Preface

This book basically addresses ICT and connectedness in the context of rural community development. Of late, many authors put forward the capability of technology to provide a sense of connectedness that encompasses several facets including a sense of belonging, sharing, and a feeling of being touched. Synchronous and asynchronous communication media are primed to lead to a strong feeling of connectedness. Connectedness can be maintained and social networks can be accessed across geographical boundaries between people who may never have met.

It is the author's contention that ICT and connectedness may well be the topic of research and graduate courses in the near future. Since ICT has progressed tremendously in form and impact, the process of defining and refining *connectedness* as one of the psychological constructs tagged to it is pertinent. Moreover, due to its utilization in many contexts and fields, there exists substantial complexity, inconsistency, and lack of clarity in the conceptualization of connectedness. Thus, it is crucial that the term connectedness is defined within the context it is studied. What does connectedness via ICT really mean?

In addition, ICT for development (ICT4D) is fast becoming a discipline taught and researched by academics. In the context of rural communities, the physical presence of telecenters such as the Malaysian Rural Internet Centers (RIC) is in itself a platform to connect. Rural people meet at such centers to attend activities conducted by the center's personnel, thus giving them a chance to intensify existing relationships and collaborate on projects of common interest. Very few literatures have deliberated on ICT and connectedness in this context. An in-depth case of how ICT influences connectedness especially in relation to social and rural community development will thus be of benefit and interest to academics, NGOs, and governmental organizations alike.

Hence, the book is limited to introducing ICT in the context of rural connectedness. It deliberates on connectedness experienced by the users of rural Internet centers as they use ICT to perform their daily tasks and to be informed of events outside their community. The concept of connectedness in this case, embodies both social and online or electronic generated connectedness experienced by the rural community through access and accessibility to the Internet and government tools and services.

This brief consequently discusses the impact perceived by the RIC users and managers. The users' perspectives at the micro (community) level were considered. The approach is relevant for research on entities that tend to be local and particularistic such as the Malaysian RIC. Moreover, determining impact and causality of ICT in the rural community is an arduous task and requires a longitudinal investigation. Despite the limitations, the findings of a year's study of RIC users' connectedness highlighted various aspects of rural connectedness that are of value to researchers and other stakeholders.

It is the intent of this brief to incite an interest in ICT for development among researchers and developers alike. The rapid advances in ICT have been constantly enjoyed by the more affluent societies rather than those in isolated geographical locations. Technology must cease to divide. Technology is to bridge and connect people. Thus a thorough look at how ICT impacts the marginalized groups in rural areas is timely.

The brief is based on a research funded by IDRC (Canada) conducted in 2010. Data were collected through a paper and pencil survey, interviews, and online survey of managers and users of RIC in Malaysia.

In Chap. 1, an overview of connectedness is given. Chapter 2 outlines ICT for development (ICTD) and rural connectedness while Chap. 3 gives an account of rural connectedness via RIC in Malaysia. The reader is expected to gain a picture of connectedness through the utilization of ICT at such centers.