. Such information may be critical in terms of sustainability of a telecentre, especially in instances where the telecentre users are reportedly different from the telecentre target audience.

Once agreed, trusted sources may be given password-protected access to the telecentres database. These contacts will be telecentre.org global Telecentre Networks. ITU will be responsible for maintaining the ITU Global Telecentre Portal but will acknowledge that the data has been provided by these specific networks.

Conclusion

The ITU's Global Telecentre Map is of added advantage to the telecentre networks and to the community. It makes individual telecentres (and their networks) visible and showing that they are a real part of larger movement of hundreds of thousands of telecentres. It

provides vital information to support decision-makers and communicators.

We believe that this portal will act as a one-stop-shop for telecentre activities, not simply providing a visualisation tool for the telecentre community but also allowing interested communities to interact (e.g. via a forum), whilst informing the audience about news in the field, new telecentres established, projects, etc. In addition, the portal can be used as an enabler to stimulate the development of telecentres, providing a gap analysis tool, which can identify where new telecentres are most needed worldwide. This map can be linked with telecentre.org and its partner websites.

References

- i. www.choike.org
- ii. Themes and Issues in Telecentre Sustainability, Development Informatics, Working Paper Series, Paper No.10, 2002, Roman, R. Colle, R.,
- iii. www.un-gaid.org
- iv. Digital Divide or Digital Bridge, Exploring Threats and Opportunities to Participation in Telecentre Initiatives in TechKnowLogia, Vol.3, No.3, May-June 2001, Roman, R. Colle, R.
- v. Telecentres: Case studies and key issues, The Commonwealth of Learning, 2001
- vi. World Summit on Information Society Report, 2007

Author



Sandra Pandi is the Project Officer for ICT Applications and Cybersecurity Division, International Telecommunication Union - Telecommunication Sector, Geneva

e-mail: sandra.pandi@itu.int