

Foreword

The *Encyclopedia of Developing Regional Communities with Information and Communication Technology* makes a valuable contribution to the very important matter of how people in developing countries can make the best use of information and communications technologies (ICT). The Internet, in particular, has promised much to the people of the world. Yet even as ICT have brought people together, they have at the same time fostered a great separation between those who have access to them and those who do not. They have increased the access of small communities to the world, but they have, at the same time, provided significant challenges to cultures, businesses, education, and social cohesion. They have added greater complexity, higher costs, growing rates of redundancy, and increasing gaps in knowledge. All in all, they have transformed most aspects of our lives.

Clearly, we cannot ignore these technologies. Our collective experience with them indicates that we need increasing knowledge in how to use them in a productive manner. Continuous learning and supportive education across all sectors of our societies and cultures is paramount to ensuring that we gain the most and lose the least from the information age.

The title of this encyclopedia challenges the reader to view the matter from a collective community perspective, one that encompasses public, private, and civil society sectors. It aims to address the increasing gaps in information, knowledge, business efficiency, and service delivery within and between developing and developed countries. This is the business of community informatics, which is about defining how we can use ICT to assist communities in achieving their social, economic, political, and cultural goals. It provides the reader with a wealth of information on issues such as e-commerce, e-education, e-health, e-governance and e-tourism. Further, it puts such information in different cultural contexts across Africa, the Americas, Asia, the Caribbean, Europe, India, the Middle East and Oceania.

ICT pose new questions to society. It would seem that the business use of ICT is well advanced. Far more complex and pressing are questions relating to the social appropriation of ICT by the communities, so as to enable increased self reliance, increased participation in decision making, and improved delivery of community services. If we are to address these matters in ways that protect and enhance diversity amongst peoples of the world, we need to place increasing emphasis on lifelong learning.

Such efforts must help people understand and develop processes for effective use of ICT. They must also help governments, policy makers, businesses, and civil society develop cohesive programmes beyond the provision of access to ICT as an end in itself. We must prepare our societies for the next wave in the development of ICT that will make them increasingly mobile and increasingly accessible. We must do this in ways that empower our diverse communities and in ways that ensure that our citizens are well prepared to use these technologies to contribute to their governance, self-reliance, and the maintenance of their cultural heritage.

This encyclopedia is a useful tool in achieving these ends and I am pleased to recommend it to practitioners, researchers, policy makers, civil society representatives, and those looking for more appropriate methods of delivering the host of services that are important in our society.

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