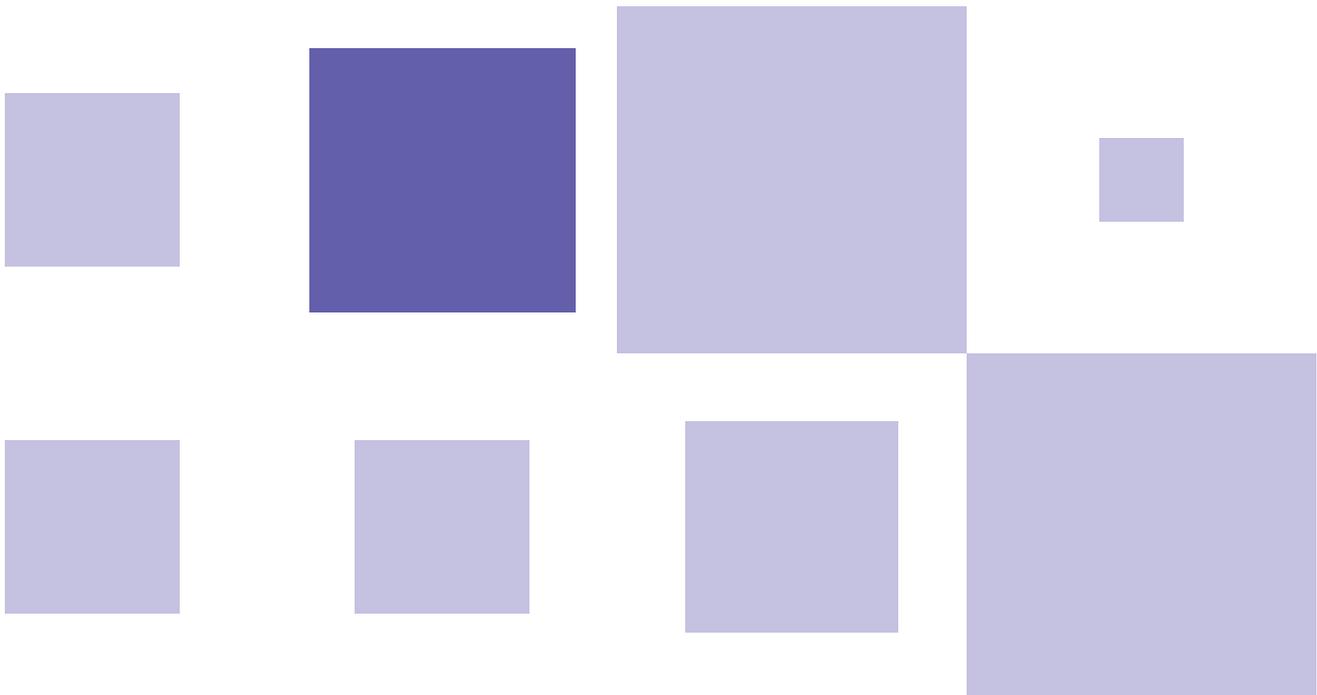
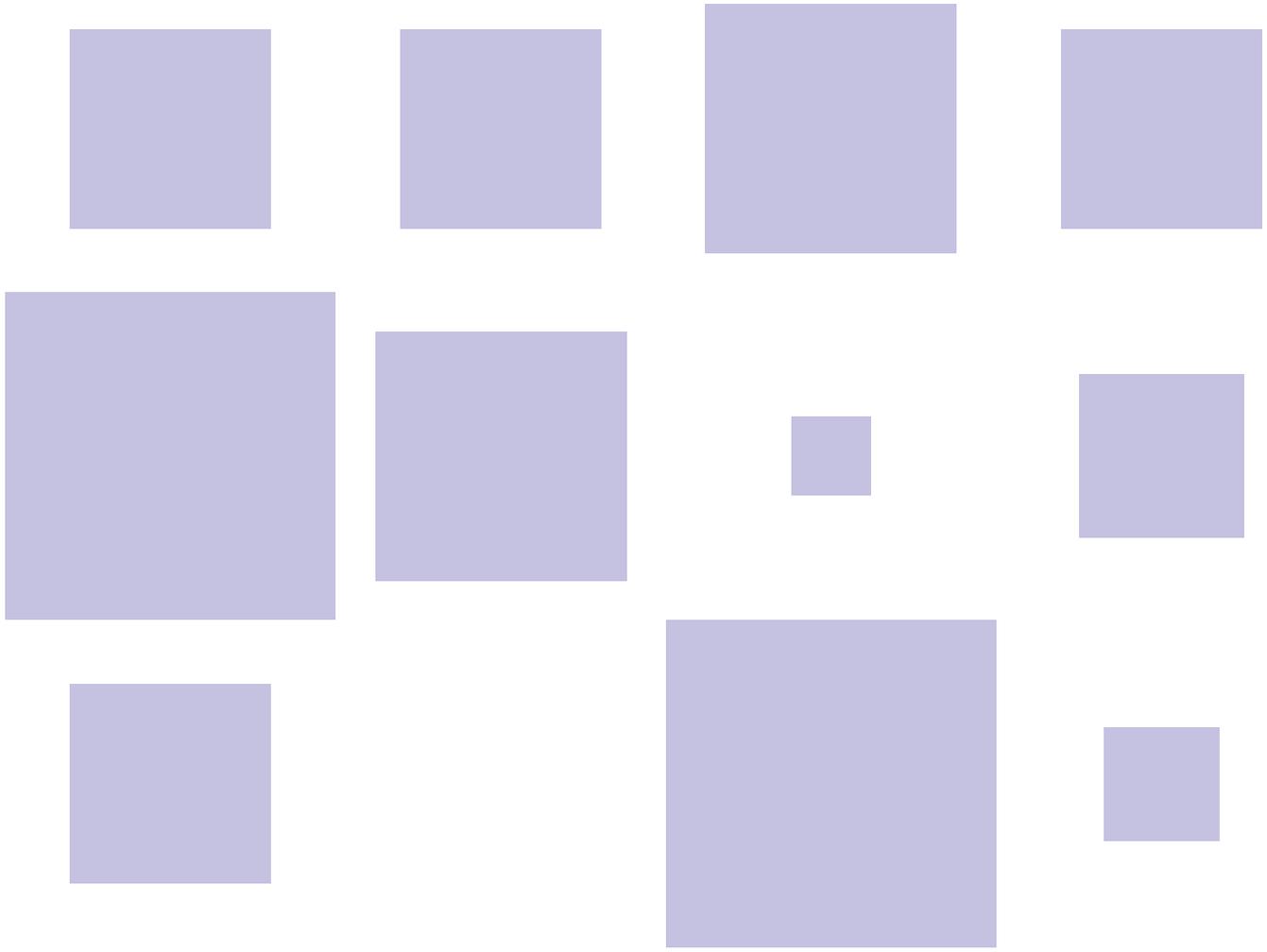


