

# Revitalising the telecentre movement in Europe

Photo Credit: Laurentiu Bunescu



*Participants actively engaged in the Telecentre Leaders Forum Europe*

## Introduction

telecentre-europe is a project for networking telecentres in Europe. Network partners have agreed in principle to coordinate efforts, seek solutions and integrate resources at an international level, in an effort to improve the capacity and management of community-focused telecentres. The vision of telecentre-europe is to become a viable network of telecentres and practitioners in Europe, to collaborate and share knowledge with counterparts within and outside the continent. Its vision is to provide participants with a unique opportunity to coordinate efforts, share skills, compare experiences, integrate resources, learn best practices and strengthen connections across the diverse e-Skills and e-Inclusion programmes. telecentre-europe can, therefore, probably be seen as a catalyser of the telecentre movement in Europe.

## Background

The telecentre-europe network has grown rapidly since its emergence in June 2007, when telecentre practitioners from around the European Union (EU) gathered in Barcelona. They discussed new ways to grow and sustain efforts to support economic empowerment through e-Inclusion programmes in Europe. Today, the community includes more than 100 telecentre practitioners, programme leaders and development partners from Non-Government

Organisations (NGOs) and organisations that fund telecentre activities from 23 countries in Europe and beyond.

## The journey begins: Barcelona

On June 19-20, 2007, more than 50 telecentre practitioners from Europe gathered in Barcelona to share best practices on e-Skills for employability programmes, and to discuss new ways to grow and sustain efforts to support economic empowerment through this field. They observed that the EU and NGOs, in the e-Inclusion programmes, have similar targets and, therefore, underscored the importance of collaboration and knowledge sharing among all key players. The participant NGOs resolved to establish a mechanism for knowledge-sharing, where telecentres can collaborate to develop training curriculum, monitoring and evaluation tools; benchmark the impact on communities; find funding opportunities and influence policy at the European level. The proposed strategy called for the creation of a network of telecentres that consolidates the voice of the NGOs working on e-Skills programmes, and provides a venue for collaboration and sharing: telecentre-europe.

Accordingly, participants elected a task force to plan and create the telecentre-europe network, which would spearhead knowledge-sharing processes and provide a unified voice for all players as they engage with the EU on implementation of the Lisbon Strategy (2005) and Riga

Declaration (2006). The task force has spearheaded a number of activities to share experiences amongst programmes and build a networking spirit.

The task force also established major in-roads into EU e-Inclusion programming. Nevertheless, it realised that there was more to be done to enable the network provide value-added services to its members and make it sustainable. The most urgent need was to create and build a community of people, who believe in the power of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) as tools for development, and appreciate the value of knowledge-sharing.

### **The journey continues: Riga**

On April 8-9, 2007, more than 60 telecentre practitioners from 43 organisations, representing 23 countries across Europe, met for the European Telecentre Leaders Forum (TLF-E) in Riga, Latvia. The Latvian Information Technology and Telecommunications Association (LIKTA) was the host. Professor Imants Freibergs, LIKTA Board Member and President, Latvia@World initiative, Meddie Mayanja, telecentre.org and Melissa Pailthorp from Microsoft welcomed the participants to Riga. Nick Batey, Representative, Directorate General for Information Society and Media, European Commission (EC) participated in the event and shared insights into EC issues. Nick underlined the importance of e-Inclusion and, emphasised the role of telecentres to the prosperity of Europe. One has heard of, "...telecentres are a social investment", but he provided another dimension, "...telecentres are also an economic opportunity... Europe could reap Euro 35-45 billion over the next 5 years by investing in efficient telecentre activities that drive e-Inclusion..."

At the meet, participants shared innovative practices on e-Inclusion and identified ways to help NGOs and telecentre practitioners find resources for sustenance. The agenda was interactive and collaborative, designed to share knowledge, seek insights and answers to challenges. Sessions featured exciting projects and innovative practices, and also considered

issues of strategy and sustainability of telecentre networking in Europe. All participants were encouraged to take up active roles to shape dialogue and help create event outcomes.

### **Outlining an overview of the network**

As the participants at Riga was a mix of experienced telecentre practitioners and newcomers, who were unsure if their technology centres and public libraries are indeed telecentres, Meddie Mayanja underlined the operational definition of telecentres: a place where people can get help to access computers, the Internet and other digital technologies to gather information, create, learn, and communicate; while it develops essential 21st century digital capabilities for better employment opportunities, or to improve and transform lives.

Task force members Krassimir Simonski, Project Manager, iCenters (Bulgaria) and Gabriela Barna, Director, EOS (Romania) briefed participants on how the network started, what it has done so far and what appeal people to engage.

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Krassimir gave an overview of the development of the telecentre-europe network over the last year, highlighting the volunteer task force's achievements: more and better communications, development of a strategy, mapping of e-Skills projects in Europe (inclusive of potential network partners, their areas of expertise, and ways they may contribute), engagement with the EC on e-Skills, development of project ideas, survey of potential members, and preliminary work on a knowledge-sharing website.

