



globalimpactstudy.org

GLOBAL
IMPACT
STUDY

Public access and development

The impact of public access venues and the benefits of libraries

Public access to computers and the Internet matters. When people can access computers and surf the Internet, they develop digital skills, connect with friends and family, educate themselves, and participate in a variety of other activities that are important to development. Evidence is found across public access venues—but public libraries demonstrate unique benefits.

Background

Public access to information and communication technologies (ICTs) can play an important role in development. Communities benefit when people can access information and communicate with experts and people in their social networks to learn about health, jobs, education, leisure activities, or whatever inspires them. When access to ICTs is public and available to everyone in the community, such as in public libraries, telecenters, and cybercafés, it can be an effective tool for those that need it most.

In some countries, public libraries deliver this core service. There are over 230,000 libraries worldwide, most in developing countries. Many of these libraries offer free computer and Internet access, sometimes the only options for free and reliable access, yet they are often overlooked when development agencies implement policies to promote public information and communication.

This brief describes some of the emerging

findings of the Global Impact Study of Public Access to Information & Communication Technologies related to the impact of public access on development, including the unique benefits successful public libraries offer.

Research design

The Global Impact Study is a five-year project (2007-2012) to investigate the social, political, and economic impacts of public access to computers and the Internet in developing countries. This study explores three main research questions:

1. *What are the social, economic, and political impacts of public access to ICT?*
2. *What is the magnitude of these impacts and how can we measure them?*
3. *What is the relationship between costs and benefits of providing and using public access to ICT?*

To answer these questions, researchers inventoried public access venues in six countries

and implemented surveys to investigate users and non-users. More precisely targeted in-depth studies were also conducted.

This brief is based on data from the Global Impact Study's surveys of more than 5,000 computer and Internet users at public access venues in five developing countries: Bangladesh, Brazil, Chile, Ghana, and the Philippines. A sizeable sample of library users was included in Chile, providing important insights into the potential of libraries. More comprehensive findings will be published in 2013.

Findings

The following findings are evident at all venues in the public access landscape, including libraries. However, in some instances, libraries may offer users unique benefits.

Public access venues are a critical gateway for developing skills among the public. Public access venues offer many people their first experience with computers

and the Internet. Half of users (50%) reported first using computers at a public access venue and 62% first used the Internet at such a place. Users also develop digital literacies in public venues: 39% indicated that public access venues were the “most important place” to develop their computer skills and 50% reported found these venues to be the “most important place” to develop their Internet skills. Even activities not typically associated with learning lead to development and refinement of skills at these venues—95% of users believe that use of email, Facebook, and leisure activities such as games increases their overall digital skills.

Public access impacts lives: income, social connections, education, and more. Users report a range of positive personal, social, economic, financial, and civic benefits: income (34%), money savings (40%), sending and/or receiving money (23%), access to employability resources (57%), and time saved (58%). They perceive positive impact related to communication (79%), education (78%), leisure activities (68%), language and culture (35%), and meeting new people (73%). For more targeted activities, positive impact is also reported: access to government information and services (40%) and health (37%).

Private access is not necessarily a substitute for public access. For 34% of users, public access venues are their only option for Internet access. While the majority of users also have access elsewhere, such as at home or at work, they continue to frequent public access venues. Why? Faster connections, better equipment, to be with friends, and to seek help from other users and venue staff. When asked what would happen if public access computers were no longer available, 50% of users state their computer and Internet use would decrease.

Libraries are more likely to be used for certain development-focused activities. Users are able to perform many activities regardless of the type of public access venue they use. Some activities, however, occur more frequently in the library setting. While similar proportions of users at libraries, telecenters, and cybercafés engage in income, education, and communication-related activities, when it comes to culture and language, health,

and government services, library users are more likely to be doing some activity in these areas.

Library users report greater impact in particular areas. Library users report greater impact, compared to users of other venues, for computer and Internet activities related to: education, health, and culture and language. This may be evidence that relative to other types of venues libraries provide better access and/or support facilities in these areas.

Takeaways

Public access to computers and the Internet make crucial differences in people's lives. Public access users see substantial impact from their computer and Internet use, in ways that are both directly and indirectly relevant to development. Governments and development agencies should not overlook the importance of these venues and the benefits they bring to communities around the world – from providing entry to the digital world and fostering ICT skill development, to sparking impacts across a variety of areas in people's lives. To unlock the development potential of computers and the Internet, an infrastructure built on low-cost and reliable access, training opportunities, and skilled staff is essential. Libraries, and other types of public access venues, are delivering this infrastructure. Public access plays a critical role in development, and whether through formal partnerships or simply awareness of their existence and function, these important community resources should be on the development agenda.

Public libraries are an integral part of the public access landscape, offering unique benefits. Libraries that provide access to computers and the Internet play an important role in the public access landscape. Libraries are generally free or low-cost, providing access to those who need it most. Public libraries that offer access cultivate an environment for certain important development-focused activities, such as health, culture and language, and government services. Development agencies and governments should consider public libraries for information and technology access – by continued support for libraries that already offer access and consideration of public libraries as effective places for technology access.

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.



The **Technology & Social Change Group** (TASCHA) at the University of Washington Information School explores the design, use, and effects of information and communication technologies in communities facing social and economic challenges. With experience in 50 countries, TASCHA brings together a multidisciplinary network of social scientists, engineers, and development practitioners to conduct research, advance knowledge, create public resources, and improve policy and program design. Our purpose? To spark innovation and opportunities for those who need it most. Learn more at tascha.uw.edu.

W TECHNOLOGY & SOCIAL CHANGE GROUP

UNIVERSITY of WASHINGTON
Information School

Source

Clark, M., Sey, A., & Sullivan, J. (2012). *Public access and development: The impact of public access venues and the benefits of libraries*. Seattle: Technology & Social Change Group, University of Washington Information School.