

Telecentres for Disabilities: Bringing Hope Amid Despair

Nabil Eid



Photo Credit: Nabil Eid

Bassem teaching another blind student Nour on a blind programme at Salamieh telecentre

‘Disabled but not disqualified’

One of the disabled who was enrolled in one of the courses in Salamieh telecentre answered when asked why he is doing this course: “I want to show the world that though it may be true that I am disabled, I am not disqualified”.

‘Disabled but not disqualified’ - under this motto, governments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and private sectors are working together to enable the disabled get integrated into the mainstream of the society and realise their full potential. With the advent of information and communication technology (ICTs), new hopes are emerging for persons with disabilities. In spite of the huge challenges, sincere efforts are being undertaken to involve ICTs to counter issues around disability.

On an average around 10 percent of the world population is disabled and this number is likely to increase in the near future due to various factors. The following statistics will give us an idea: 18 per cent of the world population lives with some kind of disability, 10 per cent or more than 650 million people live with life-altering disabilities. Two third of the disabled people live in the developing countries.

Technology for persons with disabilities

The use of technology for people with disabilities and in the field of education has tremendous potential in alleviating particular problems associated with particular disabilities as well as making job opportunities available for persons with physical disability, visual impairment and hearing impairment. Technology that can help in including the disabled within the curriculum framework and let them have seamless access to computer literacy is the need of the hour.

There can be many other ways in which ICTs could be used to enhance the skill sets of persons with disabilities, raise their hopes and opportunities. In this respect, the following suggestions can be tried out:

- Certain special browsers can be programmed, enabled with speech recognition devices for wider



Map Credit: Google Maps

access of the Internet to the disabled. These devices would facilitate access of information for persons with disability as done by their peers.

- Developing programmed services for persons with learning disabilities and flexible control mechanisms would facilitate easy learning for them. For example, controlled use of only few icons, special mouse and keyboard would make learning for persons with disability more easier and comprehensible to them.
- Improvement of networking facilities to allow more efficient co-operation between institutions and telecentres for all types of disabled people online network (discussion groups, mailing list, chatting, etc.)
- Adaptation of standard software to the needs of children with intellectual impairment. Compatibility of application and cooperation, in order to get a standardised storage format for text, pictures and sounds in different teaching materials and softwares according to the differing needs of children with disabilities.

There is requirement of both disability prevention as well as mitigation. Improved disability prevention will require a change in organisational priorities, restructuring of the symptom-driven healthcare system, and training for providers and clients to co-operate in collaborative care. Extensive research is needed to activate the role of ICTs in the community.

ICTs and disability issues

ICTs can open new vistas for disabled people and make a different world through education, as well as by rehabilitation and building their capacities. ICTs are useful for improving the quality of life by enhancing effectiveness of teaching, developing life-skills, complementing learning in special needs education, and exploring other related issues. ICTs enrich the learning opportunities, capabilities and potential of the disabled, especially of the physically challenged persons with visual impairments, hearing impairments, autistic spectrum disorders, Down's Syndrome, learning disabilities, etc. Similarly telecentres can also be designed as having special disabled-friendly services, softwares, and applications. Even within the existing infrastructural framework, telecentres could make a difference to the lives of persons with disabilities through appropriate use of ICTs.

Telecentres for physically disabled people

Noura is a physically disabled student in Salamieh Telecentre. She is at the prime of her age but till now had a gloomy outlook towards life. Currently, she is a regular visitor to the telecentre and is learning some more software applications in the telecentre. After having been trained in handling and operating computers, her outlook towards life has changed. She has mastered certain softwares and has received her International Computer Driving Licence (ICDL). She is now working at the Study Centre for Handicapped Research as a trainer for disabled people on ICDL examinations.



Photo Credit: Nebil Eid

Noura having a training on ICDL exam at Salamieh telecentre

Telecentre.org, in collaboration with other international organisations, can play a role in attaining this goal of enriching the learning opportunities of the disabled people by facilitating their access to knowledge. This can be done by integrating the different telecentre networks with the global movement to prevent and mitigate disability and surrounding issues, adapting digital revolution to the nature of their disabilities, and by enhancing the scope of their social and economic integration into their communities. The 'Information Society for All' target can be achieved through building and supporting telecentres in different areas all over the world especially in the poor and developing countries which should and could be structured in a way so that they can look after the needs of the disabled.

Telecentres providing education to people with disability

Telecentres can help the disabled people in leveraging the benefits of the most appropriate technologies to suit their

Telecentre for visually impaired



Bassem Yazagi, a 25 years old man, has been suffering from severe blindness for some years and that was reflected on his psychology and manners. After making a visit to the Salameieh telecentre new vistas have opened up for him and surprisingly, his hopelessness has given way to new hopes and is now turning into a miracle.

He underwent a training course on speech recognition programme and was taught the usages of ICTs and taught him to use it properly. Now, Bassem is working as a trainer for the blind and visually impaired students at Computer Training Centre in Damascus.

needs while assisting in identifying the key areas in the educational process. telecentres are proving to be very effective in assisting the disabled people to communicate with other disabled people as well as helping them in writing with the help of ICT tools like communication aids, computer access devices, switches, access utilities and specialised software with alternative input options, provide options to the disabled persons. Practical examples of telecentres using ICTs to assist disabled people by identifying their needs with different disabilities can be found across the world.

