Using new ICT possibilities to strengthen Mahila Samakhaya - A policy note based on emerging insights from the pilot project Mahiti Manthana

While MS sanghas and their federations have emerged as significant institutional forms for mainstreaming gender concerns in the development process, as well as for stimulating community centred development, some structural issues or limitations to the knowledge processes of the sangha and the federation have been felt. The MS programme has been successful in developing a cadre of women leaders among its target groups, who are socially articulate and oriented to engage with women's rights as well as general community issues. However, it is often felt that they lack adequate resource support in the form of vibrant sources and processes of knowledge. At present, these processes are in the form of personal or face-to-face communications and sessions with MS and outside resource persons, which are then carried forward by the more active sangha women at sangha and federation levels. This means that most knowledge processes depend on the memory of these women, since most of them are illiterate. Even if literate, reading habits are not well developed among these women, and text based resources, if existing, are not easy to access and in any case often not very contextualised to the knowledge needs of local groups of women. This has led to a mismatch between, on the one hand, the eagerness of these women to learn, and the enthusiasm of women leaders among them to lead such learning and knowledge processes, and, on the other hand, the availability of appropriate resources to enable and facilitate these processes. This may be one of the most important structural issues or limitations that MS needs to address. This issue becomes even more important in the context of the withdrawal strategy of MS, where more and more actual processes are being sought to be handed over to sangha women and the programme steps back to providing resource based support.

One way to address this issue is to explore the use of new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in an appropriate and contextual way, as also in an inexpensive and sustainable manner. The Ministry of IT and Telecommunications, GoI, and UNDP are currently supporting a pilot project- Mahiti Manthana - among sanghas of Mahila Samakhya, Karnataka, in 3 talukas in Mysore district, towards this objective.

The specific initiatives under the Mahiti Manthana pilot project are discussed below with suggestions based on emerging insights for replication and upscaling:

1. The Mahiti Manthana pilot project uses inexpensive, locally made videos which carry relevant, local and contextual knowledge for sangha women. Many of these videos features sangha women themselves; some are simple recordings of taluk or district level training sessions that only a few women could attend but many can view on video, some capture processes in one taluk or sangha which can be replicated in others, some other videos simply show women discussing key issues in the village, or interacting with government officials. The possibilities here are innumerable, and can be adapted to the different learning needs and contexts within the MS process. These videos are 'directed' by the MS team and shot by local 'videographers' (like the ones who cover marriages and other occasions) with inexpensive production techniques, and then replicated over VCDs that cost around 8 rupees apiece today. Making and distributing these VCDs can in fact be cheaper today than developing and distributing text based material. The impact of the audio-visual media is immense; it is completely accessible to the largely illiterate women, and is easily amenable to the context and needs of women's sanghas.

In this pilot, locally made videos are supplemented by large amounts of developmental audio-visual material available in local language from government agencies and NGOs, like those concerned with health, education, sanitation, political participation, livelihoods etc. All these are copied locally, of course with permission of the concerned agencies, on inexpensive CDs. A short write-up is developed for each audio-visual resource, on its substance and context, as well as the manner in which it could be used most effectively - for example, whether it can be used with a lead-facilitator, or as a trigger to discussions, or as a training resource complementing other resources like games etc. The attempt is to provide appropriate, effective and sufficient resources that enable development of women's sanghas as complete and sustainable institutional forms for all-round learning, like schools are for formal education. The project has introduced the concept of *sangha-shale* (SHG-classroom) to emphasise the point of a new independent and viable institutional form for learning for adult women, who may be largely illiterate, but have a great thirst for knowledge and orientation to social and community issues. This is not to underplay the importance of literacy, but to simultaneously work on possibilities that go beyond text and written-word based knowledge processes.

These processes not only overcome barriers of literacy but as importantly, the limitation in terms of availability of localised print-based resources that are contextualised to the needs of different groups. Video based resources also capture interactive and reiterative processes better; for example, in Mahiti Manthana, discussions among sangha women watching a video based resource, is itself being captured as footage which then becomes new video and learning material.

The concept of *sangha-shale* can be compared with 'farmer field schools[1] ' that have been very popular in some East Asian countries, to the extent that these schools also emphasise group based learning processes among adults, around very contextual issues with direct relevance to their lives. In the case of MS sangha women, where the women are already motivated and oriented towards such learning processes, the concept of *sangha-shale* merely provides resource and process support to make such learning possible and sustainable.

The processes of developing videos and editing them has become quite an inexpensive and 'non-technical' activity today, and the Mahiti Manthana project is trying to develop video production processes whereby taluk and district level MS units can produce their own resources, which are supplemented by externally sourced resources, from outside MS. *Sangha-shales* will be provided a large number of these videos with appropriate 'help-sheets' of 'how-to' information. To go into the economics of the issue, it is pertinent to note that around 100 VCDs can be provided for Rs.1000-1500 to a *sangha-shale*. Self-driven learning works best when the learning group itself chooses the subject, time and method of learning. This is possible in a *sangha-shale* which has a large variety of resources, has the flexibility to conduct learning sessions independently without necessary reliance on the presence of resource persons, and contains possibilities of alternative learning processes through the use of the 'help-sheets', which are dynamic documents relying on iterative processes.

