Costa Rica

Overview

Costa Rica is classified by CIS as a "quick win" with regard to improving public access to ICT. The country's needs are low and readiness is high. A lack of widespread non-urban access as well inadequate local content are two of the key challenges ahead. Encouraging more local involvement in identifying and filling information needs, as well as more collaboration between key players will help improve the public access situation.

PUBLIC ACCES LANDSCAPE	
Challenges ahead	Steady gains
Needs	Low
Needs (rank)	20/25
Readiness	High
Readiness (rank)	6/25

Findings

The central focus of this study aimed at the three principal venues that provide public access to information and ICTs in Costa Rica: public libraries, Centros Comunitarios Inteligentes (CECIs, or telecenters), and cybercafes.
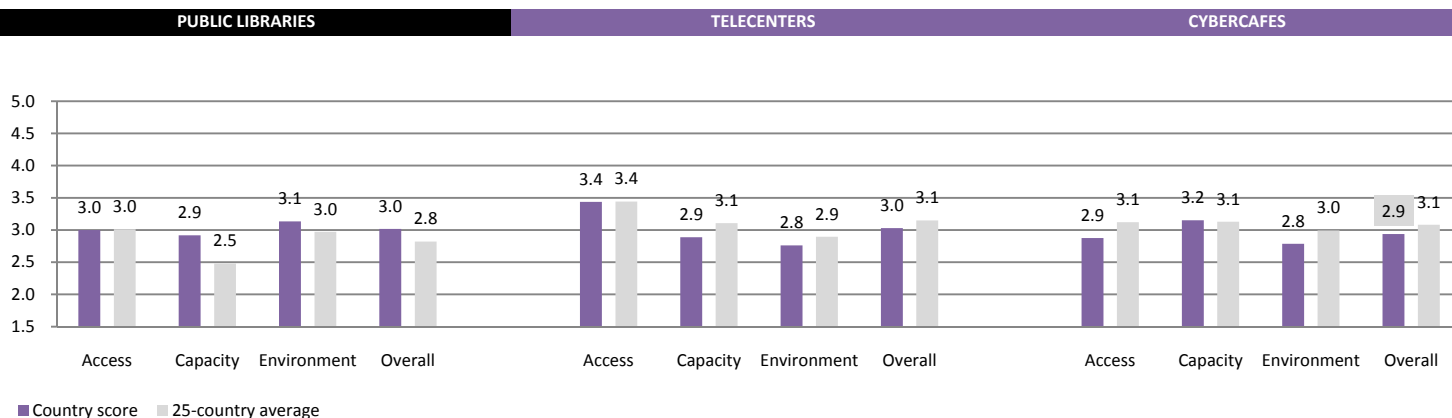
Costa Rican public libraries are organized into a national system that includes 57 libraries located throughout the country and a national library located in the capital city of San José. The library system is a part of the Ministry of Culture (Ministerio de Cultura, Juventud y Deportes), which allocates operating and maintenance funds.

Although the library system is widespread, border towns and other isolated communities rarely have a library. The same is true in indigenous areas where some information access is available through independent organizations, public universities, and non-government organizations (NGOs). Budget allocations for libraries are universally inadequate. Out-of-date collections, the limited availability of ICTs, operating schedules that prevent many potential users from visiting the venues, and other failures are common conditions among public libraries. They have limited relevant local content, limited participation by the communities in decision-making processes, and a student-focused orientation. These factors reduce the importance of libraries as venues for access to information.

CECIs are governed by Costa Rica's Ministry of Science and Technology (MICIT). Because individual communities administer, maintain, and manage the venues without the support higher government support, CECIs have little chance to survive, and self-sustainability is not included in the program design. CECIs located in public libraries have greater possibilities to be successful. The CECI initiative was born as an isolated program of the MICIT, which has been trying to establish strategic alliances with other public institutions such as universities and public libraries. There are 104 CECIs presently operating nationwide, and the goal for the current administration is to reach a total of 300.

Individual CECI venues are a technological platform typically composed of six to ten computers with Internet

ACE Scores

Bar chart showing Country score vs 25-country average:

PUBLIC LIBRARIES
- Access: 3.0 / 3.0
- Capacity: 2.9 / 2.5
- Environment: 3.1 / 3.0
- Overall: 3.0 / 2.8

TELECENTERS
- Access: 3.4 / 3.4
- Capacity: 2.9 / 3.1
- Environment: 2.8 / 2.9
- Overall: 3.0 / 3.1

CYBERCAFES
- Access: 2.9 / 3.1
- Capacity: 3.2 / 3.1
- Environment: 2.8 / 3.0
- Overall: 2.9 / 3.1

■ Country score ▢ 25-country average

Shaded data points are outside standard deviation for 25-country set
See the last page for country-specific definitions of these venues
See the last page for a definition of the ACE scoring framework

