Preface

When UNESCO launched its programme for Community Multimedia Centres (CMCs) at a seminar in Kothmale, Sri Lanka in January 2001, Kothmale Community Radio was a unique prototype: the only existing example of a CMC. Two years earlier, this rural radio station had added a small walk-in telecentre where local people could use the Internet and get computer training. Daily "radio browsing" programmes brought on-line information directly into people's homes in their own languages. This ensured that the whole community became familiar with cyberspace and aware of the usefulness of ICT.

Today, over twenty pilot CMCs are operating in 15 countries of Africa, Asia and the Caribbean. UNESCO is now envisaging scale-up. The Kothmale model has been successfully adapted to a variety of different environments and contexts. The basic premise has withstood the test of time: the *combination* of local radio and ICT access offers an effective gateway to the Information Society for marginalised communities. For many years to come, radio will undoubtedly remain the primary – and all too often, the only – source of information for the poor in developing countries. Community radio coupled with a small telecentre exponentially increases the outreach and impact of the computer equipment and digital resources available to a given community.

The key to the success of a community multimedia centre is its capacity to deliver the services that its community needs. This is first and foremost a matter of content. Access to the World Wide Web is likely to be of little use to a subsistence farmer or a rural trader with no knowledge of the international languages most often used on the Internet. What content is needed? Content generated locally, content of local relevance, content in local languages, educational content, content in different forms – audio, digital, print, video or visual materials such as posters...the list is long. A whole range of skills and organisational capacity are required to build up such contents, to identify the needs of target groups, to link available contents to activities that mobilise and involve all the potential users, to develop appropriate software applications.

Every day, CMC staff have to tackle not only these challenging tasks, but also the administration of the centre, technical maintenance of the equipment, relations with the public. The defining feature of community multimedia centres is their many-facetted novelty: they fill new roles in the community, attract new types of candidates to new job profiles, require new training inputs, associate new sets of skills, identify new target audiences, offer new services to and take on new responsibilities towards the community. A consequence of this far-reaching innovation is that the greatest challenge and the greatest investment for CMC development is not equipment or connectivity, but comprehensive implementation support. New projects have to be accompanied for extended periods with a wide range of inputs that mobilise significant financial and human resources. The only way to meet this challenge is through local capacity building.

UNESCO is leading a group of stakeholders in preparing a comprehensive suite of workshop-ready, open-access training materials called the Multimedia Training Kit. The first modules and the curriculum of this kit are available on www.itrainonline.org. As the kit continues to grow, this handbook is designed to be a complementary tool – giving an overview of all the different aspects of setting up and operating a CMC. Many of the same partners who are involved in the Multimedia Training Kit have also authored chapters in this book. Indeed, the

list of authors and the organizations they represent epitomises the multi-stakeholder nature of CMC development. The multi-stakeholder partnership acts as a crucible in which all the different strands of experience and expertise needed in this innovative field come together. I would like to thank all those who have contributed to this book, all the partner organizations and the outstanding individuals who have helped the community multimedia centre concept and programme become what it is today.

W. Jayaweera
Director, Communication Development Division
UNESCO
Email: **w.jayaweera@unesco.org**