How to Build Open Information Societies

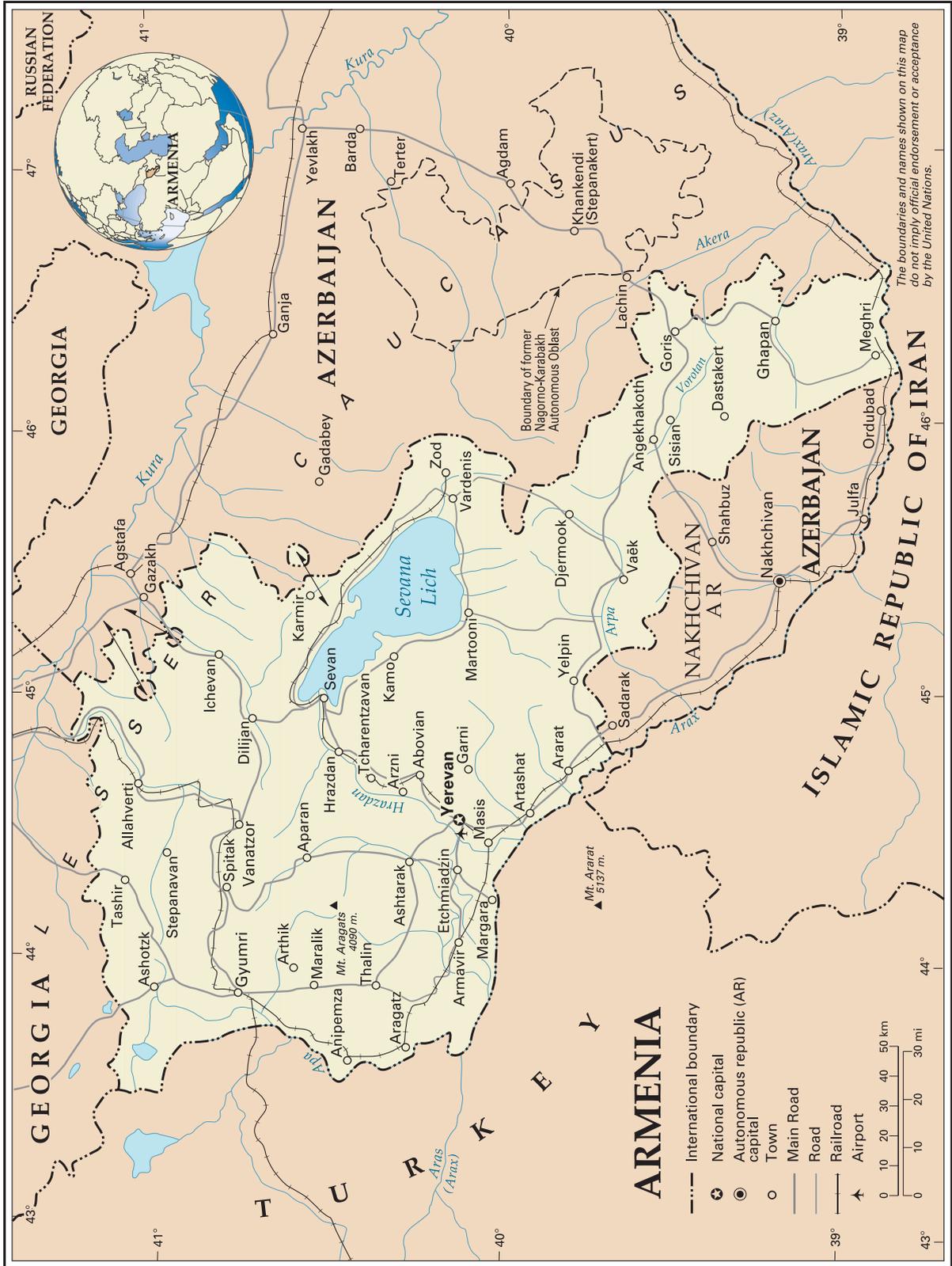
A Collection of Best Practices and Know-How



