

## **ICT Telecentre: new model of social development for rural communities in Thailand<sup>1</sup>**

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### *Digital gap: the important factor interrupting social development*

Like other developing countries, Thailand has a number of social problems damaging citizen in assorted dimensions and one of important troubles happening to Thai society right now is the difference between people living in rural and urban areas. The factor playing a noteworthy role on such difference is the level of accessibility to information and communication technology [ICT]. Basically, people staying in urban areas or big cities can easily access to ICT while those living in rural ones cannot. That incident is what we call “digital gap” or “digital divide”.

The situation of digital gap is somehow different from other social problems because not many people can be aware of it. Generally, when talking about digital, people will think about computer and the internet which are considered to be very far away from rural and remote communities. However, without the knowledge and skill of ICT, children are risky to be suffered from a number of social troubles, such as human trafficking and sexual businesses which are usually expanded by the internet.

In Thailand, the government has recognized the importance of digital gap for more than decade. There are a number of organizations attempting to collaborate for addressing digital gap of people living in rural and remote areas. One of the government agencies playing the major role for eliminating the digital gap among people is Ministry of Information and Communication Technology [MICT]. In 2007, MICT promulgated the project of ICT Telecentre Establishment. The project’s objective is to provide ICT knowledge and skills to communities located in rural and remote areas through ICT Telecentre established all over the country.

### *ICT Telecentre: new solution addressing the incident of digital gap*

ICT Telecentre in Thailand is different from one promoted in other countries, it is not only computer lab or internet café but the learning center as well. In the beginning, the MICT was the major agency creating the ICT Telecentre, but the community members themselves will take care of ICT Telecentre afterwards. Therefore, the ultimate goal of ICT Telecentre establishment project is to encourage communities to have self-organization on ICT Telecentre management until it can be the autonomous organization.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is published in Graduated Volunteer Institute Journal, Thammasat University (January – June 2012)

To make ICT Telecentre independent, communities need to have the strong networking and partnership which is basically combined non-business sectors [NGOs, GOs, and CBOs] and business sectors together. By strong networking and partnership, ICT Telecentre operators who are fundamentally community members and volunteer to work for the centre, will be able to write the business plan and prepare for any situations unexpectedly happen in the centre. Moreover, the effective cooperation can also bring about the adequate revenue coming from local products selling or computer and the internet using fee and it will then make ICT Telecentre be able to survive.

In Thailand, some ICT Telecentre is located in temples, ethnic villages and even military camp and the Tecentre operators are monks, ethnic people and soldiers themselves. According to the book “ICT for Rural Development”, a number of interesting stories of ICT Telecentre all over Thailand was written and some selective cases are narrated more as follows:



#### Wat Chan ICT Telecentre, Chiangmai province

[Resource: <http://www.thaitelecentre.org/main/index.php/component/content/article/54-2010-11-24-09-36-30/253---ict-->]

In Chiangmai [province in the northern region of Thailand], by the information technology provided in the ICT Telecentre located at Ban Wat Chan [Wat Chan Temple], group of gangsters can change their life in the better way. Dew – the boy who used to be the member of street gang in Chiangmai decided to visit Ban Wat Chan ICT Telecentre by the advice of his grandmother. Gradually, by the suggestion of ICT Telecentre’s operators, Dew learnt about how to appropriately use computer and the internet and he finally found that it is more pleasant than driving motorcycle and fight against other gangs as he used to do with his friends. Afterwards, Dew started persuading his friends to visit ICT Telecentre and attend the ICT and computer training conducted by ICT Telecentre’s operators. Presently, the new hope of Dew and his friends is to be computer and IT specialists. Without ICT Telecentre, Dew and a number of teenagers would not know what they are interested in and change their life in the better way.



### Bangprieng ICT Telecentre, Samutprakarn province

[resource: [http://www.thaiaseanhomeworkers.org/th/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=68:2010-10-04-11-21-24&catid=34:2009news&Itemid=53](http://www.thaiaseanhomeworkers.org/th/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=68:2010-10-04-11-21-24&catid=34:2009news&Itemid=53)]

In Samutprakarn [province in the central region of Thailand] 5 years ago, small public schools located in rural area of this province were encountering the problem of teacher shortage. Mr. Soravee Banluesup, teacher at Bangprieng School, decided to submit the request form to MICT for establishing the ICT Telecentre inside Bangprieng School in order to replace teachers by online learning class provided by the internet. The consideration of Mr. Soravee could support a number of students to access to the curriculum as same as others studying in schools located in urban areas. Consequently, by online learning attendance, students of Bangprieng Schools got higher scores for annual examination. With online learning class, both students and teachers had a valuable option to learn and teach.

