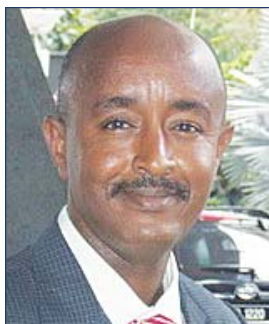


Thai Telecentre Movement: A Case Study of North East Thailand



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A family at a telecentre

Photo Credit: CCDKM

Background, current situation and policies

According to UNESCO (2005), the concept of telecentre in Thailand started during 2001-2002, when the Office of Non-Formal Education Commission implemented a 'Literacy Development through Computer Software' project in two villages in Thailand: Ban Samkha of Lampang Province and Ban Bomagrood of Ratchaburi Province, to develop a prototype software package for literacy and post-literacy education, and to help the creation of Community Learning Centres (CLCs). The CLC initiative evolved into a telecentre movement in 2006, and eventually became a national telecentre project in 2007, spearheaded by the Ministry of Information and

Communication Technology (MICT). As a result, from 2007 to 2009, the MICT established 260 telecentres (20 in 2007, 40 in 2008, and 200 in 2009) of which 82 telecentres are in the North East of Thailand, 62 in the North, 46 in the South, 44 in the Central and 23 in the East of Thailand.

The MICT sponsors the Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), training of operators and operational costs for a period of one year, after that telecentres are expected to be self-sustainable and operators are expected to promote people participation, training and enable people to become ICT literate.

Though Thailand telecentre initiative is young, yet, MICT's effort in making

the ICT services available across the country has enabled the initiative mature rapidly and has enabled many people to join the Information Society. As the speed of creating access continues at this pace, the issue of access to ICTs will not be a matter for concern. But, the main difficulty will be ensuring sustainability and proper utilisation of the services. So, by the 4th year of the Thai telecentre's operation, the MICT as well as its partners have designed more holistic and collaborative activities aimed at the sustainability of Thai telecentres. Some of the outstanding policies and activities are as follows: supporting more community trainers; strengthening the network all over the country as well as at the global level, aimed at best practices and resource sharing, especially among the regional network centres; creating a support database to help each other as also driving the policy matters to this end; supporting more social network systems to be used for development and communication purposes to continue its development services in community e-commerce; creating more systematic Thai Telecentre Academy; and creating the Thai Telecentre Fund, etc.

Progress of north east Thailand regional telecentre movement

Out of 300 telecentres in Thailand, 82 telecentres are in the northeast region. The first four telecentres were established in 2007, 11 telecentres in 2008, and 67 telecentres were opened in 2009. Some of the prototype models for this region are outstanding and could get along well with other regions. Some models found in the north east areas are as follows:

1) Wat Sakate telecentre: Youth-based telecentre

Wat Sakate telecentre, a youth-based telecentre was established inside a temple, located at a strategic location in Kaset Wisai district, near the fresh food market.

The idea of this telecentre was based on the personal initiative of the temple Abbot (Phra Athikain Wchience Phasuko). He started it with his personal funds in July 2004, to open and support an ICT centre inside the temple. The Abbot's vision was to:

- Divert the youth and the children from playing games at cyber cafés;
- Create a learning environment through ICTs; and
- Attract more people to join the temple, as in his view, once people enroll in the telecentre, they will also find time to observe the temple and learn the way of life, instead of just going out to people for preaching.

Initially, the teenagers avoided the ICT centre in the temple, but two years later, in 2006, they started coming regularly to the telecentre and today they are the managers of the centre. They educate people from all age groups to use these ICT tools and encourage others to join the centre. When the MICT started the telecentre project in 2007, the Abbot became interested. He invited an MICT delegation to visit the temple to observe and decide whether and how to support the ICT centre. The MICT was impressed with their findings and approved the project and the Wat Sakate telecentre was opened on August 2007.

The Wat Sakate telecentre is considered as an extra large (XL) centre because it accommodates 21 computers. The centre is open every day from 7 am to 9 pm; the average users per day are 30 people during the week day and about 100 people during the week-ends. Users buy a coupon for 10 Baht (US\$0.3) and use the hour as they wish. The majority of the users are below 21 years of age.



A training class in progress inside a telecentre

Photo Credit: CCDKM



Map Credit: Google Maps

2) Wat Potikaram: Community-based cum home worker-based telecentre

Wat Potikaram is a community-based cum home worker based telecentre, because the centre accommodates a variety of small scale enterprises dealing in local products, such as silk. The centre promotes business development and also has a local cooperative bank managed by the community. Wat Potikaram started its development activities in 1995, with secretarial skill training. In 1999, they started using computers, and added dress making skills, bee farming, fish farming, rice farming, cooperative bank and a shop to their repertoire of services offered. The centre has also a kindergarten and a sauna. Like Wat Sakate, the Wat Potikaram is a temple-based telecentre, but with a business development background. The centre was opened in August 2008.

Though the main customers of the centre are the local enterprises, they also encourage youth through their schools and adults from all walks of life, as well as out of school youth. They provide weekly training on computer and Internet use and they also invite external trainers to train users and staff on website development. The Wat

Potikaram telecentre is considered an extra-large (XL) centre, because it accommodates 21 computers.

The centre operates seven days a week from 7:00 am to 7:00 pm and average users are about 30 during the weekdays and over 100 during weekends. The centre charges 10 Baht (US\$0.3) per hour as service charge, except, for students working on their assignments using the centre as a computer laboratory and training is offered free of charge.

