The São Paulo Telecentres Project: When social innovation met political will

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This case study is about the involvement of RITS (*Rede de Informacão para o Terceiro Setor*) – a Brazilian civil society organisation involved in ICT policy monitoring and advocacy – in setting up community access centres (telecentres) in São Paulo which inspired various policies to roll out telecentres in Brazil.

The São Paulo Telecentres Project was selected for inclusion in this toolkit as a successful example of how practical ICT demonstration at a local level can support national advocacy for policy change. This partnership-based project mobilised policy, investment and technical support leading to the establishment of 128 community-based telecentres. The São Paulo model was based on free public access to facilities and training, community participation in management, free and open source software, and development of the community telecentre as a venue for social organisation.

RITS provided support for the São Paulo telecentres right from the conceptual stage. RITS was instrumental in pioneering new and innovative approaches and ensuring results were widely disseminated. The project has influenced national policies on digital inclusion and free and open source software and has inspired proposals to roll out community telecentres across Brazil.

Background

In 2000 a digital inclusion project called Sampa.org was started in the region of Capão Redondo, one the most impoverished regions in the periphery of São Paulo. Sampa.org's main objective was to build a Network of Communication and Public Information, with a network of public telecentres providing the technological infrastructure. According to its founders, Sampa.org was to be a kind of laboratory for a future proposal for an ICT public policy for the city of São Paulo. It was incorporated into the campaign platform of the Workers' Party (PT) during the municipal elections in São Paulo.

RITS provided support and consultancy to the Sampa.org telecentres from the very beginning. This was part of RITS' active participation in, and initiation of, public policy discussions during 2000 and 2001 in various conferences and workshops. RITS also provided consultancy on technological alternatives and connectivity models during the implementation of the first Sampa.org telecentre. In addition, RITS and Sampa.org developed a project with *info*Dev that ensured the resources for the pilot project. RITS' membership in global and regional networks – such as APC and somos@telecentros – served to catalyse knowledge and collaboration from a range of other experts and organisations which were relevant for the project's success.

The São Paulo Telecentres Project

After winning the elections, the Workers' Party established the Electronic Government Coordinating Committee in 2001, within the administrative structure of the Municipality of São Paulo. This committee was responsible for developing and implementing a digital inclusion project in the city of São Paulo – called the Telecentres Project – which had as one of its references the experience of Sampa.org.

In January 2001, at the beginning of the São Paulo Telecentres Project, the strategy was

to create 50 centres for public and free access to the internet. In June 2001, the first community telecentre of this project was launched in Cidade Tiradentes, in the east zone of São Paulo. In three years, the number of telecentres reached 128, serving an estimated 500,000 people per month. The São Paulo Telecentres Project was recognised inside and outside Brazil for its massive scope.[2]

In most of the communities where the telecentres were installed, they were the only option for the population to access information and culture. The lack of public libraries, movie theatres and public spaces for popular art exhibitions and events made the telecentres a hub for people who were searching for leisure and arts. The telecentres became spaces not only where ICTs were used, but also where music groups gathered, popular dance presentations were performed, and so on. The telecentres were also perceived as a safe place for children and youth: parents often said that they felt relieved to know their children had a place to go during the day, instead of loitering on the streets in communities where the presence of drug trafficking is a permanent reality.

In each community telecentre, twenty computers were installed and connected to the internet through a high-speed connection. Each telecentre was also equipped with two printers and a package of free and open source software and other applications. The use of free software – one of the central policies of the project – led to a significant reduction of costs in the implementation of the telecentres. The telecentres worked with thin client computers (machines without hard drives connected to a Linux server), which lowered the costs of installation and operation. Since these machines operate without having a hard drive, the equipment is significantly cheaper: for each group of twenty computers connected in a network, one server performs the hard drive services for all the machines.

The goal of the São Paulo Telecentres Project was to be the gateway for communities to the internet and to the online services and information provided to citizens by the municipal, state and federal governments. The telecentres were open to the public for at least twelve hours a day. Each centre had two staff members to help users to use the computers and the internet and to provide orientation to online public services.

