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Telecentros 3.0 y la Innovación Social en la Sociedad Red

THE VIRTUAL TELECENTRE AND THE DEMAND SIDE OF UNEMPLOYMENT

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During the European Commission Expert Workshop on Measuring the Impact of eInclusion Intermediaries in Europe I was invited to present a position paper, eInclusion Intermediaries in Europe: horizon 2020. My diagnosis related to the development of the Information Society and the state of the digital divide in most developed countries was as follows:

- Last mile issues about to be solved.
- Physical access to infrastructures generally not a barrier.
- Increasing supply of content and services.
- Advanced (digital) competence required.
- Stable share of refuseniks.

Of course, it is untrue that all other problems are already solved, but they are quickly falling in the field of “operational issues” rather than “strategic policies”.

On the other hand, Telecentre.org has identified for Spark, the 4th Global Forum on Telecentres three main themes around which to spin all the reflection and debate:

- People.
- Innovation.
- Sustainability.

These are, in my opinion, closely intertwined topics: I do not think there is sustainability without the support of the community and without innovation; and innovation can only come from the community and supported by a strong community.

So, people, innovation and sustainability, but with a changing scenario — as depicted before — and in a new context of crisis and rampant unemployment (at least in Europe). Thus, what could the next steps of telecentres be to contribute to development, social inclusion and employment?

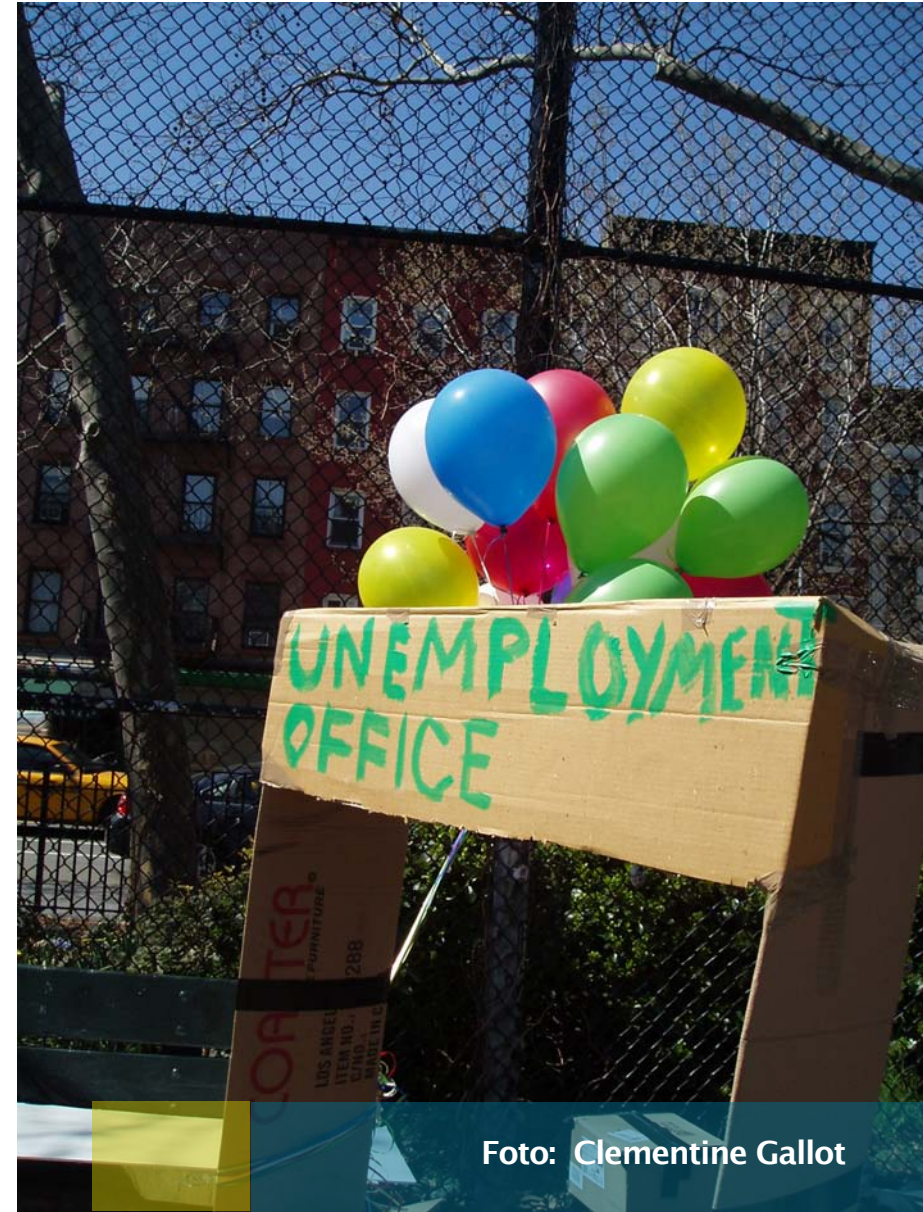


Foto: Clementine Gallot

Transforming telecentres

I believe there are two ways to transform telecentres or to push them ahead: change the things they do (and how they do them) and change the way they are.

Concerning the former, Paco Prieto provides a couple of very interesting proposals related to sustainability and people (or the community).

Related to sustainability, he advocates for a BYOD-based telecentre model: that is, a telecentre without equipment (just connectivity), where everyone is free to use their own device. Not only is this more sustainable (of course) but it also enhances a community use, as it gets rid of the smell of classroom of most telecentres, becoming instead an informal place, a big living room.

