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GLOBAL
IMPACT
STUDY

Connectedness of overseas workers

The impact of public Internet access for Filipino families

Communication is critical for overseas workers and their families. The Internet makes it more convenient and less expensive for families to stay connected. While private options may be preferred, many Filipinos rely on public access as they creatively mix technologies and venues to communicate with overseas family members. Opportunities exist for policymakers and cybercafé operators to support families and improve the sustainability of overseas labor programs.

Background

Global migration and overseas work are increasingly common. Internet technologies, such as instant messaging, video chat, voice over Internet, and social networking, are believed to keep workers connected with family and friends. But questions remain. How connected do families feel? What support services are effective? What role do public access venues play?

This brief summarizes the report, *The Impact of Cybercafés on the Connectedness of Children Left Behind by Overseas Filipino Workers*, by E. Alampay, L. Alampay, and K. Raza. It explores the impact of ICT-related communication by overseas workers and their families. The Philippines offers a unique perspective because more than one-tenth of the population works abroad, and to Filipinos, family is “the center of their universe.”

The study is one of seven in-depth inquiries of the *Global Impact Study of*

Public Access to Information & Communication Technologies. The study has implications for policies that address the challenges of large migrant and overseas populations.

Research design

The study sought to identify:

- What ICT-related programs support migrant workers and their families?
- How effectively do cybercafés provide e-services for migrant workers and their families? What interpersonal communication services are provided to make communication possible?
- What is the impact of different combinations of e-services?

Researchers addressed the above questions by conducting:

- A survey of children of overseas Filipino workers (158 urban, 150 rural), to measure indicators of connectedness:

children’s knowledge of parents’ lives overseas, parents’ knowledge of children’s lives at home, and parents’ ability to monitor children’s activities.

- Focus groups with parents who had lived abroad.
- Semi-structured interviews with 15 cybercafé managers (seven urban, eight rural).

Findings

Mobile phones provide the strongest connectedness, but high cost is problematic. Children reported greater knowledge of parents’ lives due to frequent mobile use versus Internet use, in both urban and rural settings. Focus groups confirmed that frequent mobile phone interaction constitutes the most direct way to maintain family relationships, due to convenience, privacy, and spontaneity. However, frequent mobile use is expensive.

Internet communication strengthens parent/child connectedness. While 92% of youth respondents use the Internet, 47% have no home access and rely *exclusively* on cybercafés. Overall, 70% of youth surveyed use the Internet to communicate with their parents abroad. These families were significantly better connected than others who do not use the Internet. The informal, synchronous nature of real-time chat and messaging was emphasized.

Creative combinations of tools and venues boost connectedness. Many youth combine private and public access. Their preferences are neither absolute nor permanent. Public access may offer better equipment, faster connections, and socializing. It can prevent siblings from eavesdropping, but it can also be noisy and *not* private. Mobile phones are used to coordinate real-time Internet chats with parents, which sometimes take place in cybercafés. These chats significantly impact what parents know about children's lives. The key may lie with synchronous interaction and complementary use – parents use cell phones to summon their child to the cybercafé so they may chat.

Ubiquity of cybercafés increases urban connectedness. Internet use has greater impact on connectedness in urban areas. Cybercafés are so common in urban neighborhoods that they almost rival the convenience of home computers. For rural users, cybercafés impose additional travel time and costs. One rural youth said that between travel time to the venue and time-zone differences, he and his mother barely talked once a week.

Content of communication influences venue and mode choices. Participants reported reluctance to discuss difficult topics – trouble at school, personal problems – through real-time applications, preferring the reflection time afforded by asynchronous communication. Real-time modes are preferred for informality and impromptu communication. Facebook monitoring helps parents to know about

their children's lives, often followed by voice conversations to fill-in background details.

Connectedness is driving demand for computers and training. In both rural and urban areas, Filipinos are motivated to purchase a home computer to stay connected with overseas family members. Many overseas parents also cite family connectedness as a key motivation to learn about the Internet.

Recommendations

Adapt venue space, rules, and operations. Public access venues could cater to families of overseas workers by providing equipment and space that balances communication and privacy, such as offering VoIP “phone booths,” hours of operation that accommodate time zone differences, and dedicating hours and resources to migrant family communication.

Enhance technology training prior to departure. Exposure and training for migrant workers and their families, by government or NGO welfare agencies, on how to communicate online should be conducted prior to departure. Training should address technology and venue options for parents *and* children.

Subsidize the communications ecology. Communication and connectedness directly impacts the sustainability and effectiveness of overseas labor arrangements. Financial support for communications, such as private mobile phones, computers, Internet access, international texting, and public access services, should be considered as an investment and a cost of doing business.

Negotiate communication access in international agreements. Migrant workers' abilities to communicate online when working in another country should be among the rights that governments of labor-exporting countries should push for, especially with destination countries that accept a large number of blue-collar and domestic laborers, such as Saudi Arabia and Hong Kong.

The **Global Impact Study** of Public Access to Information & Communication Technologies is a five-year project (2007-2012) to generate evidence about the scale, character, and impacts of public access to information and communication technologies. Looking at libraries, telecenters, and cybercafés, the study investigates impact in a number of areas, including communication and leisure, culture and language, education, employment and income, governance, and health. The research is supported by Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Learn more at globalimpactstudy.org.



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Source

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