

Distance education and telecentres public policies: the case of “CASA” project in Mexico

Educación a distancia y políticas públicas en materia de telecentros digitales: el caso del proyecto “CASA” de México

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ABSTRACT

This research focuses on one telecentre project called “CASA”, Mexico, aiming to understand the impact of this type of policy instruments in its target population. What is interesting in the study of the CASA project is its non-governmental origin, having been created by a decentralized public educational center: the University of Guadalajara, Mexico. The project’s goal is not only to bring free Internet access to areas where its use is limited, but also to offer continuing education courses, high school, and graduate studies to marginalized population around Jalisco State. The fieldwork conducted aimed at detailing the use of social technology in one CASA center, and sought to provide supporting analysis relating to the usefulness of telecentres as important factors on improving the quality of life of their users. Final outcomes show a significant contribution of these spaces in improving the social conditions of individuals, although more powerful strategies must be accomplished to achieve broader impacts.

Keywords: Community development, digital divide, telecentres, digital public policies, e-learning.

RESUMEN

El presente trabajo se centra en el estudio del proyecto de telecentros “CASA”, México, con el fin de comprender el impacto de este instrumento de política pública en la población atendida. De especial interés se considera su origen, no gubernamental, en tanto iniciativa generada por un organismo público descentralizado, como es la Universidad de Guadalajara. El objetivo de CASA es permitir el acceso gratuito a Internet en zonas donde su uso es limitado y ofrecer cursos de educación continua, educación media superior, bachillerato, licenciaturas y posgrados a núcleos poblacionales marginados del Estado de Jalisco. El trabajo de campo se enfocó en detallar el uso social de la tecnología en una de sus sedes, buscando aportar elementos de análisis sobre la utilidad de los telecentros digitales como factores de impacto en la mejora de la calidad de vida de sus usuarios. Los resultados muestran un aporte significativo en este último ámbito, aunque aún falta diseñar estrategias para lograr un impacto de mayor amplitud.

Palabras clave: Desarrollo comunitario, brecha digital, telecentros, políticas públicas digitales, educación a distancia.

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INTRODUCTION

TECHNOLOGICAL DISPARITY AND TELECENTRES

Information and communication technologies, such as computers and mobile devices that allow Internet connectivity, have facilitated the lives of millions of people around the world. Nowadays it is easier to engage in commerce, contact family and friends, and study without physically traveling. It is no exaggeration to say that the way of socializing for millions of people has changed with the use of the Internet.

Due to the increasingly critical role of cyberspace in the lives of individuals, since the mid 1990s some public policies have been focused on providing access to these platforms to a greater number of people in addition to training them in the use of these tools (Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, 2000). However, these initiatives have not been effective since the focus is on the means (technology) and not on the final purpose (improving the condition of people through the Internet). Current requirements are more that just connecting to the Internet. Moreover, there is a growing need to provide public services via the Internet, such as paying bills online, distance education, and business consultancy, to name a few. However, the use of information technologies (ICT) to educate, communicate and actively participate in organizations is also becoming increasingly more important. It is therefore essential to establish comprehensive strategies to incorporate new technologies among the population. It might not be prudent to assert that the greatest risks of merely using electronic means to alleviate social disadvantage are more related to the optimism and faith placed on Internet connectivity and infrastructure rather than to the way the skills are disseminated and socially used (Kwaku Kyem, 2010). In the case of telecentres, this omission allows for the project of installing computers in a marginalized community to be completed, albeit this step only being the preamble.

In general terms, public policies that promote the use of technology face the dilemma of whether the Internet can truly improve the lives of citizens by reducing disparities, or if their use creates new inequalities as well as emphasizing preexisting ones. The telecentre project e-Mexico (2000), which continues in part with the name of Digital Community Centers, is an example. Despite being announced as a catalyst for social change, the strong investment in technology whittled down to

an infrastructure program, which paradoxically is still currently being replicated under different names on a local and federal level. The fact that such initiatives do not focus on developing educational skills, particularly of marginalized citizens, ends up benefiting those who already have said ability. In the XXI century, large populations live marginalized centers in the country live marginalized, not only in the digital aspect, but educational, economic and social as well. For decades they have been invisible to governments, and social public policies have been thought of from a remedial or palliative approach. In the area of development, the policies thought have tried to include these people through various strategies; either by providing Internet access via satellite, ATM or electronic kiosks, or by providing computers to people with limited resources. The use of telecentres, or public spaces, for communal access to mitigate the digital divide has been a very frequently used measure, especially in areas of difficult access. These public spaces are characterized mostly by making use of existing infrastructure, i.e. public buildings (usually the City Hall or a school), where an area is refurbished with computers and has access to the network for public use (Robinson, 2004). Although there is no universally accepted definition of what a telecentre is, it is possible to assert that these community spaces are locations that provide access to long-distance communications and information services using, for this purpose, various devices such as telephones, fax machines, computers and Internet (Dey, Newman & Pendergast, 2010).