Each telecentre was run by a steering committee, comprising representatives of the City Hall, NGOs and social movements of the region. These included civil society organisations such as women's groups, Afro-Brazilian organisations, environmental organisations and cultural groups such as the hip-hop movement. These groups often defined the profile of each telecentre. The steering committee was also responsible for defining priorities, developing sustainability strategies and programming activities for the telecentre. The effective participation of community representatives on the steering committees promoted a feeling of ownership of the telecentres among the community. This meant, in many cases, the consolidation of the legitimacy of the telecentre as a public space, leading to concern among the community for the maintenance and protection of the equipment.

The City Hall of the Municipality of São Paulo was responsible for providing the equipment (computers and printers), furniture and office supplies; hiring services for the maintenance of the equipment; installing the electrical and network systems; and providing a connection to the internet (ADSL standard or higher).

RITS was responsible for the management and training of telecentre staff. It also provided training and technological support for different activities, including an online platform used by each telecentre to register the users' profiles and manage the frequency of use. RITS also organised events for telecentre staff in order to raise awareness on social and political issues and promote discussion. A good example of this kind of activity was the GEM (Gender Evaluation Methodology) training that was offered

2   This project, as it was conceived, ended in 2004, when another political party was elected to the government of the city of São Paulo. The telecentres continued to exist, but some of their key characteristics were discontinued – such as the use of free software, their governance structure, and in some cases, even the support of City Hall to sustain connectivity and maintenance of their equipment.

in 2004 in collaboration with the APC WNSP (Women's Networking Support Programme).

Review of the project

After three years of working on the São Paulo Telecentres Project, RITS conducted a field study to understand more about the profiles, preferences, activities and expectations of the telecentre users. The 2004 RITS study also looked at people in the communities who did not fully participate in the project, to learn about their expectations, demands and priority interests.

This study provided interesting, although not entirely surprising, results. It showed that there was a small difference between the percentage of men and of women using the telecentre – the majority were men, although the difference was only 2.64 percentage points. However, there was a significant gap in the age of users: as high as 70.22% of the users were under 19 years old, and the number of elderly people as a user group was statistically insignificant. The average proportion of users over 60 years of age was less than 1%. A typical user profile would be a male teenaged student attending secondary school. The minority user group would be retired women over 60 years old. There was no record in the study of any woman over 64 years of age using a telecentre.

The importance of telecentres for people in the communities was undeniable: 98.26% of the respondents stressed the relevancy of the project while 63.04% assessed that the telecentre was very important for the community. Less than 1% of respondents were negative about the importance of the telecentres. The importance of telecentres in the lives of the users was confirmed by the frequency with which people went to the telecentre: 25.7% of respondents went to the telecentre every day.

The RITS study showed that the telecentres were seen as public spaces where the learning possibilities offered by formal education could be expanded. When asked about their main activities in the telecentres, 25.03% of respondents said that they looked for information and did online research. When asked about activities that they would like to see offered in telecentres, the responses reaffirmed the vision of the telecentre as a space for learning: the majority (52.88% of all respondents) wanted to have access to courses, mostly focused on computing and the internet. Orientation and preparation for the labour market was another theme that emerged from the study. The last question on the survey asked users to complete the sentence, "To me, the telecentre is a place where I can..." The most frequent response was "learn" (26.39%), followed by "have access to information" and "take part in leisure activities".

It is clear that these spaces open up a new horizon for learning, where access to information gives new meaning to the day-to-day life of people and communities. But that is not enough. More is needed for telecentres to be fully perceived as public spaces for social and political participation, rather than only as an alternative for finding information and learning. Reaching this level of awareness of the potential of ICTs requires a focused approach and sensitisation on new possibilities for the exercise of citizenship. The São Paulo Telecentres Project demonstrated the importance of offering, together with ICT training and tools, efforts for raising awareness of the use of ICTs for the empowerment of communities, where communication must be presented not only as a tool, but as a fundamental right. This experience has shown that an effective strategy fosters the self-esteem and empowerment of people and communities through the use of ICTs. It values the knowledge, history and language of local communities to raise awareness of users' rights and opportunities to exercise citizenship.