ARMENIA



Armenia



Department of Public Information
Cartographic Section

UNDP Armenia—ICTD Country Profile

Armenia

<http://www.undp.am/>

Population (millions):	3.8
Adult literacy rate (% ages 15 and over):	98.5
GNI per capita (WB Atlas method, 2002, \$):	790.0
Telephone mainlines (per 1,000 people):	152
Mobile phones (per 1,000 people):	5
Personal Computers (per 1,000 people):	7.1
Internet users (thousands):	13.2
Human Development index rank (out of 173 countries, 2003):	100
National ICT Strategy (Y/N):	NA
E-assessments (0,1,2...N):	4 completed

UNDP staff in ICTD

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ICTD Partners

- **International:** Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), World Bank, USAID, USIS, EU, Open Society Institute
- **National:** Ministry of Foreign Affairs, National Academy of Science, Ministry of Territorial Administration and Infrastructure Coordination, Central Bank of Armenia, Armenian Card Ltd., ARENA.

ICTD Activities

- Support to Information Society and Democratic Governance
- E-Governance System for Territorial Administration
- E-Visa
- E-Payment for Public Utilities

Pipeline Programmes

- E-Governance for local self-governing bodies or e-Communities: Access to public information at the community level, online interaction between the public and the municipal authorities; provision of online services; enhanced enabling environment for democratic governance through human resources development (Tentative Budget: US\$ 500,000)
- E-Consulate: On-line provision of consular services to Armenian citizens, including those living abroad (Tentative Budget: US\$ 100,000)

A Browsing Democracy: Supporting Information Society and Democratic Governance in Armenia

Hrair S. Sarkissian¹

Abstract

The UNDP in Armenia began with a first step of providing basic Internet connectivity more pervasively throughout the country by creating and implementing Armenian Freenet. Providing National Language Support software and making effective use of available technology helped to ensure the success of this endeavour. The take-up and interest in Freenet email and webpages, and daily traffic at the Freenet Internet access sites indicated that this platform could be extended from personal development to even more substantive areas. This engendered the vision of using this platform to also support democratic governance. The e-Governance project has deployed a network of portals which provide a range of government and administrative information, online discussions and access to other administrative features. The project continues to grow and to add new information and functions.

Armenian Freenet – The Essential Tool

With the belief that “every person has the right to a free email address” and “every person has the right to have a personal website,” in 1997, the UNDP country office in Armenia established the country’s first free Internet facility, giving every Armenian the opportunity to have free email and Internet access.