This community factor can be even more enhanced by flipping the telecentre, with the idea of avoiding the use of telecentres as lecture rooms and turn trainers into knowledge sharing facilitators.

These are two ideas I full agree with and go very much in the line of turning telecenters into ICT-empowered community centres, an idea that was at the core of the work we did when designing the Professional qualification: Promotion of ICT Facilities. The main idea is that telecentres are more community based, doubling as (or being embedded in) civic centres, schools, used by local entrepreneurs as living labs, etc.

But we sure can go one step beyond.

The virtual telecentre

We tend to think in telecentres as places, literally, not as functions, or roles. But let us think in the roles or functions of telecentres. To main role of telecentres is to enable public access to the Information Society.

Accessing the Information Society used to mean accessing ICT infrastructures. But [evidence is telling us that access is increasingly a matter of skills and, still, a matter of money](#). Why not focussing, thus, in providing skills at a very low price?

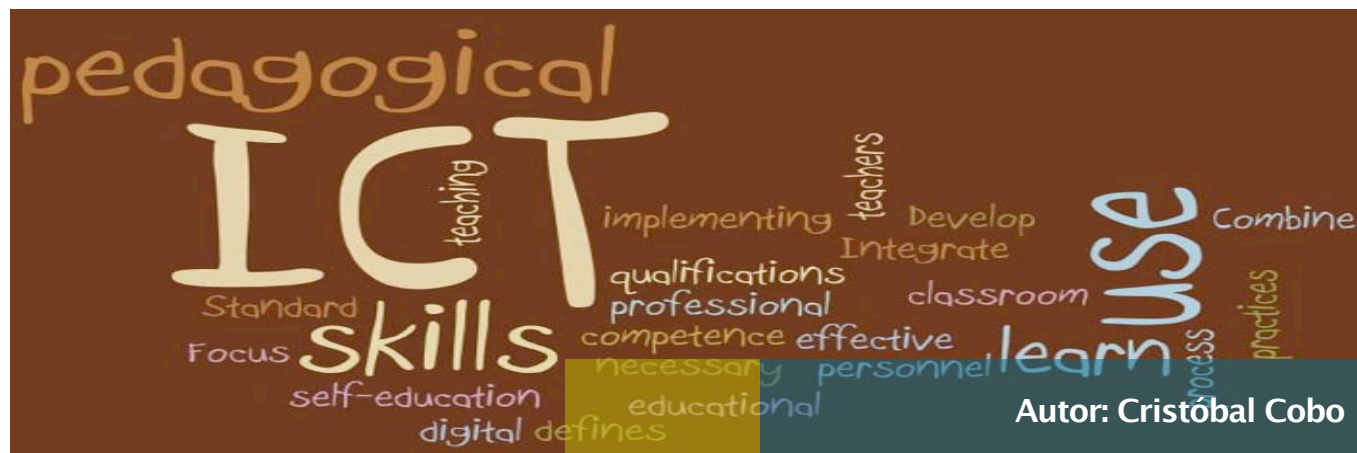
On the other hand, we know that while people is increasingly more confident with ICTs and use them in their everyday lives, [institutions usually lack the awareness for using ICTs e\\$ciently and e#ectively](#). In other words: despite individuals being able to use ICTs, this usage is not translated in institutional ICT usage.

I suggest it is time for developing a new modality of telecentre: the virtual telecentre.

The virtual telecentre is insourced into a host organization. Unlike the usual IT department,

- The virtual telecentre has the functions and roles of a traditional telecentre, that is, enabling access at a very low price (or even free, through subsidies, etc.).
- As a traditional telecentre, too, the virtual telecentre operates in a network of virtual telecenters, who share amongst them strategies and resources.
- The virtual telecentre has it easier to, at its time, outsource much of its administration (to the network or to the hosting institution), thus being able to concentrate on its specific tasks and goals.

Of course, this is a de facto public-private partnership, which improves targeting the beneficiaries of policies to public access to the Internet and the sustainability of the whole system: being insourced, there is a growing possibility to provide services for free (subsidised) and others for profit.



Autor: Cristóbal Cobo

The demand side of unemployment

Most policies (that is, all policies, not just “e-policies”) to fight unemployment are addressed to the supply side of the job market: the worker or the unemployed. Training, improving employability, new skills, new competences, how to apply for a job, how to better write and disseminate your resume. And telecentres are contributing and quite well to this endeavour. I am OK with that, but it is only half the story.

There is increasing evidence that SMEs are less competitive than bigger firms, and that part of this lack of competitiveness is due to the lack of knowledge or training in management of their decision-makers. A corollary of the previous statement is that, due to this lack of knowledge they also lack the knowledge on how to apply ICTs in their production functions. In other words, they neither know the tools nor the benefits of e-commerce, e-business, cloud computing, social media, ERPs, CRMs, teleworking and net-working, etc.

And the thing is that these decision-makers rarely visit telecentres. In the best scenario they will attend a specific course on a given topic. But most of them will not seek for help in telecentres and most of them will not be able to pay for professional consultancy.

And here is where the virtual telecentre may make sense: by insourcing the telecentre, advice and facilitation is not outside the firm, but inside, that is, at reach. And by being a telecentre — and not an external for-profit company — that advice and facilitation is affordable by SMEs.

The virtual telecentre could become a useful trojan horse to fight the digital divide from the inside of the enterprise, and from there, to contribute the fight against unemployment, by helping especially SMEs to make the best of ICTs in terms of better organization, productivity and competitiveness.