Telecentres originated on the Scandinavia peninsula in the mid-1980s, and then gradually expanded to Europe and the United States. Today, governments use them as a tool for their inclusion and development policies (Latchem, 2001). Internet access through these spaces has become – and not only in economically advanced countries – an essential element for social and economic improvement of the communities, to the extent that these centers have been considered as the universal panacea to cure the ailments that plague those areas. However, although digital telecentres are an important element for both governmental discourse and actions in Latin America, it is not possible to have accurate data on their impact on development, the reduction of poverty and the marginalization of these communities. Many of the telecentres' ultimate intention is to provide access to the Internet. Others

go further and seek to train their users as well as to facilitate the completion of governmental formalities (i.e. paperwork).

The use of telecentres has been considered a central strategy in digital public policy (Chasquinet Foundation, 2002). The main international organizations, such as the World Bank, the International Development Research Center (IDRC) and UNESCO, have created a series of master documents to promote these areas of access. Similarly, there are several organizations with projects related to the use of telecentres: *Telecentre Organization*, with over 2,600 members mainly from Asia and Africa, and *We are Telecentros (Somos Telecentros)*, focused on Latin America, with more than 3,000 members. In the case of Latin America, we can mention Mexico, with its system of digital community centers totaling over 1,500 (Sánchez, 2014), and Brazil, with 5,013 branches serving 4.6 million users (Berbet, 2014). In Europe, *Telecentre Europe* stands out as an organization with digital community projects throughout the European Union. One can say that this type of strategy is in almost any country, which is not surprising, considering in many cases the access to the Internet was incorporated into existing community centers that focused on marginalized populations, located in areas with difficult access and far from major urban centers. This is the case of some Australian aborigines, members of Eskimo tribes, communities from the Amazon or the indigenous Wurráricas in Mexico.

The importance that government authorities have given shown towards the problem of the digital divide in Mexico has triggered a series of proposals at a local and national level, some of which are described below:

- a) The Centers of Knowledge (2009). Launched in Guanajuato by the state government, they have installed Internet at schools. These spaces are designed as digital libraries where you can have access to multimedia support classes. Its aim is to help marginalized areas of the state Bajío to get a better level of educational training and providing technical, educational and organizational assistance to these communities.
- b) Committee for the Democratization of Informatics (CDI) (2005). Sponsored by a civil international nonprofit organization, its purpose is to create community spaces in low-income communities to implement training programs. It currently manages

22 centers in several federal entities of Mexico: Mexico City (Distrito Federal), State of Mexico, Guanajuato, Hidalgo, Nuevo León, Oaxaca.

- c) Project Dignity and Culture Santa Barbara A.C. (2003). Carried out in Querétaro, it contributes in helping to educate young people in the development of skills and competencies in the area of information technology (computing).
- d) Capacity Development for Internet use in Latin America and the Caribbean (2003). Located in Oaxaca, it promotes local content production by indigenous communities to publish them on the Internet.
- e) SICOM (2002). It is a decentralized agency of the Government of the State of Puebla and is part of their System of Information and Communication. Its areas of intervention are: Computer Science (Informatics), Information and Development Center, Television and Regional Centers.
- f) Digital Community Centers (2006). It is the successive program of the e-Mexico project. Currently, it has 1,500 venues across the country. Its main objective is to expand the Internet access of marginalized populations.
- g) Project CASA of the University of Guadalajara (2003). It is a program that seeks to establish technological infrastructure in marginalized areas of the State of Jalisco, with the ultimate aim of providing distance education to improve the educational level of the population.