According to the two cases described above, ICT Telecentre effectively provides people option to develop their life and social status. However, the extent of beneficiary does not limit to merely students or youngsters, but all group of community members; especially, vulnerable and marginal people, such as women, people with disability [PWD], older people, illiterate people and even ethnic minorities. Those basically cannot access to social welfares offered by the government or any relevant organizations; therefore, by vocational training, computer training and the internet connection provided ICT Telecentre, they can consequently enhance their quality of life, economic status and social status. At the same time, with higher income and job opportunity, the dilemma of social exclusion and discrimination can be also eliminated.

#### *ICT Telecentre and the role of vulnerable people's development*

In Thailand, disadvantaged community members cannot easily find the full-time and permanent jobs as ordinary ones can do. Generally, they are daily labors, home-based workers and some work as agriculturists with low monthly income. Without enough revenue, it is impossible to fulfill basic need and welfare; for instance, food, health care, accommodation and even education. Vulnerable people in Thailand are hence suffered from problematic circle and it is difficult to get out from such loop.

By ICT Telecentre, home-based workers in rural communities of Thailand are able to improve their life and create additional income. Besides home-based workers themselves, the benefit gaining from ICT Telecentre is also distributed to their family members and all community members. According to the research done by HelpAge International [2011], it

reveals that the context of ASEAN, older people living in rural areas cannot access the social welfares and services provided by the government. The same research also analyzed that the community does not need to merely wait for the public social welfare because the social welfares for older people can realize everywhere by community cooperation.

In this case, ICT Telecentre can play an important role to enhance the quality of life of senior people in the community, because when community members have enough income, they will not leave their families in order to look for job opportunities in other areas; especially, for women who basically take care of other family members. The outstanding story of successful home-based worker after visiting ICT Telecentre is the case of Mrs. Saiyud Poonsawat, ICT Telecentre's operator at Bangpu School, Samutprakarn.



Mrs. Saiyud Poonsawat and the doormats her home-based worker group made.

[Resource: [http://s278.photobucket.com/albums/kk89/sorave/otop/bangpoo\\_pattana/?action=view&current=DSCF9920.jpg](http://s278.photobucket.com/albums/kk89/sorave/otop/bangpoo_pattana/?action=view&current=DSCF9920.jpg)]

The relationship between Mrs. Saiyud and ICT Telecentre started when ICT Telecentre's operator invited her to attend the computer training conducted in the centre. Although she did not know anything about computer and the internet and those things are for youngsters in her opinion, Mrs. Saiyud decided to accept the invitation of ICT Telecentre's operator and visited the ICT Telecentre. After attending the class, Mrs. Saiyud understood how to use computer and the internet in the basic level. The trainer introduced her e-commerce and indicated how to post the products to the website. Mrs. Saiyud was encouraged to upload the doormat, her product, to e-commerce website created by the ICT Telecentre's operator and there were a number of customers contacted her for purchasing the doormat she made. The big turning point came when Tesco Lotus, big department store, contact her in order to do long-term contract of purchasing her products.

After all, Mrs. Saiyud became a big promoter for ICT Telecentre, she persuaded her relatives and neighbors to produce doormats and it can give everyone adequate extra income. The life of Bangpu community members is continuously better. With the intention to see the better life of many young people, Mrs. Saiyud then considered to request for ICT Telecentre and voluntary work as ICT Telecentre's operator herself. The ICT Telecentre was located in Bangpu School and it every day provides computer and the internet connection to all people.

### *Conclusion*

In conclusion, with the basic idea of digital gap elimination, ICT Telecentre in Thailand is the new model of social development organization. It is not directly organized by government agencies, although it is initially created by MICT. The ICT Telecentre's main principle is networking, partnership, participation and voluntary system that significantly differs it from non-government organization model. However, ICT Telecentre cannot be included in community-based organization because it is not merely directed by community itself but other relevant organizations as well.

To operate ICT Telecentre, it is required the cooperation of all involved sectors which will share the information in order to figure out how to successfully and sustainably manage the ICT Telecentre. Therefore, each ICT Telecentre in Thailand has different and unique form of management depending on the cultural and social diversity. The ICT Telecentre can be the representative of new trend of people and social development in the present. It is really of people, by people and for people.

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