By 2000, more than 6,000 users had registered and were using Freenet email addresses and more than 1,000 websites had been created, in all 11 regions of the country (see figure 1). Each registered user received 6 MB of Internet space (3 MB for email and 3 MB for webpages). The Freenet system also provided free dial-up and access to all Armenian domains (.am sites), via 30 analogue phone lines, and analogue equipment and modems.

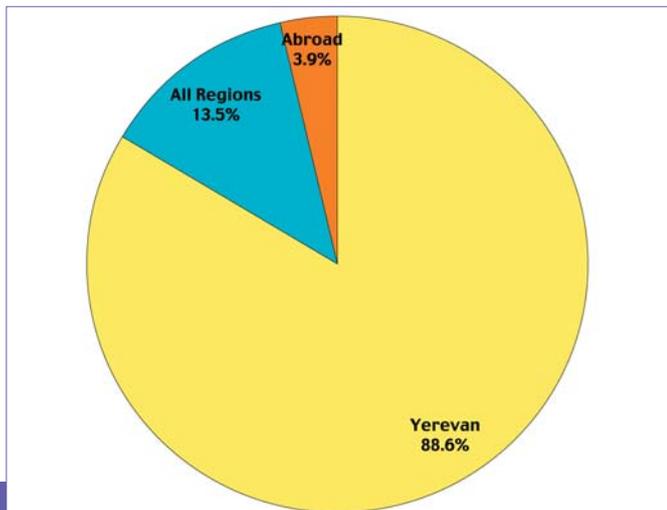


Figure 1 Freenet users, by region 2000

Today, the number of registered users exceeds 21,000 and websites now total around 3,000, with a far more diverse reach into the regions (see figure 2). Each registered user receives a total of 12 MB of Internet space (5 MB for email and 7 MB for webpages). Access is now offered over 90 digital phone lines, as well as digital equipment.

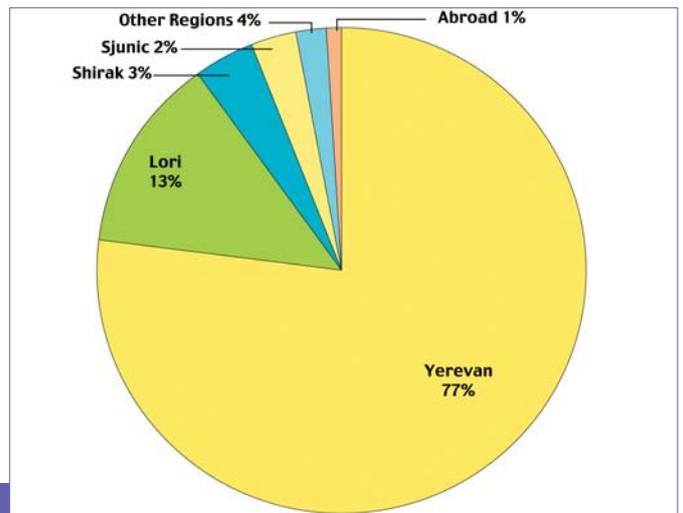


Figure 2 Freenet users, by region 2003

In addition to providing free Internet access, the Freenet project also created the National Language Support (NLS) software, giving users the option to compose email texts in Armenian. NLS later became the standard for all Armenian language text inputting in Word and other programs, including for websites and email, and currently is widely used.

Another such creation was the Yerevan Internet Exchange, which made it possible for Freenet users to exchange emails with other providers in Armenia directly, bypassing the World Wide Web and accessing .am domains and emails much more rapidly. This exchange which was, at its inception, based on Radio Modem Connectivity, is now mainly DSL-based.

Online Forums to Promote E-Democracy

The creation and successful implementation of Freenet paved the way for UNDP Armenia to move towards an even more significant area with the possibility of a more far-reaching impact: democratic governance. In 2000, UNDP Armenia shifted its focus from providing Internet access to the Armenian people, to using the Internet in developing democracy. “We wanted to support the development of information society and democratic governance, through the use of the Internet,” says Artashes Darbinyan, Project Coordinator for UNDP’s ICT for Development.

As a tool for building e-democracy, in 2001 this shift in focus resulted in the creation of online forums, <www.forum.am>, on various topics such as human rights, the environment,

and political parties. The forums combined both off-line and online work where, for example, political parties discussing constitutional issues off-line published all relevant material online and continued these discussions online with any Freenet registered user wishing to participate. As a result, all the large political parties participated in these discussions, presenting their own drafts of the constitution and receiving comments from other parties as well as the general public. Overall, almost 1,100 Freenet members registered and participated in the various forums (see figure 3).

