

IT TECHNOLOGY IN DEVELOPMENT COUNTRY

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the information gap between industrialized and developing countries. In view of this gap, the Dutch Ministry of Development Co-operation decided to finance research aimed at formulating policy recommendations on the removal of bottlenecks preventing or slowing down the growth of electronic information exchange in developing countries. From this research it can be concluded that the major bottlenecks for the application of telematics can be found in the field of technology and its use. The level of technology is influenced by such factors as regulation and infrastructure. The level of use is determined by the capacity of providers and the demand in the 'South'. However, also the economic and socio-cultural situation has a large impact on using telematics. To bridge the information technology gap, local governments, post and telecom organization, user groups from industries and social institutes, international organizations and donor agencies should liaise in development activities and supporting projects.

Introduction

Over the past decade a rapid development has taken place in the field of information and communication technologies. As the richer part of the world is now entering the 'Information Age', it becomes clear that especially for developing countries it is hard to keep up with all these innovations.

In developing countries in the South, access to the rapidly expanding information technology is in general restricted to the capital and to organizations

that are active internationally. The advanced mode of access can be called on-line Internet, which is used by these international organizations, like multinationals, embassies and large relief organizations. International communication companies, often even without a local representative usually serve those organizations. It is unlikely that these service providers will expand their services in the South beyond branch offices of multinational firms and international organizations in the near future. Good examples are the Dutch embassies. Their telematics services are provided from Holland, but other organizations are not allowed to use this network. Therefore, such institutions in developing countries are not taken into account in this research.

Alternatives for on-line Internet could be off-line Internet or off-line e-mail with a gateway. Off-line Internet means that, instead of having real-time access, the user calls in to a server, which is connected to the Internet (TOOLnet, 1995, p. 13). When a user only has access to (off-line) e-mail services, it is difficult to get information from the Internet, although not impossible. But even if the technology is sufficient, the use of telematics can be restricted because of language barriers, legal stipulations or other factors excluding the population from the 'information economy', resulting in an information gap between the industrialized and the developing countries.

This information gap is even more severe also because traditional sources of information and communication cannot be accessed properly. For example, university libraries are poorly stocked, and remote hospitals cannot access information which could answer medical questions. To a lesser extent, small and medium enterprises, public services and small NGOs also experience information and communication problems.

In view of this growing gap, the Dutch Ministry of Development Co-operation (DGIS) decided to finance research called 'Bridging the Information Gap

between North and South, the role of Development Aid'. The project aimed at formulating policy recommendations for Dutch development organizations, in particular DGIS, on the removal of bottlenecks preventing or slowing down the growth of electronic information exchange in developing countries.

This article addresses the question of what could be done to improve the application of information technology in developing countries. After a brief description of the research project, an overview is presented of the research results. Selected findings of field studies are included to exhibit the current situation in developing countries. In a discussion the different factors affecting the application are reviewed. The conclusions propose a number of actions that could be undertaken to accelerate the provision and application of information technology in developing countries.

Section snippets

Research project

The research project consisted of three major components. First a quantitative study of the present status of telematics in 20 developing countries was executed. The 20 countries were selected on presence of DGIS, geographical position and presence of local contacts. Moreover, low income countries as well as some middle income countries were included. In this way, knowledge and experiences from the more developed countries in the South can be transferred to other countries in this region.

Results

From the quantitative research a telematics profile was developed, based on actual telematics status (Advanced, Intermediate or Lagging) and on development potential (High, Medium or Low potential). Regarding the actual telematics status, two main groups of factors indicated the degree of implementation of telematics in a country: infrastructure and market factors. The infrastructure concerns both

telephone (quantity as well as quality) and informatics (computers and modems), as both are

Technology

Several factors influence the level of technology (i.e. full Internet or no telematics).

From the country studies it appeared that regulation often hampers the implementation of telematics. If it is not allowed to provide telematics in one way or another, it will hardly be possible to improve the current situation although some times it is possible to do so. For example, in Zimbabwe the post and telecommunication organization (PTO) had a monopoly on all kinds of telephone services, including

Use

The level of use is also determined by several factors. The capacity of the providers is an important factor for example. It can be concluded from the country studies that the telematics sector consists of small providers, making them rather vulnerable. Most of the time only one person has the responsibility for the connectivity services. Besides the capacity of the providers, the quality of the services can also be very low.

Secondly, the demand in the South for telematics is limited compared

Regional differences

Not only a gap between North and South exists, but also the situation between countries in the South differs. In Burkina Faso for example, the market is limited to the university, some development organizations, international institutions and western organizations. Costa Rica, by contrast, has a high use of Internet-facilities. This can be explained by the fact that relatively more international and service-oriented organization are located there. Those kinds of organization need in general

Conclusions and recommendations

In general, it can be said that the application of telematics in developing countries is poorly developed. Especially Africa seems to be a marginalised continent. Many countries have only access to the Internet in the capital, or no access at all. However, most of the time e-mail is possible. Reasons for this poor situation can be found in the field of technology and use.

In the field of technology, the strict regulation in many countries and the lack of infrastructure form the major constraints

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