1. Introduction

A telecentre is a public place where people have access to computers, the internet and other information and communications technologies that enable them to gather, create, learn and communicate information for social and economic development. Beyond the issue of connectivity, telecentres provide an opportunity for accessing and using appropriate digital technologies to solve problems and assist developmental activities. For instance, by supporting the community’s economic, educational, health and social development so as to bridge the digital divide.

With the increasing use of ICT in daily life there is a great tendency for those at the marginalized groups to be left out in the online activities due to geographical limitations and limited ICT literacy level. The internet is not just the window to the vast knowledge but now it is becoming the medium for business transactions and social communications. The digital gap at present seems to be widening between the information have and have-nots, rich and poor people, and those at the urban and rural areas, gender and age levels. In order to bridge the digital divide the Government of Nepal has greatly emphasized the establishment of telecentres in remote locations of the country. There are more than 300 telecentres have established in different locations of the country.

2. Selecting location for telecentre

The location for telecentre is identified based on its remoteness from the urban areas where commercial internet cafes and other ICT facilities do not exist. Typically, a telecentre consists of following facilities:

- Computer sets
- Printer
- Photo Copier
- Fax machine
- Internet connectivity
- Power backup
3. General Objectives of Telecentre

The objectives of the telecentre projects in Nepal among others are to upgrade the community ICT literacy level, and to provide access to Internet. The projects also aim to increase e-participation of the community in the e-government, e-commerce and online activities and finally to empower the rural communities socially and economically via the use of ICT. Specific objectives are:

- To help building knowledge based society
- To assist in increasing the economy
- To provide internet access to rural community
- To provide employment opportunity
- To enhance ICT literacy
- To help bridging the digital divide

4. Services Provided by Telecentres

The services provided by telecentres can be categorized broadly into three categories; viz. Basic ICT Trainings, Internet Access and VOIP Services and Other ICT based Services:

4.1 Basic ICT Training

Telecentres provide basic ICT trainings on hardware, software, word processing, document design, printing, use of internet and e-mail. On the basis of participatory need assessment, scope of training programs are designed and implemented. However, ICT literacy trainings are commonly conducted at most of the telecentres.

4.2 Internet Access and VOIP Services

Internet access and emailing services are popular services at telecentres. This is a similar facility that the internet cafés are providing in urban areas. As the telecentres are operated by rural community without any profit motives, the charges are minimal compared to the rates charged at internet cafes in urban areas.

VOIP service is very popular in rural community as it is cheap and convenient. In most of the remote areas, access to telephone is very difficult. People need to walk for 2-3 days to make a call. As a matter of fact, many youths from rural areas go abroad for employment. The cheapest and convenient way to call abroad is through VOIP service at a telecentre.

4.3 Other ICT Services

Telecentres have become the convenient places for the rural community to get services for photo copy, fax and printing services at a single location. Otherwise, they need to travel to the district head quarter to get such services, which may take several days. Some value added services can also be provided using internet services. For example; remittance services and credit card processings.
5. **Key Observations**

Undoubtedly, the telecentres have brought a large number of people in disadvantaged and under-served communities into direct contact with modern ICTs. This familiarization would not have been possible without the telecentre in rural areas:

- Our efforts should be focused more to create ICT awareness and increase ICT literacy in rural communities so that ICT could contribute the community’s economic, educational, health and social development.

- Users are shown to have been disadvantaged on the basis of age, gender, education, literacy levels and socioeconomic status. And, fewer women than men use telecentre services. More inclusive schemes should be developed and implemented.

- If we could provide some value added services based on the nature of requirements of specific locations, telecentres could contribute more to the society. With this objective in mind, High Level Commission for Information Technology, Nepal is implementing pilot projects on remittance services and credit card processing services (beside its regular services) at telecentres located in tourist areas of rural Nepal.

As a matter of fact, telecentres have played effective roles in reaching ICTs in the rural communities and contributed significantly for empowering rural communities socially and economically.