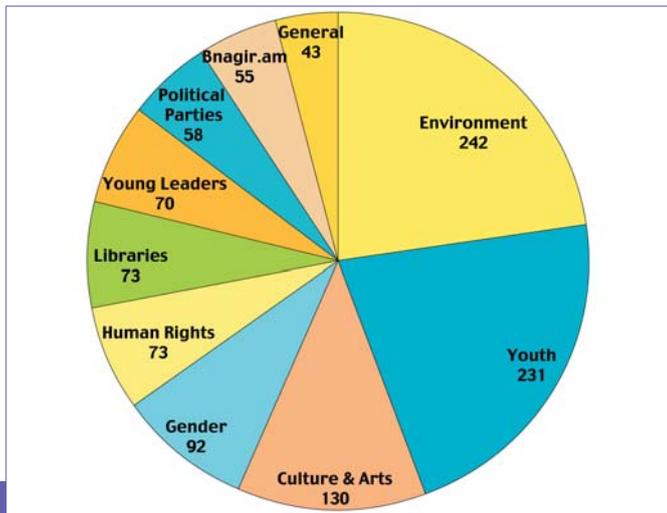


Figure 3 Number of registered users in each Forum

Currently, discussion forums such as for the environment, youth, young leaders, and culture and art, are still alive, and new ones are being opened, such as the online modern Armenian literature and poetry magazine Bnagir.am, which is hosted by Freenet.

E-Governance Creates an Informed Public

The creation of both Freenet and discussion forums were steps in the right direction of providing free public Internet access and the opportunity to participate in the democratic process of the country. However, a larger set of problems still persisted: an uninformed public, a society largely uninformed about rights and the laws of the country, and old bureaucratic traditions deriving from Soviet-type administration still rather prominent within the Armenian civil service. These factors contributed to hindering development of democratic principles of administration, leaving the system susceptible to corruption, and processes very cumbersome and time consuming.

In order to address these constraints, the next step in UNDP Armenia's mission was to create an informed society by giving it a modern tool to facilitate interaction with the otherwise vague and unavailable authorities, through the Internet. This would also yield the benefit of creating an Internet savvy society able to use the World Wide Web for personal development, something that did not exist especially outside of the capital.

Thus, in late 2002, UNDP Armenia implemented the National e-Governance System for Territorial Administration of Armenia – a network of e-Governance portals with corresponding databases hosted by regional administrations, and a central

portal hosted by the Ministry of Territorial Administration (MTA). This network of web servers installed at the MTA and the ten regional centres, will host corresponding web portals connected through the Internet. These are independently functioning systems with uniform functional structures and features, and with varying content. The function of each portal is to provide information and interactive services to various strata of the population of a given region, serve as official information interface for the regional authorities and as an interface for interaction between the population of the region, the private sector, and public and non-public entities. The MTA portal maintains overall management and coordination functions, including capacity to provide general as well as region-specific information and services to the regional administration offices.

Empowering the Public

E-Governance aims to promote personal development at the citizen level by creating an informed society, and also works to transform the old logic of administration by introducing the 'democracy element'. Conditions of increased transparency are introduced with the use of ICT, making it possible to provide usual services to the public in electronic format in addition to traditional procedures, thus ensuring better access to public information and services. This helps reduce instances of corruption by eliminating opportunities for government employees in the regions to misuse their authority in providing public information. More significant ways of promoting transparency would be through publication of decisions of Governors, decisions of branches of central administration (social, health, education, land management), decision on regulatory acts, normative acts, criminal case rulings, etc. This would further reduce opportunities to mislead an otherwise uninformed public, and would work to increase accountability and responsibility of the authorities.

How Does it Work?

The web-based network facilitates interaction between the population and the regional and community authorities for each region. It also facilitates interaction between the different regions, and between the regions and the central government. The system includes maintaining a number of databases that will be searchable irrespective of from where queries have been initiated. The databases will include Laws of the Republic of Armenia, Presidential and governmental decrees, Governors' decrees related to territorial administration, as well as criminal case rulings of the regional courts. Community-related information will include databases on population, territory, economic background, budgets, contact information, as well as information about international organisations and NGOs that are present in the region. Regarding the Central Government, there will be information on the decentralised bodies present in the regions. For business-related data, there will be information on companies and enterprises registered in the region, for which online input tools will be available.

Another main database component will be the availability of forms – those which are now available in hard copy only – used by citizens for various issues in dealing with the Governors' and other Governmental offices related

to provision of services. Those forms will be downloadable and subsequently submitted in person.

