

Connecting Island Communities: A Regional Approach to Supporting the Telecentre Movement in the Pacific

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Abstract

A vibrant telecentre movement is emerging in the Pacific. The telecentres range from community radio initiatives, to networks of e-mail centres that communicate by HF-Radio, to larger VSAT installations. Despite this vibrancy, Pacific telecentre initiatives face a real problem, which is the same old problem faced by the communities in which they are located — isolation. This paper describes the plans and efforts of telecentre stakeholders in the Pacific region to establish PacTOC — the Pacific Online Telecentre Community, a regional approach to support the establishment, sustainability, upscaling and replication of development-oriented community telecentres in the Pacific.

It is widely recognised that shared access points known generically as ‘telecentres’ are, at the present time, the only practical way to deliver basic ICT services to people living on the wrong side of the digital divide. This is especially relevant to Pacific Island communities, and it is against this background that a vibrant telecentre movement is gaining momentum in the Pacific. Community-based telecentres are helping to connect island communities with each other, with their Diaspora communities and the wider world.

Telecentres in the Pacific

In the Pacific, the term ‘telecentre’ is simply taken to mean a “community-based facility equipped with ICT tools”. They may range from community radio initiatives, to low-bandwidth e-mail centres and networks, to high-bandwidth VSAT installations with networked computers, to (most often) some combination of these. Whatever the technical configuration, telecentres are universally directed towards community building, and they achieve this by facilitating increased access to empowering information and more effective and timely communication. They may be located in a range of settings, such as dedicated premises, community centres, schools, community development organisations, or cooperative businesses.

[#] The mission of the Foundation for Development Cooperation (FDC) is to strengthen partnerships for sustainable development and poverty reduction through action research, policy dialogue, advocacy and capacity building. Since 2001, FDC's Information and Communication for Development program has aimed to explore, demonstrate and publicise opportunities to apply information and communication technologies to human development in Asia and the Pacific.

Using this broad definition, examples of Pacific telecentres include:

- community radio initiatives in Papua New Guinea (PNG), Vanuatu and Fiji, each focussing on communication of important public-education messages such as HIV/AIDS
- standalone telecentres located in two community development organisations in PNG
- community-based telecentres in Maori communities of New Zealand
- networks of e-mail centres that communicate between remote communities through short-wave radio. The People First Network of Solomon Islands is the best known telecentre initiative in the Pacific, with 17 e-mail stations linked to an Internet café hub located in the capital, Honiara. A similar network can be found in the outer islands of Yap. The promoter of this initiative uses the paradoxical phrase “the last 100 miles” to describe the telecommunications challenge.
- a network of digital libraries in the schools of Niue (an island nation that boasts free public wireless connectivity throughout)
- an integrated network of telecentres with broadband connectivity scattered throughout the Indigenous communities of the remote northern Cape York of Australia
- an integrated network of Indigenous Knowledge Centres, also in the Cape York region, which are a new way of being ‘library’ in the digital age, through cataloguing stories and artefacts in digital form, by and for Indigenous people
- the Pacific Open Learning Health network, which is an association of telecentres located in the major hospitals of ten Pacific Island countries, dedicated to the ongoing education of health professionals.

Each of these initiatives was represented at the Pacific Telecentre Workshop, which was held in Brisbane, Australia in December 2004. There are, however, numerous other initiatives that were not represented, or which have been instigated since the workshop. Samoa has two major projects underway, a ‘schools online’ project and a network of community telecentres. The government of Fiji’s ITC Services has a telecentre projects program. Tonga is the home of ICT entrepreneurship in the Pacific, with a number of individuals implementing Internet-based businesses and activities.

The Pacific Telecentre Movement — from isolated community to online community

It is a common misconception to think of the Pacific as a homogeneous region of island paradises, with uniform cultures and similar levels of human and infrastructure development. On the contrary, the Pacific region is characterised by diversity. There is little commonality, for example, between an outer-island community in Yap, a highland village in Papua New Guinea, and a Samoan community in urban New Zealand. It makes no more sense to speak of ‘Pacific’ culture than it does to speak of ‘Asian’ culture. With respect to ICT and allied infrastructure, different Pacific Island countries are each at different stages of development.

Take PNG as a case in point. The population of PNG is one of the most heterogeneous in the world. PNG has several thousand separate communities, most with only a few hundred people. The diversity of these communities is illustrated by the local languages. There are more than 700 Indigenous languages and only 350-450 of these are related. The remainder are completely unrelated to all others. Very many of the villages scattered through PNG have no telecommunications services whatsoever although, in the literal sense, jungle drums are telecommunication devices. Some communities are fortunate to have a single HF-radio phone. The larger population centres have basic fixed telephone services and a fortunate few have mobile services. The best connected people in PNG are those from very elite groups who have access to satellite technology. What then is the role of community-based telecentres in PNG?

“It might not look much from the outside, but when you go inside the world is at your fingertips”. This is the catch-cry of a small, community-based telecentre in a town called Wewak, capital of the East Sepik province. The host NGO, HELP Resources, established the telecentre in 2001. HELP needed telecommunications to support its own operations, and the telecentre has become an important tool in its community development work. HELP also saw the opportunity to extend access to this telecommunications facility to the community it serves, and in doing so, the telecentre could also return some funds to the NGO.