Venue Distributions

	ALL PUBLIC ACCESS			PUBLIC LIBRARIES			TELECENTERS*			CYBERCAFES			OTHER VENUES		
	Total urban & non-urban	25-country average	25-country median	Total urban & non-urban	25-country average	25-country median	Total urban & non-urban	25-country average	25-country median	Total urban & non-urban	25-country average	25-country median	Total urban & non-urban	25-country average	25-country median
VENUES	1,162	10,017	5,489	58	1,111	1,062	104	1,273	366	1,000	8,693	3,225	0	398	46
number with ICT	1,162	9,802	5,122	58	349	96	104	1,149	257	1,000	8,507	3,251	0	146	13
% with ICT	100%	98%	87%	100%	31%	20%	100%	90%	100%	100%	98%	100%	NA	37%	92%
% OF PUBLIC VENUES	100%	100%	100%	5%	11%	20%	9%	12%	11%	86%	73%	67%	0%	4%	1%
POP. PER VENUE ('000)	4	8	5	76	93	37	42	205	68	4	52	9	NA	419	103
with ICT ('000)	4	15	6	76	2,093	208	42	242	119	4	62	10	NA	1,354	198

NA=Not applicable
See the last page for country-specific definitions of these venues For this country, telecenters include CECIs.
Data points are missing for some measures in some countries, which can result in oddities when comparing rows of data (for instance, the average number of venues with ICT appears high compared to the average number of venues). For a complete overview of comparative country data, please see the summary paper for this study.

User Profiles

		PUBLIC LIBRARIES				TELECENTERS				CYBERCAFES			
		Urban	25-country average	Non-urban	25-country average	Urban	25-country average	Non-urban	25-country average	Urban	25-country average	Non-urban	25-country average
INCOME	Low income	11%	28%	ND	35%	11%	26%	ND	24%	11%	26%	15%	24%
	Medium income	33%	54%	ND	46%	33%	56%	ND	45%	55%	56%	85%	45%
	High income	0%	7%	ND	6%	0%	9%	ND	4%	0%	9%	0%	4%
EDUCATION	No formal education	11%	3%	ND	2%	11%	5%	ND	6%	15%	5%	ND	6%
	Only elementary	11%	16%	ND	21%	11%	14%	ND	13%	10%	14%	ND	13%
	Up to high school	22%	50%	ND	36%	22%	37%	ND	32%	45%	37%	ND	32%
	College or university	0%	28%	ND	19%	0%	40%	ND	28%	30%	40%	ND	28%
AGE	14 and under	11%	12%	ND	15%	11%	9%	ND	14%	0%	9%	10%	14%
	15-35	22%	72%	ND	51%	22%	74%	ND	57%	61%	74%	90%	57%
	36-60	11%	12%	ND	23%	11%	12%	ND	8%	5%	12%	10%	8%
	61 and over	0%	2%	ND	2%	0%	0%	ND	1%	0%	0%	5%	1%
GENDER	% female	11%	53%	ND	49%	11%	39%	ND	39%	44%	39%	44%	39%

ND=No data
Percentages may not add up to 100% in all cases
See the last page for country-specific definitions of these venues
Data collected through interviews conducted by research teams. See country reports for details with regard to methodology, locations, timing, and data collection issues.

connectivity plus a capacity building program (although none are currently in place). The venues are oriented to diminish the digital divide by reaching underserved communities and individuals such as rural women, farmers, and students in isolated communities. Because the program is not well organized, it has been difficult for it to reach its goals.

Cybercafes are often operated by a family or by a few friends and are easy to find almost anywhere nationwide. Nearly all have high connectivity and reliable electrical service. They are inexpensive small enterprises and are spreading rapidly across the country. Cybercafes are often located in the centers of towns or in commercial areas, but also are found in neighborhoods and near schools and universities. Many cybercafes are just a commercial initiative of entrepreneurs who already operate a grocery store, a small bazaar, or other small business, and find a profitable cash flow by fulfilling a need in the community for an Internet connection.

Cybercafe venues have more flexible schedules than libraries or CECIs, and often are open at night. They are a practical alternative when the local users cannot easily afford to have a home connection and do not own a personal computer.

Recommendations

This study revealed that more information is needed across many subject areas, but that people also need to understand how access to information can help them to improve the quality of life. Furthermore, they need to find ways to become involved in empowerment processes and to acquire the ability to identify information needs and the opportunities to fulfill them.

Local content is not being generated under a participative logic where the communities have a voice not only in identifying needs, but also in working to develop good solutions. Social participation is needed to guarantee the quality of information solutions and to create public policies that fulfill the needs of the population. For the most part, the people know what they need, and this must be positioned prominently in any agenda. The establishment of popular participative venues is the first step needed to solve the critical needs of underserved communities and groups.

Based on the results of the research and the analysis of the data gathered during this study, the following conclusions and recommendations emerged:

- Conduct inclusive discussions where communities and underserved segments of the population participate and are encouraged to introduce constructive criticism.

- Establish public policies that guarantee the long-term successful operation of the different initiatives.

- Thoroughly understand that indicators such as "the number of computers per each 100 inhabitants" do not contribute qualitative information about the social appropriation and benefits of ICTs.

