



# Sri Lanka

## PUBLIC ACCESS LANDSCAPE STUDY SUMMARY



### Overview

Sri Lanka has moderate levels of needs and readiness with regard to public access to ICT, but improvements will be slow in coming.

Although the government is committed and the regulatory environment is favorable, connectivity and access in non-urban areas is problematic and content development and information delivery are constrained by many barriers, including venue location, disability access, language diversity, and a general lack of ICT skills among users. Approaches to improving ICT access include more mobile phone applications and more library funding.

PUBLIC ACCESS LANDSCAPE	
Challenges ahead	Slow gains
Needs	Moderate
Needs (rank)	14/25
Readiness	Moderate
Readiness (rank)	16/25

### Findings

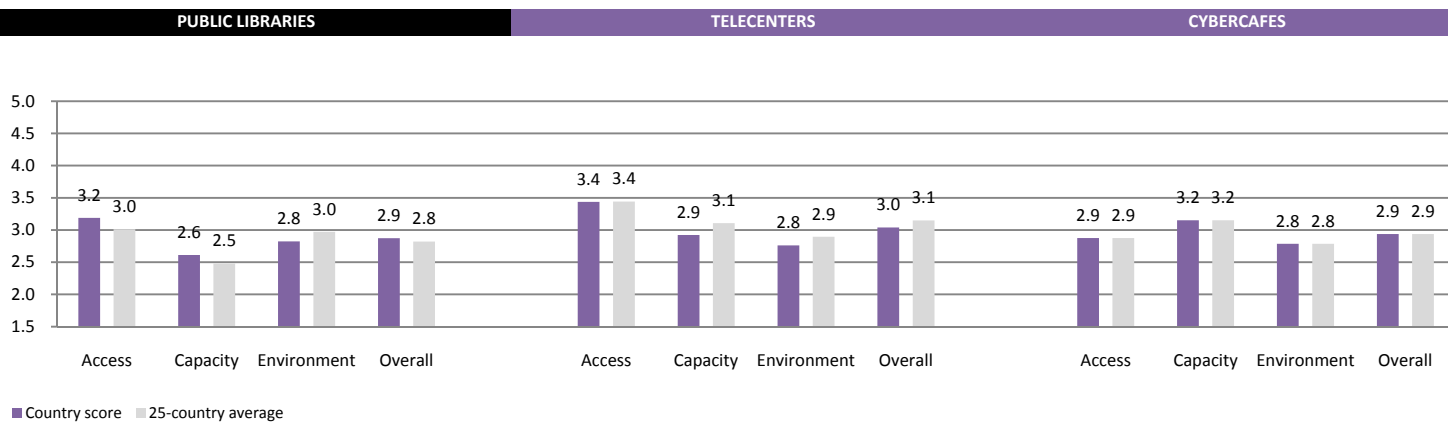
Sri Lanka has a relatively high national literacy rate and features gender parity in general education. Schools report low dropout rates and an 82 percent junior secondary education completion rate. University enrollment is increasing, especially in science and technology with an emphasis on computer literacy, and the results fit well with the widespread adoption of ICT as an instrument to help promote socioeconomic development.

Sri Lanka is shifting to a knowledge-based economy, in part, by using ICTs as a tool for reducing poverty, promoting economic growth, and fostering peaceful social change while struggling to overcome internal political conflicts that at times have turned violent. The country has faced protracted political and ideological conflicts for twenty-five years, but the people and the economy have been resilient although progress has been slow. In 2004, Sri Lanka initiated its national program to expand digital technology through institutional reforms, regulatory changes, infrastructure development, and streamlining government processes.