CONCERNING THE RESEARCH WORK

The present research focuses on the study of the telecentre project called CASA, conducted by the Virtual University System (UDGVirtual) from the University of Guadalajara, with the ultimate aim being to understand the impact of these instruments of public policies on the population. The main objective of said project is to take upper secondary education (high school, undergraduate and graduate programs) to marginalized areas through distance education. The fieldwork was conducted in one of the centers of the CASA project, located in the community of San Miguel Hidalgo, in the municipality of El Limón, in the State of Jalisco, Mexico. The focus of the research was on detailing the social use of technology and seeks to provide elements of analysis about the usefulness of

digital telecentres as impact factors that improve the quality of life of its users. Perhaps the biggest challenge these telecentres face in their community consolidation is to move beyond mere computer provision and to reach a second stage, where technological tools are used to strengthen and enhance development opportunities of the communities, especially those with high levels of marginalization (Selwyn & Facer, 2010); hence, the importance of qualitative studies that bear witness to the way in which communities assimilate and make use of these spaces (Dey et al., 2010). Therefore, interviews were carried out from a qualitative perspective and applied at both centers of the project in Guadalajara, Jalisco, and in the community center based in San Miguel Hidalgo. Users as well as project managers were interviewed. The purpose of the fieldwork was to determine as to what extent the center had become a factor of change within the community and in what social, educational and economical aspect were the intangible benefits of the project. It was also inquired how this space was seized and assimilated by the users.

THE CONTEXT OF THE CASA PROJECT

The Virtual University System (UDGVirtual) of the University of Guadalajara established the Learning and Academic Services Communities project (*Comunidades de Aprendizaje y Servicios Académicos*), also known as "CASA Universitaria", in 2003. Its purpose is to allow Internet access in marginalized areas of the State of Jalisco and to promote the entry into middle and higher education through distance education. The project currently has over fifty venues, extending from the Wurrárica area to the south coast. They have provided 70,000 services, from technological consulting to information queries (Virtual University System, 2014). However, it fails to specify the number of students enrolled in distance education who use the facilities and who are enrolled in the Virtual University System, since this format of education is very versatile and allows login-in from mobile devices as well as computers with public access.

The CASA centers connect the University of Guadalajara and the community, as is their intention to insure direct support to the needs of training and the updating of users, meanwhile working in collaboration and social self-management. These areas of off-campus

learning are located in marginal areas from which you can access the educational services of the University of Guadalajara. These centers are sustained by community-based organizations, government agencies and / or corporate entities. It aims to:

- i) Offer communities an alternative way to access not only education and training, but also information and communication.
- ii) Be a center to support community development and benefit other social programs, heightening community participation.
- iii) Give the opportunity of higher education studies to people who, for social, economic, cultural and geographical reasons, do not have easy access to university education programs.

CASA University has its own educational model that focuses on learning communities and adjusts to the ways of being, learning to be, knowing, doing, co-existing and entrepreneurial endeavors of the individuals within them, all the while being backed by an adequate institutional management. Instead of imparting a closed and unique curriculum with particular subjects, it proposes diversified and shared curricula, nurtured by knowledge networks. The facilities and equipment are computational tools, educational television, both interactive video and audio conferencing in an attempt that these means:

- Foster and enhance the creation of learning environments that facilitate interaction;
- Simplify the access to information as well as its processing and transmission;
- Provide students access to university services of any kind and level;
- Ease the communication and work of academic networks.

The project modules consist of three physical areas: classroom, multipurpose room and computer room. Designed in a holistic manner to develop educational, training and community development activities, in its facilities there is a wide range of educational materials available, either in print or in cutting-edge technology format including audiovisual. The classroom is used for individual or group counseling and to share a learning process or initiate the organization of a project. The services that the University of Guadalajara offers through CASA University are open studies by means

of distance education: online curriculum courses, diploma courses, leveling classes, postgraduate and continuing education.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Internet is not only a means of communication that provides opportunities for educational and economic development of a region. Also, in certain contexts, it embodies marginalization, exclusion and inequality. As its use expands throughout the world, the differences between countries, communities and individuals who use as well as are excluded from it have increased. This phenomenon is known as the digital divide, defined as the inequity in access to Internet (Castells, 2001). In 2001, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2001) emphasized, “the digital divide is the gap between countries, individuals and companies who may use information technology and communication and those who cannot” (p. 5). It is important to highlight the emphasis that this organization places in the field of technology, leaving aside the social and economic aspect of users. At about the same time, Pippa Norris (2001) noted that “the concept of digital divide has three different aspects: the global division, meaning the one that occurs between industrialized countries and those with underdeveloped infrastructure; the social division, embodied in the differences between rich and poor within each country; and finally, the democratic division, which includes the separation between people who use the resources to get involved and participate in public life [and those who do not]” (p. 5).