Impact and expansion

The São Paulo Telecentres Project has inspired many other digital inclusion initiatives in Brazil which are being implemented by governments (federal, state and municipal), NGOs and the private sector. As a result, there are currently 5,100 telecentres according to the Ministry of Planning's National Digital Inclusion Observatory records, and this does

not cover all initiatives of this kind in the country. While Brazil still does not have a national policy for digital inclusion, we can say that the experience of telecentres in São Paulo has inspired and is still a reference for many government initiatives and local public policies.

The São Paulo Telecentres Project did not have a formal strategy but has been influential in national meetings,[3] in the media, and among NGOs, local governments and private companies. As a result there has been growing awareness of the possible uses of ICTs for local development as well as an increasing perception about the eagerness of poor populations – especially young people living in peripheries and *favelas* (slums) – to have access to the internet. This has particularly been the case with governments and private enterprises and has led to an increase in so-called digital inclusion projects.

The diversity of initiatives in this area can be considered positive in some respects. However, the proliferation of projects without a coordinated effort to analyse their impact, outline lessons learned, and formulate basic criteria for "digital inclusion" has led to a disjointed movement all over the country. For example, in many initiatives access to the internet is the only objective, with no concern for the development of users' capacities for its meaningful and critical use. In some projects and programmes, the exclusive use of proprietary software leads to dependence on commercial monopolies. Another issue is that the great majority of digital inclusion initiatives are still focused on urban areas, mainly those which are already served by the market, especially in terms of broadband services. A national policy on digital inclusion could inform Brazil's criteria, objectives and strategy for effective democratisation of the internet in the country.

Today there are twenty digital inclusion projects being implemented by the federal government within its Programme for Digital Inclusion. The objectives of this programme are:

1)   To develop a national digital inclusion public policy

2)   To increase significantly the proportion of citizens with access to ICTs, especially among the poorer populations

3)   To integrate and coordinate the different initiatives for digital inclusion conducted by the federal administration

4)   To promote the creation – by municipal governments, state governments, the private sector and civil society – of public spaces for community access to the internet

5)   To prioritise the use of free software.

A proposal for the federal government to support the expansion of community telecentres as a vehicle for digital inclusion is currently being discussed. This could see the creation of about 10,000 new telecentres throughout Brazil – leveraging the model inspired by the experience of the São Paulo Telecentres Project. This proposal is one of the outcomes of a process, started in 2000, of ongoing discussion on digital inclusion projects between governments and civil society – a process which is far from ideal, but is slowly maturing. One concrete outcome of this dialogue is the use, since 2003, of free and open source software in all federal ministries and federal government agencies as an official guideline of the Technical Committee for the Implementation of Free Software in Public Administration. This was largely inspired by the experience of the telecentres in São Paulo.

Within this process of dialogue, RITS has been constantly advocating for the need for coordination among different governmental projects and policies, as well as among

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[3]   For example, the annual National Workshop for Digital Inclusion, presently organised by the Ministry of Planning. For more information, see: oficina.inclusaodigital.gov.br

academia, the private sector and civil society. RITS' experience in the São Paulo Telecentres Project has proved how successful a participatory process can be.

Brazil has a long way ahead until broadband access to the internet is universal and until its use translates into human and social development. There are a considerable amount of resources in Brazil's Fund for the Universalisation of Telecommunication Services (FUST)[4] that could be used for the implementation of a national strategy for leveraging ICTs for human development in the country. There are several successful cases – such as the one described in this case study – that can serve as a reference. There are also many institutions (NGOs, local governments, public and private companies, educational institutions, etc.) that are prepared to collaborate and participate.

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[4] Created in 2000, after the privatisation of the telecommunications system in Brazil, this fund is composed of 1% of the gross operational income of the companies that provide fixed telephony. Today this fund contains more than USD 3 billion, which has never been used for the universalisation of telecommunications services. Instead, it has been used to achieve Brazil's financial surplus objectives. For more information on the FUST see: www.mc.gov.br/telecomunicacoes/fust