

Introduction

Who is this book for?

There are growing numbers of grass-root communication and information service providers in the developing countries today. They are operating community radio stations, multipurpose telecentres, information centres, community learning centres and – in a few cases – community multimedia centres (CMCs) that already combine both radio and telecentre facilities. This book (available initially in English with other language versions planned) is intended to be of use to all those wanting to become involved or already involved in such initiatives – staff and managers, community groups, NGOs working for community empowerment, communication planners supporting development activities, trainers and project partners. It will obviously be of particular interest to those operating or considering starting a CMC as it covers the full range of topics linked to community broadcasting and to telecentre operations. But for those working in a more limited structure, some chapters will be of direct relevance while others can be useful to help situate one’s own activity within a broader perspective.

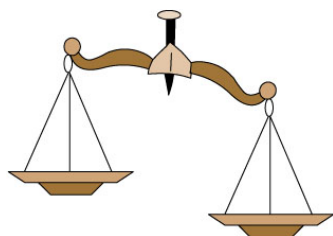


Not a narrow blueprint

As the following chapter on “Types of Community Multimedia Centre” shows, the CMC concept is not a narrow blueprint. A great variety of structures, institutional arrangements and facilities can be found within the CMC model. UNESCO has developed a programme based on this particular model – radio and telecentre combined - because it is proving to be a highly effective way of achieving community empowerment through the harnessing of communication and information for development. Radio acts as a bridge across the Digital Divide, providing indirect, mass access to digital resources. But at the same time as it operates its flagship CMC programme, UNESCO also continues to support other types of grass-roots projects such as community media or stand-alone telecentres. In the same way, many other development organizations and communities across the developing world continue to explore and implement many different forms of community-operated communication and information service provision. In the effort to ensure the active participation of all in the Information Society, it is worth exploring each promising avenue.

Getting the right balance

This area constitutes an immense learning zone for all concerned and there are valuable lessons to be drawn from differing approaches. Aware of this, the authors of this book have tried to avoid being prescriptive while giving as much practical guidance as possible. It is hard to strike a balance in this type of practical manual, between being too general and too specific. Circumstances vary hugely not only between continents but within continents and even within countries. For that reason, this publication has been designed with a fairly general introductory text in each chapter and a set of more concrete case studies and practical annexes.



Publication or process?

Ideally, this initial publication is just a starting point and practitioners will contribute a growing number of case studies, links and references, using the UNESCO CMC website as a contact



point or through networks. At the back of the book, a pouch inside the cover can hold a set of further texts and references. A future CD Rom version will also add updates and enrich the guide with further practical examples. Information and knowledge about all the various aspects of community multimedia centres is scattered widely across the world. Rather than being based on a central corpus of theoretical knowledge that is applied in different localities, the CMC experience has local roots, finds local solutions to local challenges and in any case *adapts* locally the inputs that come from outside and that are based on tried and tested experience and expert knowledge. This publication has therefore been a gathering process – bringing the stands together to build up the first comprehensive reference work on community multimedia centres. We hope that this gathering process will continue, benefiting from the dynamic and highly interactive networking which fortunately CMC practitioners tend to engage in quite readily.

A shared foundation

What picture emerges from this gathering process? For all the variety of situations and contexts, a read through the chapters that follow will show that there are a certain



number of constant elements and features that build up the common, shared foundation of all CMCs. Perhaps the most significant one can best be expressed as the *ethical* role of the CMC. A community multimedia centre is a tool whose power should not be underestimated. As the saying goes, “information is power” and in the CMC we have an entire communication and information platform – powerful indeed! The CMC has a duty to serve the interests of the whole community and to withstand any undue influence of particular interest groups. It has a duty to ensure that the benefits of this communication and information platform are accessible to all and monopolised by none. It has a duty to seek to make available information that is both valid (balanced and diversified, up-to-date and accurate) and relevant to the community’s needs. These are ambitious goals, especially when set against the more mundane reality of the CMC’s daily struggle for survival

– and it often is a struggle for a CMC to keep going once the project support phase is over. Ultimately, all of the guidance, advice, tips and ideas in this book seek to help the CMC fulfil this ethical role as best it can.

Seeking solutions

Finally, a word of caution. This guide can offer few “quick fixes” or instant trouble-shooting solutions to the numerous questions and dilemmas facing the CMC, either in its daily operations or in choosing its long-term strategies and options. This is because there is often no “right” answer and seldom any simple answer in the area in which CMCs function. Solutions are often a matter of performing a delicate balancing act between different contingencies. So, often the reader will have to take one of the examples cited in the book that is closest to local realities and then adapt it to make it fit. But readers at least have the comfort of knowing that their own solutions are likely to be as good as anyone else’s. Take the question of managing volunteer staff and the difficult issues of how to keep them and how to reward them. On this subject, as on many others, there is no right answer, or rather, no answer that is right for longer than the duration of the set of circumstances in which the answer appears to be working well.

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