While access to the Internet has been increasing worldwide with the passing of time, the digital divide has become more complex. Infrastructure is not the only point of reference for analyzing and determining the state in which population centers are regarding the use of ICT. Delia Crovi (2008) notes that there are five different scenarios associated to the digital divide, referring to the issues concerning technology, economy, technological prowess, as well as the cultural and political capital. The digital divide is also related to the access to opportunities in the educational, economic and social areas. Therefore, it does not refer to a mere classification of individuals with or without digital access, but to the historical continuation of poverty,

inequality and lack of opportunity (Servon, 2002). Expectations of progress of a society are now also being determined by the lack of access to Internet (Loges & Jung, 2001). The use of information technology by a society, far from being a factor of social change and improvement, thus becomes the advocate of marginalization (Sorj & Guedes, 2005). One of the most complex problems of using the concept of digital divide is that the term comprises realities that are not always equal or comparable (Toudert, 2013). It is one thing to only regard the issue of Internet access, and quite another to focus on the territorial marginalization, lack of educational skills, exclusion and censorship of political discourse. For the purpose of this paper, digital divide will comprise all these points:

When regarding the problems of digital divide with policies at telecentres, one should not maintain the popular belief held in the mid-nineties of either only being “connected or unconnected”; instead, it is vital to surpass said popular belief in order to recognize and pay attention to the impact, appropriation, and the use of telecentres (Billon, Marco & Lera-López, 2009). According to Jinqiu, Xiaoming and Banerjee (2006), these spaces can no longer solely rely on infrastructure to be consolidated as important components of support in regional development. The study of the impact of telecentres does not only focus on the lack of Internet or digital devices. It is also related to other social issues, such as territorial exclusion of the community or the low educational levels of its users. Often than not, the problem of social integration, migration and language directly affect this phenomenon, as was the case of some European countries, where a high percentage of young migrants or children of migrants have low education levels and a deficient use of the official language (Mertens & D’Haenens, 2010).

METHODOLOGY

The following data comes from a doctoral research of approximately six years between 2008 and 2013. Between late 2011 and late 2013, nineteen interviews were conducted, not only to the initiators of the CASA project, but also to the inhabitants of the community where one of the program’s centers is located in San Miguel Hidalgo, municipality of El Limón, Jalisco. The main goal was to get firsthand accounts of everyone involved: the program’s board members and trustees, officials of the City Council

directly implicated with the operation of the telecentre and community residents. The users of the project who were interviewed embody two main types of users: the first include students, who are either obtaining their secondary level of education or are already of high school level, both using the classroom option. The second type of user included workers involved in agricultural and fishing related activities. The interviewees gave their

oral consent to use their stories, as long as they were published under a pseudonym. In the case of minors who also agreed to let their opinions be used, teachers were present at the time of the interview. The ratio of respondents can be seen in Table 1.

The selection of interviewees was conducted in a way to obtain testimonials about the use of telecentres for both educational activities and productive activities. It

Table 1. List of interviewees

	Age	Gender	Marital status	Children	Occupation or Education Level
CASA user: Students (Secondary or Middle level, or High School)					
User 1	16	Male			Student of middle level, classroom modality
User 2	17	Male			Student of middle level, classroom modality
User 3	19	Male			Student of middle level, classroom modality
User 4	16	Female			Student of middle level, classroom modality
User 5	15	Female			Student of middle level, classroom modality
User 6	15	Male			Student of middle level, classroom modality
User 7	12	Female			High school student
User 8	14	Female			High school student
User 9	26	Male			Undergraduate student, classroom modality
User 10	13	Male			High school student
User 11	13	Female			High school student
CASA user: workers (jobs)					
User 1	44	Male	Married	3	Mechanic
User 2	30	Male	Married	2	Fisher/Professor
User 3	63	Male	Married	3	Farmer and rancher
Public officials					
Officer 1	27	Female	Single		Councilor of the municipality/responsible of the grocery store
Officer 2	43	Male	Married		Former municipal delegate - mechanic
CASA University					
Project Manager 1	37	Male	Bachelor		Bachelor's degree in Political Science
Project Manager 2	65	Male	Married	3	School teacher, B.A. in history and master in education
Project Manager 3	29	Female	Married	2	Bachelor's degree in education

Source: Own elaboration

was sought out to learn how this space derived in positive changes in various areas within the community. The use of interviews made it possible to be on the side of the individual, to understand the meaning of these spaces to them and what the use of Internet signifies in their social sphere. The experiences from different agents during the process of embracing Internet use were recorded in their own personal voice, to understand their perspective on the role the community leader took said process. At the end of the transcription process of the audio recordings, an overall picture was formed, enlightening the use of Internet in communities, the importance of telecentres and community leaders as promoters of the use of technology. To do this, the people involved were asked to give testimonies related to the following points proposed by Servon (2002, p. 9).