When reporting on this initiative at the abovementioned Pacific Telecentre Workshop, the manager of HELP Resources Telecentre lamented that “we are completely isolated from similar activities in the region”. Telecentre initiatives in remote, sparsely populated communities such as those in the Pacific face particular challenges, different from those situated in high population centres. It does not always help that much of the shared learning is coming from the more populous parts of the world. It was this comment, and the similar experience of other participants at the Workshop, that caused the group to propose the establishment of a support network — an online community — through which telecentre initiatives could share ideas and information, resources and skills from within the region. The proposed network was dubbed ‘PacTOC’ — the Pacific Telecentre Online Community.

However, given the cultural and economic diversity of the region and the vast ocean distances between countries and communities, what would lead them to think that such an online community could work?

Pacific regionalism — cooperation within diversity

Notwithstanding the diversity of the Pacific region, with small populations spread over a wide area, it is crucial for Pacific Island Countries to work cooperatively at regional level. While not reaching the extent of European integration, regionalism is nevertheless alive and well in the

Pacific. The Pacific is well served by a number of regional intergovernmental organisations that make up the Council of Regional Organisations in the Pacific (CROP).¹ The ICT sector efforts of these Pacific regional organisations are further supplemented by the regional outposts of various UN agencies.

A commitment to regional cooperation is not, however, restricted to formal inter-governmental organisations. Indeed, there is a groundswell of engagement and activity from a number of less formal regional organisations and networks that are becoming increasingly influential drivers of ICT innovation at all levels. These include the Pacific Islands Chapter of the Internet Society,² the Oceania regional network of the Global Knowledge Partnership (GKP-O),³ and the Pacific-WSIS group. Other non-government organisations that operate at regional level include the Foundation for Development Cooperation (FDC) and the Sasakawa Pacific Island Nations Fund/Digital Opportunity project (PIDO). It is in light of this culture of 'cooperation within diversity' that Pacific telecentre stakeholders were confident that a regional online community could be successful.

Establishing PacTOC

PacTOC was envisioned to be an online resource and knowledge-sharing centre to support the establishment, sustainability, upscaling and replication of development-oriented, community telecentres in the Pacific. It is an inspiring vision, but establishing PacTOC has been a slow process thus far, and we are not there yet. It involves a number of key challenges: community organising (through both electronic and conventional means), the technical ability to develop and maintain tools to support the online interactions of the members of the community, financial resources to support this technical development, and the ability to discern useful content and to be willing and able to share this.

PacTOC has floundered on the third of these challenges. The financial resources needed to support the development of a sophisticated online platform were not available to the PacTOC stakeholders, even with the commitment of organisations such as FDC, GKP-O, PIDO and UNESCO New Zealand. The stakeholders want something more than just another ICT4D website from which they can download yet more oversized PDF documents.

Thankfully, 'great minds think alike'. The International Development Research Centre (IDRC), which has been involved in telecentre initiatives all over the world for many years, also realised there was need for regional support of otherwise isolated telecentre initiatives. IDRC has established a program called 'telecentre.org', which is being generously funded by the Microsoft Corporation. The aim of telecentre.org is to "create a rich and resilient online ecosystem within the international telecentre movement by creating, strengthening and connecting regional

network web sites around the world that are in the business of supporting telecentre operators". This aim coincides exactly with that of PacTOC.

The final piece in this puzzle was put in place by the Executive Director of GKP, who realised that PacTOC would be a likely 'client' of the telecentre.org project. IDRC is a fellow member of GKP, and the formal connection was made at the recent GKP annual meeting in Cairo. Pacific telecentre stakeholders will now be able to leverage IDRC's online community development efforts and thereby reduce the cost of developing PacTOC, which has been the major obstacle to its development.

The remaining tasks for the establishment of PacTOC include:

- undertaking a sub-regional training program to empower selected Pacific nationals to be 'telecentre champions' and to undertake participatory consultations regarding PacTOC. It is envisaged that training will be held in three geographic centres: (i) for Palau, FSM, Marshall Islands, Nauru and Kiribati; (ii) for PNG, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu; and (iii) for Fiji, Cook Islands, Niue, Samoa, Tonga and Tuvalu. The goal is to train at least one national from each country, and more from the larger population countries, as travel costs allow.
- facilitating a coordinated program of national consultations and information gathering, utilising the telecentre champions mentioned above. The purpose of this activity is to populate the PacTOC environment with resources and people.
- launch of PacTOC
- monitoring and evaluation.

Conclusion

Improvements in telecommunications services and information technology now provide increasing opportunities for Pacific Island Countries to overcome the barriers of distance, remoteness and diversity. Community telecentres are helping to connect island communities with each other, with their Diaspora communities and with the wider world. However, without some form of ongoing coordination and support, these initiatives are likely to continue to struggle as isolated entities. PacTOC, which is founded on the willingness of Pacific Islanders to cooperate and to support community across the oceans, will be a vital support tool for telecentre initiatives throughout the region.

¹ CROP is an inter-organisational consultative process that aims to prevent overlaps or gaps appearing between the programs of its members. Membership includes the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, the Secretariat of the Pacific Community, the Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency, the South Pacific Applied Geoscience Commission, the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme, the South Pacific Tourism Organisation, the University of the South Pacific, the Pacific Islands Development Programme, the Fiji School of Medicine and the South Pacific Board for Educational Assessment. CROP heads of organisations meet once each year, but the main consultative work is done by sectoral working groups. These working groups are responsible for collaboratively working on various regional projects and policy initiatives. For example, the CROP ICT Working Group has shepherded the Pacific Islands ICT Policy and Strategic Plan (PIIPP).

² On a per capita basis, PICISOC is the largest and most active chapter of ISOC.

³ While not the largest of GKP's regional networks, the Oceania network is, arguably, the one with the greatest sense of 'community' among its members.