

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2008

Focus on access to infrastructure



Global Information Society Watch

2008



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Introduction

Colombia's information and communications technology (ICT) infrastructure is growing but is still not significant. During 2007 computer sales increased between 62% and 66%. In 2006 there were 4.6 computers per 100 inhabitants and by the end of 2007 this figure increased to 8.4 computers per 100 inhabitants.

In the coming years the Ministry of Communications is planning to increase significantly the purchase of computers by eliminating value added tax (VAT) on computers costing less than 1,740,000 Colombian pesos (USD 967) and by encouraging telecommunications companies to offer packages that include an internet connection and a computer.

As a way of offering equipment to the most deprived communities, the Computers for Education programme aims to increase access to ICTs in public educational institutions by promoting their usage and application in teaching. By 31 July 2008, this programme had given away 114,524 computers, benefiting 3,055,452 students in around 10,086 educational institutions. This represents 22.64% of the total number of public schools in the country.¹

Between June 2006 and December 2007 there was a twofold increase in access to the internet. According to the Telecommunications Regulatory Commission (CRT), 13.2% of Colombians were internet users in June 2006. By December 2006, the figure was 22.8%, and in December 2007 it had risen to 26.9%. According to recent figures from Internet World Stats,² Colombia, with 45,013,674 inhabitants, has an access rate above the world average of 20%, and is even ahead of other Latin American countries such as Peru (26.2%), Brazil (26.1%), Venezuela (21.7%) and Mexico (21.6%). However, the access rate is still below countries such as Chile (44.9%), Argentina (39.3%), Uruguay (31.6%) and Costa Rica (35.7%).

While these statistics show that during 2006 and 2007 Colombia made a major leap in ICT coverage, internet usage is still limited to the main cities. At the same time there are no statistics available on the use of internet by age, occupation, gender, and rural or urban areas, nor research available on how and what people do with ICTs, in order to know which groups most benefited from the use of ICTs.

The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), in association with the IBM Institute for Business Value, recently published an e-readiness ranking which assesses a country's ability to promote and support digital business and ICT services. The

rankings include criteria such as number of computer servers, websites and mobile phones, but also things like the citizens' ability to utilise technology skilfully. A total of 70 countries were included, and ranked on a scale from one to ten. The top countries were the United States (8.95), Hong Kong (8.91) and Sweden (8.85). Colombia slipped to 58th place in 2008, from 53rd in 2007, although its overall score was higher than in 2007 (4.71 versus 4.69) (EIU, 2008). This change of position can be explained by the fact that other countries made much more significant progress and their ranking is now higher.

Bridging the divide

Rural access

Although rural areas still have less access to the internet, due to a lack of service providers and of infrastructure that requires high financial investment, the Compartel programme – which aims to increase the coverage of ICTs in areas isolated from urban centres – has provided localities with less than 10,000 inhabitants with internet access through telecentres. Presently there are around 1,230 telecentres run by Compartel, and 265 telecentres already in operation have been upgraded.³

From 2007 onwards, Compartel has reformulated and included in its plans the design, execution and support of projects that aim to improve the social ownership of ICTs. This has to be highlighted as an important achievement because it will increase the impact of telecentres by improving the living conditions of users. The strategy involves promoting the use and appropriation of the existing ICT infrastructure in order to enable communities to use the available telecentres for fulfilling their business, economic and social needs. This strategy of ownership, promotion and training in the use of ICTs is implemented in alliance with other government initiatives and public and private institutions.

By 2008 Compartel is expected to have established 2,000 new internet access points in educational institutions and telecentres. Some of Compartel's achievements in the last year have been:

- 218 telecentres with 46 free virtual training courses provided by the National Learning Service (SENA), in which 9,370 people have registered.
- 64 telecentres taking part in a pilot virtual classroom initiative for coffee producers, in which 1,106 people have been trained.

¹ www.computadoresparaeducar.gov.co

² www.internetworldstats.com

³ www.compartel.gov.co

- In March 2008, in a public accountability event, Compartel highlighted the achievements of the project “Management of Knowledge and Exchange of Experiences between Community Telecentres and Compartel Telecentres in Colombia”, coordinated by Colnodo, the Universidad Autónoma de Occidente and Compartel. This project was funded by Telecentre.org. It is important to mention that many of Compartel’s achievements would not have been possible if it were not for its alliances with numerous organisations working on the development of telecentres and training.

To achieve some of the access goals, Compartel and the Ministry of Communications, through its Department of Access and Social Development, are implementing a project which aims to strengthen telecentres by promoting the exchange of experiences and training, and, amongst other things, sharing knowledge to strengthen the national telecentres network. For implementing this project the ministry has signed an agreement with Colnodo, which is coordinating the activities together with universities and private and public agencies.

In Colombia there are at least four types of telecentres that, despite their different ways of operating, share the same mission of providing ICT access to urban and rural communities and through this enabling the development process:

- Telecentres set up and supported by the national government (Compartel)
- Telecentres set up and supported by local governments
- Telecentres set up and supported by for-profit companies
- Telecentres set up and supported by civil society organisations and universities.

Another of Compartel’s objectives is to provide connectivity services using a broadband connection for public agencies. In 2007, the coverage of public agencies was increased by 73%. In 2008 Compartel expected to set up 5,197 connectivity points using a broadband connection for public agencies. These points were to be set up in 3,467 schools and 1,730 public agencies such as hospitals, town councils and judicial offices.

Broadband services have been growing steadily in the main cities, and this market is saturated. However, there are just a few initiatives offering broadband services in small towns and in rural areas. Some towns located far away from the country’s centre have no broadband service providers. As a result, the challenge for the Ministry of Communications is to promote access to these services in these areas.