- **History and context:** It refers to the socioeconomic characteristics of the community. It contributes the cultural aspects regarding the inhabitants' use of innovation and its impact on economic, social and educational matter.
- **Intensity and magnitude:** It allows taking into account miscellaneous items regarding infrastructure, such as the type of computers, software used and the speed of Internet connection. From the side of the user, it invites reflection over the time of use, the services used, and so on.
- **Centrality:** It considers all the circumstances affected by an innovation in a person's life that make it indispensable in the life of users.

The following describes how the community center of the CASA Project, where this study took place, operate. It is located in the town of San Miguel de Hidalgo, municipality of El Limón, Jalisco. This center has significant shortcomings in the area of information and communication technologies, with a less than encouraging assessment in terms of the number of computers and Internet. The physical space of the venue, equipped with eight computers, is small, and consequently operating errors occur. The Internet connection is slow and often not available. It is precisely these deficiencies in infrastructure that ultimately affect the functional operations of the center of the CASA project in the community.

The venue has a manager who has obtained university studies in education, and whose salary is provided by the City Council. The manager knows the process of learning in virtual teaching platforms and develops activities channeled towards improving the community and the CASA University. The manager

also plans the marketing and advertising of CASA. Additionally, said manager promotes the distant educational offer from the University of Guadalajara during the enrollment period by placing posters in strategic locations throughout the community and nearby villages, supporting users who have technical difficulties and accompanying students through their learning process. The manager also carries out various cultural events to raise money, which is used to improve and maintain the CASA University in different ways (buying computers, paying phone and Internet service, improving the physical office space, etc.). Individuals from the local community and residents from the United States give support through voluntary aid to improve CASA services, whose program is known by the majority of the residents in the community.

RESULTS

ON HOW THE PROJECTS OPERATES

CASA University does not have an annual budget. It relies on donations from individuals and on the interest of local governments and community leaders. That is why each venue presents remarkable differences in the infrastructure, service and use. In the case of the offices located in the municipality of El Grullo, Jalisco (close to the offices in San Miguel Hidalgo, municipality of El Limón), their subsistence depends on the support of a cooperative that is interested in that the space continues permanently. However, in the case of other areas of the program where permanence depends on agents that change every three years, as do the municipal presidents, its endurance is compromised:

We're waiting to see if they will support the next administration, because the CASA University is not an institutionalized program, but a program that can be endorsed or not. And, what we have seen, is that the program is much more sustainable when it has support from the same community or a community organization, not depending on who endorses it every three years. For example, in El Grullo it is a cooperative, and there are students and everything, but because cooperatives, especially the one from El Grullo, have been around for many years - the one in El Grullo was founded in the middle of the last century - there's an interest, it is a service that can be thought of long term. Or it can be an indigenous community, an ejido, because they are organisms that can plan long term, while the municipal presidencies do not think past the three years, and often no longer want to support the next in charge. (CASA Project Manager 2, Guadalajara, October 5, 2011)

The way communities use the CASA venues vary and, therefore, even if Internet is available and the possibilities of studying an academic program are essentially the same in all venues, the services used are different. In some locations, the ejidatarios - members of an agrarian community where all are co-owners of arable land - gather and use computers and printers to handle the minutes of their meetings. At other times, organizations like the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI) request the venue to give advice to the community. The users are as varied as the needs solved at each venue: from the lady who has a son in the United States and has no resources to talk with him, for which the venue supplies audio or video chat, to small producers who need to know at how much a kilo of jitomatoes is trading on the market. In recent years, there is a growing tendency within the program to first consult the community about the services needed and then offer them. It implies ending a vertical public policy, of general application, that does not take into account the particularities of the communities:

The CASA University program conforms to the needs of each one of the communities, because although we obviously arrive [with] a general offer – upper secondary education and continuing education courses, which are almost fifty and already managed – we have to do some research on the needs that exist in the community in order to be able to have a real academic offer, and obviously listening to the people. Because if not, we would just be another public policy from Guadalajara that becomes statewide. (Casa Project Manager 2, Guadalajara, October 5, 2011)