Telecentres for persons with visual impairment

Telecentres can also help the visually impaired. This has been realised at the Salamieh telecentre and various initiatives are being undertaken here to help people with disabilities tackle the issues faced in their own way. In case of visual impairment, things that are kept in mind while designing the situation of the blind are position of the screen, clarity of the display, use of large and clear

fonts, adjustment with respect to the colours and adding speech recognition where possible which enhance the effectiveness of these modules. The tools which facilitate these processes include talking word processors, big pointer utilities, screen magnifiers, screen readers, electronic Braille and closed circuit television.

Telecentres for persons with hearing disability

Telecentres can also be made a tool of empowering persons with disabilities by making them a part of the framework for using ICTs for disability prevention, mitigation, and capacity building. ICTs facilitate the use of language development activities, as speech is a major difficulty for most of the people with hearing disorders. Symbol or picture enhanced text can bring meaning to print illustrated concepts. Keyboard overlays make writing more accessible and access to the words can aid expression and help persons with hearing disabilities to organise their ideas and graphics and simulate writing as well as learning. Symbol generating softwares such as word processors, clip art which illustrates writing, etc., help the persons with hearing disabilities learn more quickly and in a meaningful manner. Telecentres across the world can facilitate this positive change in the lives of the persons with disabilities by incorporating these educational tools for special needs in their bouquet of services.

Telecentres for persons with intellectual impairment

Even for persons with intellectual impairment, telecentres could play a hand role. People with problems associated with intellectual impairments like autism, Downs Syndrome, learning disability can benefit immensely from the use of ICTs as it can be used to support individual children and adult needs by providing access to online software resources. Teachers/ telecentre managers operator with special training can assist their integration into the curriculum and assist them in learning about different uses of ICTs. Moreover, ICTs can also be used in language development, communication and in development of other cognitive skills. ICT tools offer support programmes such as talking books, CD-ROMs with good sound and graphics with a minimum of text, speech driven writing tools and focus for language development activities. But

Telecentre for learning disability

Roza Al-Yazji, a twenty-two year-old girl, has been suffering from many health problems, including speech disorder and learning disabilities. She was not admitted to state schools because she couldn't continue learning with her colleagues in the classroom. At the Salamieh telecentre, she was imparted with a lot of training, designed within the telecentre, to overcome her intellectual impairment. Roza showed tremendous commitment to do the tasks assigned and gradually started to begin a new life. After nine months of training she was able to perform her tasks brilliantly. Nowadays, she regularly takes part in public service through a local public service organisation.

this would only be possible if there is provision of a proper capacity building and training structure for telecentre managers/operators.

Telecentres enhancing employability of persons with disabilities

Quantitative evidence suggests that disabled people in the developing countries fare incredibly poorly especially when compared with their peers in the advancing countries. It is an important task before international organisations, to devise a strategy for increasing employment opportunities through telecentres around the world and design communication services, resources and special programmes to provide education and training opportunities to persons with disabilities. Not only this, there is also a need to participate in the development of support options to achieve those goals as well as to educate employers about the abilities of disabled people, provide information about career options, income generation opportunities, and assisting them.

Hopes vs constraints

There are different types of support structures available within countries but they must be focused on developing the capacities of the disabled by removing attitude barriers and understanding the benefits and possibilities of ICTs at the policy level and diffused responsibility for policy implementation. One more thing that needs to be done is building the capacities of the telecentres managers/

operators. Specialist national, regional, and global working groups, telecentre networks and other online networks should also be brought into the picture for better results. Still, the main challenges facing these projects are limited finances, lack of specialised teacher training, limited flexibility in training options, limited availability of specialised hardware and software resources and the lack of formal national support structure for ICT for the disabled and for telecentres working for the disabled.

Conclusion

ICTs can be a powerful tool in supporting educational inclusion for the disabled. ICTs means new 'digital opportunities' 'new job opportunities' and of course 'new hope'. The information society has the potential to contribute more in the form of knowledge resources through appropriate approaches in education and appropriate technology. The resources must be developed to meet the requirements of all disabled people by overcoming the traditional barriers to mobility and geographic distance. "Let us work together, we are confident that we can, and we are very sure, make brighter future. We have a dream that our world will be forever bright and green especially in the eyes of those disabled". □

Sources

- British Educational Communications and Technology Agency (Becta Research).
- European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education. www.european-agency.org/
- The New Zealand Disability Strategy, Ministry of Health, Wellington, New Zealand, ISBN: 0-478-24359-6 (Internet).
- Studies Centre for Handicapped Research, SCHR, Syria, Salamieh, www.caihand.org
- World Health Organization (WHO)

Author



Nabil Eid

■ Nabil Eid is working as director, Rural Knowledge Network – Salamieh Telecentre, and Studeis Centre for Handicapped Research

email: nabieid@gmail.com
web: www.reefnet.gov.sy