Chapter 16

E-Governance and Social Inclusion: Community E-Centers in the Philippines

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents a case study of community e-Centers in the Philippines. Developed as part of the pilot multi-purpose community centres program in the late 1990s and expanded as part of Philippine Development Plans, the centres were envisaged as local entry points for residents to access information and services, especially in rural areas of the country. The case study touches on the problems when content lags behind the provision of hard infrastructure, a problem associated with many e-government projects, especially in less-developed countries.

INTRODUCTION

Social exclusion haunts people and communities that suffer not only from low income levels but also from the lack of access to quality education, health, governance, and information services. In a growing information society, access to information and communications technology (ICT) including the Internet is seen as crucial in battling social exclusion. In the Philippines, poor Internet penetration is reflected in the low degree of Internet access of households. E-governance strategies that promote digital inclusion can help reduce levels of social exclusion.

This chapter seeks to find out how e-governance strategies that aim to enhance the digital connectivity of disadvantaged populations contribute to social inclusion. Specifically, it will examine whether the implementation of an e-governance strategy anchored on the establishment of Community e-Centers have led to the realization of digital inclusion outcomes that promote social inclusion. In this regard, it will consider how input variables such as the quality of investments in ICT infrastructure, skills training, and content development, together with process variables like program management, stakeholder participation, and strategic planning, affect digital inclusion out-
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comes. The outcome variables would include Internet access, Internet usage, and Internet impact.

BACKGROUND

Social exclusion is produced by a number of factors that exclude people from the repertoire of exchange relations that mark the practice of rights in modern society. Aside from poverty, social exclusion is reflected in inadequate rights in education, health, housing, and access to services (Commission of the European Communities 1993). Thus, social inclusion can be seen in terms of disadvantaged people acquiring rights, access, and benefits from improved education, health, governance services, and digital connectivity. This chapter would situate the links between e-governance and social inclusion in the Philippines. The country presents an interesting case study. Despite having a formal democratic system, there are social, institutional and political issues that bar citizens from getting equal access to Internet connectivity and capacity. The weak ICT infrastructure in the provinces is coupled with the poor functional literacy of low-income communities. There is also the absence of a Freedom of Information Law that would allow citizens to have easy access to government documents so that they can participate better in public affairs.

Social Inclusion

The concept of social exclusion gained currency in the 1990s. The equivalent French term les exclus was used to characterize those who are administratively excluded by the state (Burchardt, Le Grand and Piachaud 2002). Social exclusion is related to the lack of engagement in governance processes. Those who suffer from social exclusion experience difficulty in claiming a range of citizen rights including access to adequate health care and education. This can be attributed to their weak social integration and capacity to participate in public decision-making (Shortall 2008).

Social exclusion is often related to poverty. However, there are differences. Poverty is concerned with the issue of resource distribution. The impoverished are those with low resource or income levels. Social exclusion is a more complex situation where deficits in material resources interact with insufficiencies in social service provision. Instead of being seen as a static condition, social exclusion should be examined in accordance with the processes, mechanisms, and institutions that exclude people (De Haan 1998).

As a multi-dimensional form of deprivation, social exclusion can be caused by irregular employment, gender, ethnicity, disability or ill health, and lack of opportunities for participation, as well as low income. Social exclusion is affected in the global context by the fragmentation of the labor market. In the national context, it is influenced by the conditions of welfare regimes and rights of citizenship. Moreover, in the local perspective, it is embedded in the particularities of local culture, governance, population, and territory (Percy-Smith 2000).

In social exclusion, poverty must be seen as the denial of basic capabilities rather than the lack of income (Sen 1999). Understanding particular groups in communities experiencing this kind of poverty is critical. The task is to craft models that encapsulate the mechanisms through which the impoverished are enabled to make claims to resources. While poverty is endemic, there are efforts that aim to provide inclusive systems to alleviate the poor (Jordan 1996).

Bridging the Digital Divide

Fostering social inclusion through e-governance requires bridging the digital divide that prevents low-income communities and marginalized groups
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