THE USE OF THE VENUE

Regarding to venue in San Miguel Hidalgo, in the municipality of El Limón, the testimonies of interviewees reflect contrasts in terms of use. In some cases the Internet access was used for work related consultations, for example, to look up what type of grain could be stored in silos or what medicine to administer to livestock in order to not affect the animal or the production:

For example, in the past days we had a doubt here at the ranch about grain sorghum, if it could be placed in silage, and you asked people, but some would say yes, others tell you otherwise. You get online, you look up silos, and in there it says which plants can be ensiled, and among them is sorghum. One does not have a doubt. Our cattle get a disease, we look it up or see about medicine for cattle, and you go to

the Internet, and there is the description of the elements the medication has, eda? For example, if it is harmful to milk production, then you will not drink the milk; or if it affects the meat, then you do not kill the animal at the time, eda? You have to keep the animal in quarantine, and such tidbits we get through the Internet. (User 12 CASA University, San Miguel Hidalgo, municipality of El Limón, October 12, 2011)

Another interesting aspect of Internet use in agricultural production is the search of new markets, economic support, as well as new ways to improve production. In interviews with ranchers, the subject of help for online banking came up, as it can offer small producers to establish long-range business. A case in point was the idea to use e-banking in order to sell the produce to the European Union. Whether this project was realized or not, the use of Internet allowed the glimpse of possibilities that years ago were impossible to even consider:

We are part of a project of a civil association called PYMES, small and medium-sized enterprises directed in Guzman city, and we are more than five hundred people that have more or less extensive projects with the idea of trade with the European Union. That is our purpose, because this bunch of people, it is big enough to “jump the pond”, eda? And do things, because right now one has to get with the times, we received some kind of training by the civil association, but they are already asking us to fully get into what electronic banking is. We were with the manager of El Grullo and he opened the portal of Banamex and suggested to us that we open an account, and little by little we have been doing transactions in that way. (User 12 CASA University, San Miguel Hidalgo, municipality El Limón, October 12, 2011).

THE IMPACT OF THE PROJECT IN THE LIVES OF THE USERS

The telecentre in San Miguel Hidalgo has been considered since its beginnings as one of the most successful cases amongst the venues of the project because of its high level of community involvement as well as the great interest municipal officials have in continuing the service. However, it is not only because of the extensive use that this CASA venue has established for itself over the years, but the perseverance of the community. They have had to deal with technological issues, such as the problematic connectivity and slow speed connection, as well as floods that damaged facilities and to economic difficulties. Several events

were organized by the manager of the venue to obtain resources and help in the sustainability of the project. The purpose of the venue has been pinned to its location, since it was located in the premises of the community's "tele-high school" (*telesecundaria*), its primary use is to support students in kindergarten, primary, telesecundaria and, occasionally, the senior high school of El Limón.

Among the aspects that are valued from the existence of a CASA venue in the community is the possibility of studying at a distance: "The CASA University makes things easier for the youth, it simplifies them studying and commuting to the cities. There have been good results. We, as a municipality, try to support the CASA University so they can move forward with their projects" (Councillor of the municipality of El Limón, October 12, 2011).

The same thing is true regarding the possibility of obtaining information to improve productive activity:

Well, speaking of San Miguel, it impressed me a lot... to know that several people from San Miguel already finished studying their career in this way, eda? For example with the case of the girl we call "la Cuata" ... So the community has also taken advantage of it. I say that once you start to see things, San Miguel for me is a town that has the highest rates of professionals compared to the number of inhabitants. And that gives you culture, plenty of culture for the people, and it is also shared, eda? Other people are encouraged to make a career, right? ... For example, we check our email, and there already we have news. Or for example we want a formula for our cattle, we access the Internet to what we want and then we have the answer. (User 12 CASA University, San Miguel Hidalgo, Municipality El Limón, October 12, 2011)

Several interviewees agree on the importance of family support and project managers to overcome problems that online study entail:

At first it was difficult learning to use the educational platform, but with the support of the CASA University manager I got through it and learned new things, through feedback and comments of the advisors and fellow students ... Yes, I studied on the premises of the CASA University at San Miguel and since there was not a fast internet service, unlike now, a lot of times it was difficult for me access to the page, which is why I came to feel desperate when I felt that I could not deliver my work on time. However, even with that I managed to finish my career studies ... the support I got from the CASA University manager of San Miguel de Hidalgo

was without a doubt the best, and that motivated and helped me in the difficult moments I had during my studies. My family always gave me their support, so I did not desist my studies, and they motivated me to keep going until I finally concluded them and got my degree in Education. (User 13 CASA University, San Miguel Hidalgo, municipality of El Limón, January 12, 2012.)