- Monitor and evaluate each means of access to information and ICTs to understand what needs to be changed and what can be reproduced in future programs.

- Collaborate with other key participants (NGOs, international corporations, funding programs, and the private sector) to avoid duplicating effort, and avoid diminishing the initiatives that are already in place.

Geography & Economy

Costa Rica sits between Pacific and Caribbean coastal plains that are separated by rugged mountains and more than 100 volcanoes. The country has an enormous natural richness that attracts large numbers of tourists each year and makes the tourist industry a highly profitable revenue stream.

The population is widely diverse, with ethnic origins from African descendants, indigenous groups, migrants, Mestizos, European Caucasians, and others. The official language is Spanish, although a few other languages are spoken among the various ethnic and migratory groups.

While Costa Rica has had an active political history, it has seldom experienced the degree of volatility felt in other countries in this region. The country's economic model is relatively traditional with constitutionally guaranteed universal services for the people.

Gender differences have always been important in Costa Rican culture, and this is particularly visible with regard to employment opportunities and wages.

COUNTRY PROFILE	
Total population* (millions)	44
Urban population* (millions)	27
Literacy (%)	95.8
E-readiness	ND
Gini	0.50

*World Bank 2006 data
ND=No data

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About this study

CIS's Public Access Landscape Study examined how people around the world access and use information and computers in public settings such as libraries, telecenters, and cybercafes. Understanding public access is particularly important in developing countries where there is often limited private access to information and communication technologies (ICTs).

This study covered a carefully-selected sample of 25 developing countries containing over 250,000 public access settings. Local research teams surveyed over 25,000 people and conducted interviews and focus groups in order to develop a detailed picture of the public access ICT landscape in each country. CIS collected, interpreted, and analyzed these detailed county-level results, and also conducted cross-country comparative analyses to uncover common themes, challenges and opportunities.

The goal of this work is to help strengthen public access to information and ICTs around the world.

This project was conducted in two phases. During the first phase, country-based research teams prepared draft reports describing the information access landscape, presented a national assessment, and compiled a preliminary set of recommendations. In the second phase, teams identified the principal locations where people seek information: public libraries, cybercafés, telecenters, and other locations (such as private and religious libraries).

Local research teams used a combination of research methods to: (1) observe how people access information; (2) conduct surveys in information venues where they interviewed operators and users; and (3) perform secondary research and analysis of existing reports and documents using both local and international sources. Teams combined site visits and interviews to review the physical infrastructure and human resources of a variety of venues, and to determine the information content, service usage patterns, communication, and knowledge development. Additionally, teams examined the effects of environmental factors such as government policies, geography, and ethnic and linguistic differences.

Definitions

ACE scoring framework: Developed by CIS based on a modified bridges.org Real Access framework. The scale goes from zero to five, with 5 being the best possible score. ACE scores are calculated by evaluating dozens of variables having to do with ICT access, capacity and environment in public access ICT venues. "Access" includes variables such as accessibility, suitability, affordability, and the availability of technology; "capacity" includes training, relevant content and services, social appropriation, and collaboration capacity; and "environment" includes socio-cultural factors, popular support, political will, and a country's legal and regulatory framework.

Challenges ahead (from table on front page): Estimates based on combinations of ACE scores indicating difficulty in improving country's public access to ICT. From the fewest challenges to most, categories are: quick wins, steady gains, slow gains, and significant.

CIS: University of Washington Center for Information & Society (CIS)

Cybercafés: Since Costa Rica is a tourist destination with high connectivity and electricity coverage, cybercafés are present almost everywhere in the country with minimal regulations and no registration records.

E-readiness: The ability to use ICT for economic development, as determined by measures of connectivity and technology infrastructure, business environment, social and cultural environment, legal environment, government policy and vision, and consumer and business adoption. E-readiness is scored on a scale from 1 to 10. In 2008, the global e-readiness score was 6.4, with the highest levels in North America and the lowest in Africa and Asia.

Gini coefficient: Measures the inequality of income distribution. A low coefficient indicates more equal income distribution, while a high Gini coefficient indicates more unequal distribution. The global average is around 0.6; the US gini is around 0.45.

ICTs: Information and communication technologies (especially computers and the Internet).

Needs & Readiness indexes (from table on front page)**:** The needs index is comprised of three indicators: inequality, ICT usage and ICT cost. The readiness index is also comprised of three indicators: politics, skills and ICT infrastructure. Proxies are used for all indicators. See "Information Needs & Watering Holes" on the CIS Landscape Study website (www.cis.washington.edu/landscape) for a more detailed discussion of these indexes and proxies.

NGO: Non-governmental organization

Non-urban: A "rural" area. Urban vs. non-urban classifications vary by country.

Public libraries: Organized as part of the National System

Telecenters/CECIs: Operated by the Ministry of Science & Technology (MICIT), administered by communities without ministry support. Consist of 6-10 computers connected to the Internet, plus a capacity building program oriented to diminish the digital divide by reaching underserved populations and students from isolated communities.

Front photo: Public library in Guadalupe. Photo courtesy of Sula Batsu.