The key findings from this study include:

- Connectivity and access to venues in non-urban areas is problematic, and the central hills also present connectivity challenges. Content development and information delivery are constrained by geographical, social, ethnic and language diversity, gender issues, and the barriers that hinder information access in underserved communities.
- The legal and regulatory environment encompassing public access to information venues is favorable. Foreign investment in the telecommunications sector has increased, aids the development of infrastructure, and contributes to the growth of landline and mobile communication services although penetration remains low. Notably, the increasing number of mobile users could serve as a basis for the greater adoption of ICTs.
- Systemic problems could be alleviated partially by (1) adopting UNICODE fonts, (2) introducing a web page translation tool such as a Firefox plugin for Sinhala and Tamil, and (3) adding a Google

## ACE Scores



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
<b>VENUES</b>	1,875	10,017	5,489	1,011	1,111	1,062	558	1,273	366	39	8,693	3,225	267	398	46
number with ICT	865	9,802	5,122	1	349	96	558	1,149	257	39	8,507	3,251	267	146	13
% with ICT	46%	98%	87%	0%	31%	20%	100%	90%	100%	100%	98%	100%	100%	37%	92%
<b>% OF PUBLIC VENUES</b>	100%	100%	100%	54%	11%	20%	30%	12%	11%	2%	73%	67%	14%	4%	1%
<b>POP. PER VENUE ('000)</b>	11	8	5	20	93	37	36	205	68	510	52	9	74	419	103
with ICT ('000)	23	15	6	19,674	2,093	208	36	242	119	510	62	10	74	1,354	198

\*See the last page for country-specific definitions of these venues. For this country, telecenters are Nenasala centres, and other venues are specialised Vidatha centres.  
 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 to be greater than 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
<b>INCOME</b>	Low income	20%	28%	38%	35%	15%	26%	43%	24%	5%	26%	10%	24%
	Medium income	66%	54%	58%	46%	80%	56%	43%	45%	85%	56%	80%	45%
	High income	3%	7%	2%	6%	3%	9%	14%	4%	8%	9%	8%	4%
<b>EDUCATION</b>	No formal education	0%	3%	0%	2%	0%	5%	0%	6%	10%	5%	34%	6%
	Only elementary	15%	16%	18%	21%	9%	14%	57%	13%	55%	14%	52%	13%
	Up to high school	71%	50%	75%	36%	85%	37%	43%	32%	23%	37%	12%	32%
	College or university	14%	28%	7%	19%	6%	40%	0%	28%	12%	40%	2%	28%
<b>AGE</b>	14 and under	6%	12%	12%	15%	8%	9%	15%	14%	6%	9%	1%	14%
	15-35	64%	72%	58%	51%	78%	74%	80%	57%	72%	74%	86%	57%
	36-60	24%	12%	25%	23%	14%	12%	5%	8%	20%	12%	12%	8%
	61 and over	5%	2%	5%	2%	0%	0%	0%	1%	2%	0%	1%	1%
<b>GENDER</b>	% female	44%	53%	49%	49%	46%	39%	57%	39%	26%	39%	17%	39%

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.

search interface that allows searches of local language websites encoded in UNICODE. These developments would allow users who are not proficient in English to access information. A few FOSS and UNICODE communities already exist.

- The public can access information through newspapers, magazines, journals, books, educational CDs, audio and videocassettes, radio, and television. Independent print and broadcast media coexist with government-controlled media, and while the majority of both operate from Colombo, state and community transmitters broadcast in several regions. Regional newspapers and alternative media are active nationwide. Most newspapers maintain online editions and journalists turn increasingly to the Internet to access information.
- The convergence of technology has fostered citizen journalism and increasing numbers of bloggers are online. Censorship has been imposed at times, but there is relative freedom of expression. When imposed, suppression of information often casts a partisan view. Online sites sometimes have been blocked, and regulatory authorities direct service providers to filter obscene and pornographic sites.
- Information generated by research and development institutions, government agencies, and community-based organizations is available to the public, but tends to remain within those institutions instead of disseminated to potential users in appropriate formats.