Another user shares the vicissitudes that they had to overcome to continue studying online.

At the beginning, when the project of CASA University began, the Internet connection was very slow and shared between six teams. This made everyone's work difficult, especially when we had to download large files... But I was fortunate to accompany my wife to various training courses, which gave me another perspective on the project, not just as a user, but now also as a co-promoter. (User 14 CASA University, San Miguel Hidalgo, Municipality of El Limón, January 13 2012.)

While the use of these services has brought improvements in the lives of some students, the population is most appreciative of having a CASA program location because of the accessibility it entails. This does not refer to being able to go online, because the community already had such access before the arrival of the program, but the ease of having a closer community access point.

[Could you mention what benefits a venue of the CASA project has brought here to San Miguel Hidalgo, how people use it?]

Well, a lot, because here [in San Miguel in general], the Internet is actually not very fast and there are people who had to travel elsewhere when we did not get Internet, and it was more, well more.... More expensive and they did not have the same opportunities we have now. (User 7 CASA University, San Miguel Hidalgo, municipality of El Limón, October 11, 2011)

Previously, some people had Internet access at home. However, the bulk of the population had to move to the county seat to get Internet access at cybercafes, which was not only time consuming, but also affected the user economically:

Well, I come because before, when I had no Internet en El Palmar [community outside San Miguel Hidalgo], I took a *raite*² to use the computers from the house of teacher Edgar, and then later, I took advantage of having a couple of free hours... doing homework and when not quite done, I went to San Miguel to the CASA University to finish it. It helped me

to have this ... from Palmar to San Miguel I just had to take a *raite* and then from San Miguel to Palmar, grab a *raite* back. But it was easier, because I did not have to go to other places farther away where there was Internet, because San Miguel is much better for me and well, in the future, for people like me, like people who do not have Internet or computers and that, hopefully CASAS University continues helping them to do their homework and give them the opportunity to use the Internet. (User 2 CASA University, San Miguel Hidalgo, municipality of El Limón, October 10, 2011)

The arrival of the venue eliminates a 20 to 30 minutes commute to access the Internet. Having access and counseling for its management has allowed people to sometimes avoid the trip to the state capital (Guadalajara) to obtain, for example, a fishing license (the community is close to a dam). But the venue has become a nucleus from where it has been possible to strengthen community ties between Miguel Hidalgo and nearby settlements; now people located outside of the community also visit CASA. It is people who no longer must go to the county seat to use the Internet, but even go to San Miguel Hidalgo to purchase food and other goods. Actions like these position telecentres as nodes of regional attraction. The community begins to take ownership of them, not only for the use to which they are intended, but as spaces to verbalize problems, where they socialize and obtain training on issues that are not necessarily technology-related. The telecentre represents an opportunity of improvement for the community. The citizens, after claiming the center as part of them, will help in its tenure and conservation by conducting social events to raise funds. It ceases to be a place of an external project and gives way to become a social space of coexistence and development.

The main benefit of the venue for the community, however, will come probably in the next few years, because the majority of its population consists of children and young people. They will have better access to the Internet and tools from the venue that will complement, if they are incorporated in their educational process, to their school learning. "When I started this, I remember that they gave courses to children in kindergarten; they didn't read, weren't motivated, but they began without fear and learned based on drawings. And right now, those kids are the ones who come and just go at it like it is nothing. Today's children are very fast" (User 11 CASA University, San

Miguel Hidalgo municipality El Limón, on October 11, 2011)

CONCLUSIONS

The data collected at the venue located in San Miguel Hidalgo show that most of the users do not use the telecentre to study a university degree through distant learning, the main objective of CASA, but to obtain support in carrying out their tasks. In the early years of the project, the overall objective focused on bringing college education into marginalized areas of the State of Jalisco, where the residents, for various reasons, could not access to it. However, over time, students who use the CASA project are few compared to the total of distant students of the University of Guadalajara. This trend has caused a change in the main objectives of the project and an adjustment to the specific needs of the communities. The results of this change, however, will only be measurable in subsequent years.