Gabriela gave her vision of the current state of the network, "This work is relevant only if it is relevant to everyone. We are project managers, telecentre managers, grassroots workers, and high-level workers. Everyone has something

## **Lisbon Strategy, Riga Declaration: An overview**

In Lisbon, Portugal, March 2000, the European Union (EU) adopted a ten-year programme to revitalise growth and sustainable development across the EU. The Union set itself the goal to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth. This was to be achieved through a range of policies that is conducive to high growth, the internal market, investing in people and combating social exclusion. In February 2005, European Commission President José Manuel Barroso announced the relaunch of the Lisbon Strategy as a Partnership for Growth and Jobs. It simplified targets and reporting procedures, and announced a single National Reform Programme (NRP) for each country.

### **Sources:**

<http://www.etuc.org/a/652>  
[http://www.eu2008.si/en/Policy\\_Areas/European\\_Council/Lissabon.html](http://www.eu2008.si/en/Policy_Areas/European_Council/Lissabon.html)

On June 11-13, 2006, Ministers of the EU Member States, accession and candidate countries, European Free Trade Area (EFTA) countries and other countries adopted a Declaration on e-Inclusion at Riga, Latvia. It was a pan-European drive to use ICTs to help overcome economic, social, educational, territorial or disability-related disadvantages. 'e-Inclusion' targets included halving the gap in Internet usage by groups at risk of exclusion, boosting broadband coverage in Europe to at least 90 per cent, and making all public web sites accessible by 2010.

### **Sources:**

[http://ec.europa.eu/information\\_society/events/ict\\_riga\\_2006/index\\_en.html](http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/events/ict_riga_2006/index_en.html),  
<http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=IP/06/769>

to bring and will have something to take home. We are united by a common commitment; we have a direction and a strategic framework, support and enthusiasm from prospective members, opportunities in the larger environment, and resources to build an online presence and vibrant knowledge sharing space. Let's do this together and share everything we've got". She, then, provided a vision of a way forward, "In the short term, let's engage and define what the network can and should be for us... How do we want to share knowledge? How do we foster connections that support our work? What do we want from our network? How do we want to participate and contribute? This is our chance to get our network right and make it useful for us."

### Opportunities ahead

Gabriela emphasised long-term opportunities: more voice to collective work, a stronger telecentre movement, increased individual capacity, more resources, and the ability to make a difference. "We can create a knowledge base that

*The telecentre-europe network is pushing for closer relationships, more collaboration and exchange of ideas within Europe*

the EU can use", she said, "Then the EU strategy will be more relevant for us and our countries." She passionately recounted her personal experience to illustrate the network benefits and what can be achieved together. The power of her presentation was visible; participants expressed the desire and enthusiasm to engage and know more.

### Café Conversations: A unique way to participate

At Riga, three rounds of 'café conversations' were held. Pawel Makowiecki from Responsible Business Institute (Poland), introduced participants to the principle of

To learn more about the telecentre-europe network, visit [www.telecentre-europe.org](http://www.telecentre-europe.org)  
For more information on telecentre-europe online social network, visit [telecentreeurope.ning.com](http://telecentreeurope.ning.com)

collaborative dialogue through 'café conversations'. At each table, a 'host' was elected who introduced, led and resumed the conversations the 'guests' at his/her table engaged in. When a first 'conversation round' finished, 'guests' changed tables, but the 'host' remained at his/her table and received new 'guests' from other tables. Each round was introduced by a key question launched by Pawel:

- Reflect on a partnership or networking experience in which you were involved and share what contributed to its success?
- What inspires you the most about telecentre-europe network?
- What do you need from the telecentre-europe network to fully engage in work?

It was a very smart way to share information and exchange ideas among different participants. And with a 'host' referring to the preceding café conversation, it was a quick way to receive a report and feedback of what participants said or proposed around a topic.

### Participants made to take charge

For the rest of the meeting, Allison invited participants to co-create the agenda. People put up their ideas, each of which would become a session led by the initiator of the idea. There was a palpable sense of enthusiasm and ownership. The rest of the day and the next morning were devoted to participants' sessions. Participants sat in tight circles, sharing

and asking questions. They dug on issues like European volunteer exchange programmes, sharing success stories and knowledge on e-Learning production, communication tools for knowledge sharing, sustainability planning, breakthroughs in fundraising, European lobbying, e-Skills for employability, the future of telecentres, the "ideal" telecentre, telework in telecentres, discussions on network strengthening, collaborative actions, ideas for joint projects, development of partnerships, networking inside the network, etc.