Other findings from this study include:

- Skilled and knowledgeable leadership is critical to the success or failure of venues meeting the information needs of the communities they serve.
- Despite the emphasis on information for socioeconomic development, the highest demand by users of the venues that were studied was for information on current events followed by information on education and entertainment.
- There was little location-specific information in venues that could be used for improving incomes and local economies.
- Digitized content will greatly benefit users. Government call centers and the increasing number of government agencies that have a web presence, and the content being generated in local languages provide improved opportunities for public to access information.
- Physical distances to venues hinder public access to information. Public libraries are often in better locations than other venues, but some rural libraries are poorly located. The government has not given adequate attention to easy access for older people, the disabled, and in some instances women. The rural terrain often poses challenges to accessing venues.
- Users generally have inadequate ICT skills.
- There is a general lack of awareness, linkages, and coordination among information providers. In this context, ICTs can play a significant role by connecting information providers through an electronic network.
- Mobile applications could be developed to reach underserved communities.

## Recommendations

The following are key recommendations from this study:

- Revitalize the public library system and ensure regular financial allocations, establish Provincial Library Services Boards where they have not been established, recruit professional librarians, upgrade the services, automate the facilities, and train an adequate staff for each location.
- Readdress how and where information is located. This study found that the available information is often scattered, disorganized, and difficult to collect.
- Improve the information literacy of communities to enable them to identify the most appropriate source for the information they require, and accelerate the present government program of providing e-government services.
- Collaboration and resource-sharing are imperative. Ease the overall resource constraints. Readdress the lack of collaboration among similar types of venues and across venues. Operators complained of a lack of resources and most of the operators of the venues studied were not even aware of other public access information venues in their localities. The venues functioned as stand-alone units.
- Base content development initiatives on needs assessments to capture the critical location-specific needs. Encourage greater community involvement to give ownership to the project.

## Geography & Economy

Sri Lanka lies off the southeastern coast of India in the Indian Ocean. The terrain is mostly low with flat to rolling plains, with a mountain massif in the southern interior. Because of a rain shadow effect, Sri Lanka has two main climatic zones: a southwestern wet zone and a northerly dry zone.

A 2006 census listed the population at 19.9 million with the Sinhalese majority constituting nearly three-quarters of this total. Seventy percent are Buddhist. Except in the Northern Province, from which separatists expelled all ethnic groups except Tamils, Sri Lanka's other provinces have an ethnic and religious mix.

Sinhala, Tamil, and English are the major languages. Sinhala and Tamil hold official status while English serves as a linking language. Ninety-two percent of the people speak Sinhala, and 81 percent can read and write the language. Fifteen percent of the population can speak English, and 19 percent can read and write it.

Constitutional provisions protect gender equality, and gender disparities have been virtually eliminated in primary, secondary, and tertiary education.

Nearly 42 percent of the population lives on less than US\$2 a day while another six percent lives on less than US\$1 a day.

COUNTRY PROFILE	
Total population* (millions)	19.9
Urban population* (millions)	3.0
Literacy (%)	90
E-readiness	3.93
Gini coefficient	0.33

\*World Bank 2006 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/EasySeva:** Combination of cybercafé and telecentres, which aim to establish community information centers and develop entrepreneurs in the ICT sector

**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](http://www.cis.washington.edu/landscape)) for a more detailed discussion of these indexes and proxies.

**Nensala Centres:** Set up to democratize ICT access and extend affordable access to underserved communities as a sub-program of the national eSri Lanka program, launched in 2004

**NGO:** Non-governmental organization

**Non-urban:** Commonly labeled a rural area, but definitions of rural or periurban vary by country

**Public libraries:** The most extensive network of public access information venues in the country; service urban and non urban locations; strive to integrate themselves into the community by extending their services to meet the needs of people who are economically and socially marginalized; a place for lifelong learning, a cultural centre, a community facility, a source of information, a social space but above all, a facility for study; by and large provide traditional services

**Specialised Information Centres:** *Vidatha Resource Centres* and *Rural Agricultural Knowledge Centres* were established to improve livelihood activities. *Vidatha* centers operate under the Ministry of Science & Technology and aim to introduce and disseminate information about low-cost technology to micro and small-scale entrepreneurs. *Rural Agricultural Knowledge Centres* operate under the Department of Agriculture and target farming communities.

**Front photo:** Minister Ashraff lighting a traditional oil lamp to commemorate the opening of a new computer and training center in Akkaraipattu. Photo courtesy of Rebuild Ampara.