Furthermore, the results of the study invite to ponder over several issues: first, to understand that, beyond their social and economic conditions, communities seek to tend to their own needs without waiting for the help of external programs. The venues of the CASA project offer services that, on occasion, have already been covered by other entities, such as Internet cafes. Thus, telecentres, as is the case of the community of San Miguel Hidalgo, are installed in places where demand has already been covered. In regard to distance education, residents who have completed their studies or are in the process of studying sought options that were available to them to do so. Others became students through distance learning, but with their own resources, taking advantage of existing public or private infrastructure and using, of course, the solidarity networks in the community. Although there are many users of the facilities, most do not pursue distance-learning programs through the venue.

Another problem that shortens the scope of this project relates to the infrastructure. The telecentre facilities vary according to the resources available in the community where they are installed. Although they are generally spaces provided by the authorities or a company, they can also be school classrooms, libraries, or stores, among others. When selecting a venue, the University of Guadalajara is responsible for providing computational equipment, usually desktop

computers, with Windows operating system and Office suite from the same company. Correspondingly, the Community authorities provide furniture, light services and Internet connection. This connectivity can range from the satellite type, to optical fiber, cable modem, or phone, although generally the speed is quite low; in some cases it reaches only the 56kbs, shared between all users. Hence, the services and the resources have, quality wise disparate results.

Based on the results shown by the field study, one might think that the main goal of the project has not been achieved, given that student enrollment in programs with distant learning did not substantially increase at the University of Guadalajara. However, public policies rarely spread evenly and vertically from the managers to the communities, and very few times do the objectives materialize satisfactorily. You can always find conflicting positions and opposing stances in terms of the impact and community use.

Another interesting aspect was the fact that, as the investigation progressed, it became increasingly obvious that most of the users of the CASA project who were interviewed were not part of a truly marginalized population: many of them already had university studies when they began to go to the facilities; others were able to meet their information and communication needs through alternative means, such as Internet cafes; and a large majority used the Internet from their homes. They did not seem to be the "poor" or "marginalized individuals" the project was intended for and that are usually associated with these kinds of programs. It was more people that already had Internet access, or individuals who were either studying a career online or face-to-face, but not through the CASA project. These findings led to consider other explanations for the low influx of marginalized users in a project created specifically for them. In the case of the community where the field study was conducted, individuals with high levels of marginalization are migrant peasants living at campsites and work harvesting sugar cane. Said camps have high levels of marginalization and low levels of schooling. And although the Internet can be a catalyst for social development, this occurs only when the person has developed other cognitive skills, such as those involving writing and reading comprehension. Taking a hold of knowledge and embracing an innovation, such as Internet, is the most elaborate, final phase of a process that education and opportunities of economic and social development influence.

According to the five-points analysis on the phenomenon of the digital divide which Crovi (2008) suggests, we can disaggregate that, in the case of the facility located in Miguel Hidalgo, municipality of El Limón, even though a space with free Internet access exists, people who do not use this venue of the CASA project have problems related to technological abilities to manage computers as well as problems of cultural capital. In order to improve the situation of the marginalized people within the communities, establishing more comprehensive and integral strategies is required, where - aside from providing Internet access - citizens are taught on how use this tool to improve their socio-economic level; and, lastly, thanks to the training they can use this means of information and communication to express their views in the public sphere, meaning, improving their civic participation.

It is clear, when reading the contributions from the users of the community, that even though the Internet browsing speed is not optimal, it allows the use of a technology that otherwise would only be available in the county seat after a thirty minutes drive. The project in the community of El Limon has provided availability of free access; yet it only indirectly supports the basic educational level and sometimes the high school level. However, it fails in promoting continuous education as a more efficient way to support the efforts made in social and economic development for these communities. The current benefits obtained are limited to saving, not only time, but also money on Internet cafes and the cost of transportation. These subsidies are not yet being translated into solutions of greater impact in the community. In this sense, those involved in the CASA project have to continue working so these spaces may be consolidated as elements of change within the communities (Selwyn & Facer, 2010). Finally, despite not having fulfilled its initial objectives (improve the levels of University distance education in ostracized areas), the CASA project is operating, even considering various limitations (geographical, institutional support and resources). While some of the digital telecentres may fail in being consolidated as the great socio-economic revulsive they once promised to be, they are still places imaginarily associated with change and development. Modernity, actual and material-wise, takes time to reach these locations, but it is anticipated and becomes real at the symbolic level, as long as you have access to the Internet.

FOOTNOTES

1. *Eda*, is a colloquial way of saying “true” or “right”. It is a “filler word” commonly used in certain areas of Mexico.
2. *Raite*. A colloquial way of saying the interviewee traveled by car free of charge.

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