3) Khonsawan telecentre: School based telecentre

Khonsaw telecentre is a school-based telecentre with a mission 'to expose the school children to ICT knowledge and skills'. When the MICT started the telecentre initiative, they submitted a request to them. On approval, they started the centre in August 2008. The telecentre manages and sustains itself through the use of the school infrastructure and does not have any plan of introducing user fee. The management believes that the telecentre should serve the people since the centre is situated in an institution that offers free education. The telecentre management believes that

The telecentre conducts free basic training for the local communities, and charges some fee – 100 Baht to cover the training material and refreshment costs for participants coming from outside and those requiring advanced training in ICT. To date, the centre has awarded certificates to 50 participants

they have made advances in building social capital and raising the level of ICT knowledge and skills of their community through basic and advanced trainings. The telecentre conducts free basic training for the local communities, and charges some fee – 100 Baht to cover the training material and refreshment costs for participants coming from outside and those requiring advanced training in ICT. To date, the centre has awarded certificates to 50 participants, who attended three days advanced ICT training, and also trained over 200 community members for free in basic ICT skills.

Khonsawan telecentre is considered a small (S) centre on the MICT scale, and is open seven days a week and operates for nine hours a week – Monday through Friday (4 pm to 5 pm), and Saturday and Sunday (8 am to 12 noon). Average number of users are about 15 per day on weekdays and on weekends, there are about 60 users. On weekdays, users are students and they come to the centre soon after school hours. Unlike the weekdays, during



Students learning computer

Thailand ICT infrastructure and Use (2008)

1 Name	Kingdom of Thailand
2 Area	513,120 sq km
3 Capital	Bangkok
4 Population	67.39 million
5 GDP, Total (B US\$)	245.35
6 Main (fixed) telephone lines	7024.0 (000s)
7 Main (fixed) telephones line per 100 inhabitants	10.42
8 Mobile Cellular subscriptions	62000.0 (000s)
9 Ratio of Mobile Cellular subscriptions to fixed telephone lines	8.8:1
10 Internet subscribers	Not available
11 Internet users	16100.0 (000s)
12 Internet users per 100 inhabitants	23.89
13 Broadband subscribers	950.0 (000s)
14 Broadband subscribers per 100 inhabitants	1.41

Source: International Telecommunication Union, Country Data by Region (2008), Accessed on 27 March 2010, available at <http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ICTEYE/Indicators/Indicators.aspx#>

weekends its the secondary school students, government employed, and other community members who visit the centre. The Khonsawan school, which was established 86 years ago, has over 250 students (ranging from grade one to nine), and aims to bring more parents on board to make them ICT literate. The centre employed a variety of strategies to promote its services among the community including community radio broadcasts in the initial stage, interpersonal communication, peer pressure, and encouraging students to bring their parents, parents to bring their neighbours and neighbours to bring other neighbours. Though students seem happy with the prospect and are encouraged to pressurise their parents to learn ICT, yet, some students complain that they experience parents' resistance to ICT after their first exposure.

4) Ta-ong telecentre: Local administrative office-based telecentre

Ta-ong community telecentre is situated in the local administrative office, thus, qualifies as a local administration based telecentre. The centre was opened on July 2008 and has trained over 100 people. Of late, the management has noticed that users are learning from each other;

a phenomenon that has reduced the number of people availing the centre's training course. Taking cognizance of this development, the management is thinking about introducing advanced courses in ICT for the community.

Based on our observation, most users are teenagers, a majority of them being boys; the age range of the users according to the register indicates the prominence of 13-18 age group. Nevertheless, the management informed that the students (from primary and secondary schools) constituted about 60% and the rest 40% are community members, government staff, handicapped and illiterate children. Ta-ong telecentre is an extra large centre with 21 computers; the average users per day are about 40; each at least using two hours per day, free of charge. The centre is open 56 hours a week, almost every day including weekends from 8:30 am to 4:30 pm. To promote the telecentre, the management contacted non-formal schools to promote it among the students. They also used community radio and the community announcement centres for generating awareness within the community.

The main strength of the centre lies in its strong leadership. They believe that they are able to be self sustainable

since they have allocated budget for telecentre operation and it is situated in a central location. Its main weaknesses are: a) there are no permanent staff specifically assigned to the centre and b) no land line telecom connection in the area; the nearest connection being about 10 km away. This makes the telecentre rely on expensive wireless connection with antenna, costing them 6,000 Baht (US\$ 180 a month), thereby diverting more funds from the telecentre towards meeting these expenses. In case of a breakdown of the wireless system, the management has to call the company and wait for a technician for about 24-48 hours, without service.

Challenges

Looking at the ongoing developments in the telecentre projects running in the NorthEast: Wat Sakate and Wat Potikaram in Roi et Province as well as, Khonsawan and Ta-ong in Surin Province, it can be said that these telecentres have made some very important breakthroughs towards encouraging people to visit the telecentres and to use the ICT services.

Though each telecentre, has its own unique strengths, the main weaknesses are: lack of holistic and continuous support, especially that of managing the tailor-made activities/intervention that the telecentres need to make. Awareness creation among the community is also something that needs to be looked into. Another question is, how to integrate these ICT tools into the lifestyle of the community in ways that enable the adult population and the local business to derive benefits from the services offered by these telecentres. Once these issues are sorted out, the telecentres will be free to create customised solutions and services for the community they serve which will, in turn, enable the community to derive more benefits from them and become more involved with the telecentres. Currently, all these challenges could be reflected as a whole for the Thai telecentre movement. □