



## Connectedness of overseas workers

### *The impact of public internet access for Filipino families*

Communication is critical for overseas workers and their families. The internet makes it more convenient and less expensive for families to stay connected.

While private options may be preferred, many Filipinos rely on public access as they creatively mix technologies and venues to communicate with overseas family members. Policy makers and public access venues can do more to support meaningful online communication between overseas parents and their children.

## Background

Overseas work is common in many countries, splitting families for long periods of time as one or more parent leaves to earn money. Internet technologies, such as instant messaging, video chat, voice over internet, and social networking, are believed to keep workers connected with family and friends. What role do public access venues play in facilitating this connectivity? What support services are available? How connected do families feel?

This brief summarizes the report, *The Impact of Cybercafés on the Connectedness of Children Left Behind by Overseas Filipino Workers*, by Erwin A. Alampay, Liane P. Alampay, and Khane S. Raza. It explores the extent to which ICT-based communication helps to maintain familial connections between overseas workers and their families. The Philippines offers a unique perspective because more than 1/10 of the population works abroad, and to Filipinos, family is considered “the center of their [Filipinos] universe” (Jocano, 1998, p.1).

The study is one of seven in-depth inquiries of the *Global Impact Study of Public Access to Information & Communication Technologies*. The study offers policy recommendations to address the challenges of overseas workers and their families.

## Research design

The study sought to identify:

- How do children of overseas workers use ICTs to communicate with their parents?
- What is the impact of cybercafés on keeping overseas workers and their families connected?
- What is the impact of ICT-based communication on relationships between overseas parents and their children, and does the type and frequency of ICT use have a difference on parent's and children's knowledge of each other's lives?

Researchers addressed the above questions by conducting:

- A survey of children of overseas Filipino workers, to measure indicators of connectedness: children's knowledge of parents' lives overseas, parents' knowledge of children's lives at home, and parents' ability to monitor children's activities.
- Focus groups with parents who had lived abroad.
- Semi-structured interviews with cybercafé managers.

## Findings

Overseas workers and their children who use ICT-based communication to stay in touch are better connected than those who do not. 92% of youth respondents use the internet, and 70% of them use the internet to communicate with parents abroad. These families were significantly better connected than others who do not use the internet to keep in touch. More frequent internet-based communication gives parents the opportunity to learn about the lives

of their children, leading to better knowledge between them. The sort of applications used by children in these venues is also important. In particular, the informal, synchronous nature of real-time chat and messaging was emphasized, communication that may be more easily achieved with home access as these applications require both parents/children to be online at the same time and necessitate scheduling.

**Home access is more convenient, but many depend on cybercafés for family connectedness.** While home access to the internet may allow for more frequent interaction among families than public access, many children of overseas workers do not have this type of access. Cybercafés provide an important, alternative source of access to the internet for many households who have no home access (47%), live in areas with limited access, or have poor quality access. The need for access is bi-directional. 9% of parents of the children surveyed were unable to access the internet overseas. Parents' ability to access and use the internet, as well as quality of their access, are crucial determinants in the use of the internet to communicate between parents/children.

**A ubiquity of cybercafés can approximate home access.** The study found that densely distributed cybercafés with more flexible operating hours can approximate the impact of home access with respect to keeping parents and children connected. Easier access to cybercafés in Quezon City allowed for more frequent communication. Thus youth reported knowledge of parents, perceived parental knowledge of them, and perceived parental effort to learn about their lives was not significantly different between home access and cybercafé users in areas with convenient cybercafé access.

**Sometimes children prefer public access to home access.** 2/3 of the respondents with home access still frequented cybercafés because of limited facilities at home, better facilities and equipment in the cybercafés, or simply to enjoy the company of their friends. Although cybercafés provide little privacy from strangers, they do offer privacy from

family members, which is especially important for some types of sensitive conversations.

**Desire for connectedness is driving demand for technology training.** In both rural and urban areas, Filipinos reported that they were motivated to purchase home computers to help stay connected with overseas family members. Some parents reported that they did not know how to use computers and the internet, but cited family connectedness as a motivating factor to learn about them.

## Recommendations

**Push for universal service, but strengthen public access.** While home access is often preferred for private communication, it may not be possible. Public access networks can be strengthened, making access more ubiquitous and easy-to-reach in terms of time and distance, by increasing the amount of public access venues or the addition of wi-fi hotspots. For children who rely on public access for communication with overseas parents, venues must be close, easy to get to at any time, and have flexible hours in order to approximate home access.

## Adapt space, rules, and operations to strengthen communications.

Existing public access venues could better cater to families of overseas workers by providing equipment and space that balances communication and privacy, such as offering VoIP "phone booths," hours of operation that accommodate time zone differences, and dedicating hours and resources to migrant family communication.

**Enhance technology training prior to departure.** The quality of ICT access and digital skills that both parents and children have is important. Exposure and training of overseas workers and their families, by government or NGO welfare agencies, on how to use online communication conducted *prior to* departure would be beneficial. These parties could also provide soft loans to fund computer and internet access for the homes of overseas worker families.

The **Global Impact Study** of Public Access to Information & Communication Technologies was a five-year project (2007-2012) to generate evidence about the scale, character, and impacts of public access to information and communication technologies. Looking at libraries, telecenters, and cybercafés, the study investigates impact in a number of areas, including communication & leisure, culture & language, education, employment & income, governance, and health. The research was supported by Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Learn more at <http://tascha.uw.edu/projects/global-impact-study/>



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### Source

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