E-government

The Connectivity Agenda,⁴ a governmental policy aimed at the creation of a more competitive business sector, a modern government and a community with more development

opportunities, is focused on the design and development of e-government. This strategy aims to create an efficient, transparent and inclusive government where citizens and enterprises have access to services through ICTs. The evolving e-government framework has the following stages, according to the Connectivity Agenda:

1. Information made available to the public through web pages
2. Basic interaction between the agencies and citizens
3. Advanced interaction between the agencies and citizens
4. Transforming the agencies so they can offer better and timely services
5. Citizen participation in public decisions.

Although stages one and two – information and basic interaction with the public – have been achieved in most of the government agencies, stages three, four and five have not been achieved yet. The goal is to reach them by 2010.

The Connectivity Agenda has made a great effort for all Colombian municipalities to have a website where citizens can get public information about administrative matters.

If there is an area in which Colombia has stood out it has been e-government. According to an e-government report compiled by Darrell West, professor of public policy and political science at Brown University, amongst 198 countries, Colombia leapt from 58th place in 2007 to 22nd in 2008. According to this report, Colombia is the third highest-ranked country in Latin America, behind only Brazil (10th) and Mexico (19th) – and even ahead of Chile (26th), which is widely recognised for its leadership in e-government (West, 2008).

Mobile phones

A good way to provide internet access is mobile phones. According to reports from the Ministry of Communications, the number of subscribers leapt from 2,256,801 in 2000 to 10,400,000 in 2004, 21,849,993 in 2005 and 33,941,118 in 2007. The number of mobile subscribers does not match the number of users, since one person can have more than one subscription. Still, what is happening at a national level and especially in rural areas shows that, thanks to mobile phones, the country has made steady progress in closing the gap between people with and without access to phones. Although in 2007 the sector did not grow at the same pace as previous years, it was quite dynamic and experienced the greatest profits given the broad range of services on offer, such as text messaging, audio, photos, images, etc. Technological advances also improved quality and allowed users to have more information saved on their mobile phones. However, connection to the internet via a mobile phone is still very expensive and not affordable for the great majority of users.

Another limitation is mobile content itself. This usually consists of publicity about products. Cultural or educational content or news is not yet available.

4 www.agenda.gov.co

Policy and legislation

National ICT Plan

The Colombian government has drawn up the National ICT Plan 2008-2019. Its goal is for all Colombians to be able to use ICTs in order to increase social integration and competitiveness by 2019.

The plan includes impact programmes for different social groups and sectors, focusing on issues like regulation, business competitiveness, and programmes for improving the appropriation and usage of ICT in key sectors.

Perhaps one of the most important aspects of the plan is the announcement made by the government of transforming the present Ministry of Communications into a Ministry of Information and Communication Technology, and a redistribution of responsibilities among different government agencies.

ICT Bill

In order to regulate technological and institutional convergence, the Ministry of Communications submitted an ICT Bill, which was already approved by the House of Representatives in June 2008, and will be discussed in the Senate in upcoming sessions. This bill defines the principles and concepts of the information society and the organisation of ICTs in Colombia.

With this bill the transformation of the present Ministry of Communications into a Ministry of Information and Communication Technology will be approved and a new agency will be created: the National Spectrum Agency, which will deal with all issues related to radio spectrum and its regulation.

eVision Colombia (2019)

This vision includes a strategy called “Moving forward towards a better informed society”. The strategy holds the following promise: “In 2019, [access to] information will be a right...which in turn will promote economic development, social well-being, social equality and democracy. ICTs will be a means to access information freely, at a reasonable cost and from anywhere in the country.”

The fundamental principles guiding this vision are content generation, dissemination of information, usage of information, and standards and best practices, within an institutional and regulatory framework that includes incentives. The 2019 framework also emphasises developing ICT infrastructure.

Action steps

In 2007 the national government issued a decree on technological convergence, which aims to attract new investors, scale up telecommunications infrastructure, and promote the development of new services. According to this decree, the biggest operators are required to offer connectivity access to third parties so they can also provide telecommunication services to the public. Because of the possibilities of convergence, operators have made significant financial investments

in new networks and platforms. The country has also seen the merger of several companies and the takeover of small local companies by multinationals. One of the risks of these developments is that the telecommunication services of the whole country are being left in the hands of a few foreign companies. This situation needs to be monitored.

The ICT Bill aims to promote free competition among providers in the hope of reducing costs for the citizens and to catalyse widespread access to ICT services similar to that seen with mobile phones. However, there remain regions untouched by the market, where people's income is extremely low. In these regions it is important to have ICT access strategies led by the national or local government. This is the reason why telecentres continue to be a feasible and important alternative, and should be actively supported by civil society. ■

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GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2008 is the second in a series of yearly reports critically covering the state of the information society from the perspectives of civil society organisations across the world.

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH or **GISWatch** has three interrelated goals:

- **Surveying** the state of information and communication technology (ICT) policy at the local and global levels
- **Encouraging** critical debate
- **Strengthening** networking and advocacy for a just, inclusive information society.

Each year the report focuses on a particular theme. **GISWatch 2008** *focuses on access to infrastructure* and includes several thematic reports dealing with key access issues, an analysis of where global institutions stand on the access debate, a report looking at the state of indicators and access, six regional reports and 38 country reports.

GISWatch 2008 is a joint initiative of the Association for Progressive Communications (APC), the Humanist Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries (Hivos) and the Third World Institute (ITeM).

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2008 Report

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