Every *sangha-shale* will need access to a television and a CD player. This can be a community TV already available in the community through various schemes and programmes, or the sangha itself may need to procure these assets. CD players are available for around Rs.1500 and a TV for around Rs.6000. Sangha women have to perceive these devices as assets that contribute to important knowledge processes and invest into them in the same manner as they invest into obtaining a sangha space of their own. It also must be noted that the TV has already become an important media in most parts of the country, and increasingly, inexpensive CD players are used even in remote villages to watch popular films. (In fact, an independent video-content industry that caters to rural and semi-urban demands has already emerged in many parts of the country.) In the baseline survey of Mahiti Manthana project it was found that sangha women, in Mysore region, have a good amount of familiarity with TV and videos.

Once sangha members get well-versed in using VCDs for learning processes, the same assets and processes can be used to provide information and knowledge to the wider community. A large amount of audio video development material is available today, but it mostly does not reach target groups because the processes of outreach are ineffective. Such community based outreach processes, like *sangha-shales*, based on pull or demand, rather than push or supply (like video-vans doing occasional visits to villages) can completely transform the reach and effectiveness of development communication. For sangha women, being a crucial part of this process leads to increased empowerment in terms of improved social status in the community.

2. The Mahiti Manthana project also uses community radio in Mysore, through the facilities of the FM radio of the Karnataka State Open University, to relay a weekly hour half programme which is completely oriented to sangha women. Increasingly, more and more of the programmes for this radio broadcast are directly being made by sangha women themselves. Apart from providing useful information and discussing various gender issues, the weekly radio programme helps the sangha women in the region articulate their collective identity as members of a larger women's group or movement, and in MS's experience, such an identity-building process has been one of the most significant ways in which empowerment has happened. The radio programme seeks to plug into general MS activities in the region, informing women about and discussing various ongoing activities during the week and future activity schedules. The radio programme may also highlight some special activities undertaken by some sanghas, or *sangha-shales*, give details of new video resources available, invite women to contribute to radio programmes etc. With the new community radio policy being formulated by the government, which plans to extend this facility in a more meaningful way to NGOs, district based community/development radio catering to a couple of NGOs, and supported by common public resources, can give a big fillip to development activity of different agencies. With the Mahiti

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[1] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Farmer_Field_School

Manthana project already piloting such a radio initiative, MS can use the inexpensive technique of community radio to supplement other resource-support activities and thus enable sanghas and federations to develop autonomously into strong institutions of women's empowerment and all-round community development.

3. Getting due rights and entitlements is an important part of the struggles of poor and disadvantaged women. Therefore, linkages of sanghas to external agencies, especially government departments, is considered an important plank of MS's strategy. In Mahiti Manthana, young kishoris run telecentres under the ownership and supervision of sanghas. While the telecentres are used to provide basic computer education and some other fee-based computer services to the community, which enables them to earn some revenues, the real empowerment possibilities of telecentres lie in linkages with public institutions to obtain due entitlements. The Mahiti Manthana telecentres are used for providing basic information about government services and schemes, and are also used as Right to Information (RTI) facilitation centers. RTI, if properly used by communities is poised to become a major tool for obtaining rights and entitlements, and it is important for MS sangha and federations to engage early with this empowering possibility. The Mahiti Manthana project uses the telecentre and the telecentre *sakhi* for collecting community data, and helping public service providers to use this data for targeting interventions (like health interventions for pregnant women, and infants), and also to extract accountability for due services not provided, and matching data of actual health interventions with those listed in public records obtained through the use of RTI. Telecentres are emerging as crucial information and communication nodes at the village level and as possible community monitoring centres. For MS sanghas to get skilled in and take ownership of these processes can provide a great empowerment possibility. Many government programmes are offering community based groups assistance to set up community telecentres, and MS should look into the possibilities of supporting and promoting such initiatives for sangha women.

The Government of India has promised a telephone in every second rural household by 2010. Such ubiquitous reach of telephony needs to be seen as providing an important platform and tool for empowering information and communication processes. The Mahiti Manthana project also plans to integrate a helpline component to video, radio and telecentre components to provide a comprehensive resource support strategy for MS sanghas and federations, which is scalable and sustainable and allows sanghas and federations to work effectively on their own.

MS should seriously explore the possibility of internalising a comprehensive ICT based resource support strategy, throughout its India-wide operations, which can help MS to scale up its operations, at reducing costs, and enable autonomous functioning of sanghas and federations when MS withdraws its active human-resource intensive support.