### Ning: An effective social networking online tool

Along one wall of the room, the organisers set up resource tables and a documentation centre with computers and printers. Allison



*Participants in a group discussion*

Photo Credit: Laurentiu Bimescu



*The working group*

#### **TLF-E, RIGA : KEY OUTCOMES**

Gabriela Barna (Romania) and Pedro Aguilera (Spain) were elected as the Chairperson and Vice-Chairperson respectively

Expansion of the Steering Committee (which was previously called task force). The Steering Committee will develop a Network Governance and Services Plan by June, 2008

Two smaller working groups on Knowledge-Sharing and EU Advocacy were created

The European Commission engaged with the telecentre practitioners, who have a key to the success of the e-Skills and e-Inclusion programmes in the Union

Beyond the agreement to increase knowledge-sharing, participants shared concrete experiences, strategies and discovered tools

provided session leaders with report-out templates, which were filled out, printed and put up on the wall so that everybody could review and catch up with discussions they might have missed. A specific outcome of one of these sessions was the creation of an online social network site for internal communication among members, 'Ning'. It was the talk of the Forum. The site ([telecentreeurope.ning.com](http://telecentreeurope.ning.com)) was immediately up and working, and this immensely informed the network's options to the extent that at the end of the Forum, participants had signed-up and started inviting colleagues to thematic groups. A task group called 'communications' was also appointed to develop the 'official' website [www.telecentre-europe.org](http://www.telecentre-europe.org) for external communication to sponsors, potential members,

researchers, telecentre operators or managers, government institutions and development agencies.

#### **Outcomes of the Riga meet**

The structure of the event meant that firm decisions and actions were agreed throughout the two days. Every group and plenary session would potentially bring back an action. EOS and iCentres developed a proposal, which they presented at the end of the event. They planned to visit each others' projects, exchange materials and develop joint monitoring and evaluation tools. The proposal was certainly what the network is pushing for – closer relationships, more collaboration and exchange of ideas within Europe. In fact, all participants marked knowledge exchange as highest priority. The other outcomes of the meet were:

- Expansion of the Steering Committee (which was previously called task force). Four members volunteered to join the committee to support planning and coordination of network activities. The Steering Committee will develop a Network Governance and Services Plan by June, 2008. Members later met to agree on working modalities
- Gabriela Barna (Romania) and Pedro Aguilera (Spain) were elected as the Chairperson and Vice-Chairperson respectively
- Two smaller working groups on Knowledge-Sharing and EU Advocacy were also created. They will help plan practical activities
- The EC engaged with practitioners who have a key to the success of e-Skills and e-Inclusion programmes in the Union. Practitioners were equally energised to learn directly from the EC that their efforts are valued, and that the Commission wants to stay connected
- Beyond the agreement to increase knowledge-sharing, participants shared concrete experiences, strategies and discovered tools

## Human Bonding: key to success

One of the most important outcomes was that the network entered a new stage - active participation by members. This gave enormous confidence to the steering committee as practitioners expressed enthusiasm to engage. At TLF-E, many lessons and ways for the network to move forward were learnt. But the most relevant was, that, networks are about people who care for each other personally. Networks, as a form of organisation, do not provide much value if personal relationships, trust, and care for each other at a deeper level is not present in the group. It became very evident that we see value on a European network because the members care for each other as individuals first, and then, as community leaders and e-Inclusion advocates.

For networks to be valuable, there needs to be a commitment to put that bit of extra effort, extra hours of work to share, learn, and take advantage of each other's experiences. All of that exists simply because we consider each other friends and care about each other's work. Competition is not a word to be found in this group. From Barcelona to Riga, to wherever else this initiative takes us, what is to be kept in mind is that: we are friends, we trust each other, and we want each other's project to succeed just as our own. ❑

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### Quick Tips

- telecentre-europe is a project for networking telecentres in Europe
- Today, the community includes more than 100 telecentre practitioners, programme leaders, and development partners from NGOs and organisations that fund telecentre activities from 23 countries in Europe and beyond
- In June, 2007, more than 50 telecentre practitioners from Europe gathered in Barcelona to share best practices on e-Skills for employability programmes, and to discuss new ways to support economic empowerment through this field
- Participants elected a task force to plan and create the telecentre-europe network, which would spearhead knowledge-sharing processes and provide a unified voice for all stakeholders
- In April, 2007, more than 60 telecentre practitioners from 43 organisations, representing 23 countries across Europe, met for the European Telecentre Leaders Forum (TLF-E) in Riga, Latvia
- Participants shared innovative practices on e-Inclusion and identified ways to help NGOs and telecentre practitioners find resources for sustenance
- The agenda at Riga was interactive and collaborative, designed to share knowledge, seek insights and answers to challenges
- A specific outcome was the creation of an online social network site for internal communication among telecentre-europe network members, 'Ning' ([telecentreeurope.ning.com](http://telecentreeurope.ning.com))
- A task group called 'communications' was also appointed to develop the 'official' website of telecentre-europe for external communication to sponsors, potential members, researchers, telecentre operators or managers, government institutions and development agencies