Accessible to the Public

In Lori, the first pilot region <lori.region.am>, the regional Internet access centre for personal development and for using the e-Governance system is a public access site in Vanadzor, which is fully functional with 12 computers and 12 local dial-up lines. The site is open six days a week and



Lori Internet Center & Visa Family (Courtesy of UNDP Armenia)

is currently working at full-capacity servicing around 600 people a week. Users have been slow at accessing the e-Governance system to interact with authorities as the system has been in place for only ten months and people are still in training. However, the numbers for Internet access and of Freenet accounts from the Vanadzor centre indicate that the centre has been successful in promoting its members' personal development. "By coming here, I am able to learn things that I otherwise never had the opportunity to," says an 18-year-old user in Vanadzor. "There is so much out there that I can find out about and it is very exciting. I come here as much as I can," continues her friend.

Efforts to train larger numbers of the population in accessing the e-Governance system are currently under way, in partnership with Project Harmony (PH) <www.projectharmony.am>. PH is an agency which administers US State Department technology grants, and has created Internet Connectivity Centres in schools throughout Armenia. UNDP Armenia will train PH trainers on the e-Governance system, who in turn will train the population.

Replicable in Other Areas

With more than half a million US dollars from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, the Lori pilot model will be replicated throughout Armenia. By the end of 2003, four additional regions (Syunic, Vayots Dzor, Kotayk and Shirak), in addition to the central one at the MTA, will have their own portals.

By the end of 2004, each region will have its own portal, all under the auspices of the MTA. The entire system will also have an intranet (and email) system for government

employees of each region. This will facilitate and create more direct and efficient interaction between the public and their officials as well as for the regional staff with their counterparts in other regions and the central government, and vice-versa.

E-Visa in Armenia

In cooperation with the Republic of Armenia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), UNDP Armenia has created an e-Visa program, only the second in the world (after Australia), to facilitate obtaining visas to Armenia. Visitors who live in areas of the world where there are no Armenian consulates are forced to mail their passports to their nearest consulate (which often is in another country). "Through e-Visa, visitors are able to obtain visas in 48 hours, without the hassle and the added expense of having to mail their passports. This makes it easy for our compatriots as well as for non-Armenians who wish to travel to Armenia for business or pleasure to acquire the formal entry visa," says Vartan Oskanian, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia. The program was initiated in November of 2002 and has already been proven successful as the 1000th visa was issued on August of this year, and the 2000th, a month later.



Building on this success, UNDP Armenia together with the MFA is currently working on creating e-Consulate, which, in addition to e-Visa, will provide online all the other services a consulate can possibly provide, such as applying for all types of certificates, legal forms, etc. By the end of 2003, e-Consulate will have digital versions of all consular forms available for downloading. The final site is expected to be operational by late 2004 and to provide its services to about 300 persons per week.

Box 1

Sustainable by the Regions

Each centre will be sustained by their Regional Administration office, which will own the centre and its equipment. The Regional Administration offices will each fund a coordinator to train and oversee regular regional administrative staff for duties related to portal information updating

and maintenance. The Ministry of Territorial Administration will also fund its own coordinator.

At this early stage, it is hard to evaluate the impact of the e-Governance system on democratic processes in terms of transparency, administrative processes, etc. However, the mere fact that the number of hits on the pilot model site <lori.region.am> peaked during the months of pre-Parliamentary elections and the actual elections (April and May of 2003) demonstrates both desire and interest of citizens to be more informed via the Internet. UNDP Armenia recognises this high demand and is doing its share in partnership with the Government of Armenia and other organisations, in developing an informed and open society. UNDP Armenia also believes that this system can easily be replicated in other countries which would benefit from a more informed society and more transparent access to government information and services.

UNDP Armenia opens an ICT Centre in Yerevan



UNDP Armenia opened an ICT centre on November 11, 2003, on the premises of the Academy of Sciences, in the centre of Yerevan. The centre has 38 computers, ten of which have been financed by Project Harmony and another ten by the Open Society Institute, and provides Internet access at a fraction of the cost of regular Internet cafés, for those who are not able to afford to frequent those cafés. Internet connection is provided by the Armenian Research and Educational Networking Association, which receives its funding through a NATO-funded Science Program. The centre will be open 12 hours a day, six days a week and is providing services to 450 people per day.

Box 2

¹ Hrair S. Sarkissian is the Managing Editor of *Armenian International Magazine*, based in Yerevan, Armenia.

