Deepening Democracy, Strengthening Governance

Exploring the potential of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) to bring about institutional and structural reform in governance has been a key area of work for IT for Change. We believe that ICTs offer a range of possibilities to make governments more responsive, accountable and participatory for the communities they serve. ICTs have a special potential in the areas of strengthening local governance institutions, enhancing public service delivery and engaging citizens meaningfully in the processes of governance. In India, unfortunately, most e-governance initiatives have been limited by a narrow vision that has over-emphasised the techno-managerial concern of enhancing efficiency in service delivery. Such initiatives have mostly relied on private sector partnership, overlooking the immense potential of community-owned processes and infrastructure of e-governance.

Our research and advocacy efforts have been aimed at influencing the mainstream e-governance discourse to move beyond the efficiency and cost-saving paradigm. We have primarily examined the question of how ICTs can be used strategically in the design of e-governance programmes to establish citizens as the 'owners' of the governance system, and thus take forward the ideals of democracy.

In 2011-2012, our research study on the Common Service Centres (CSCs) scheme of the Government of India examined the question of whether a private sector led system can address the real issues of governance reform in India. We also carried out a study for the Karnataka Knowledge Commission, on 'Developing an institutional model for community knowledge centres', to identify design guidelines for establishing community telecentres at various rural locations across Karnataka. One of the major highlights of this year was our work as part of the Task Force on Proactive Disclosures under the Right to Information Act 2005, constituted by the Department of Personnel and Training, Government of India.

As part of our advocacy and networking efforts, we organised a workshop on 'Community Information and Service Centres: A new village institution for governance and democracy' in order to discuss how different telecentre models may be required to addresses different set of community development imperatives. We also coordinated a study visit for a delegation from the Government of Mongolia, to enable them to understand the Indian e-governance scenario.

Research

Review of the Common Service Centres Scheme of the Government of India

This year, we continued our research study on examining the implementation of the CSCs scheme of the Government of India. CSCs are ICT-enabled village level kiosks set up through a public-private partnership model under the National e-governance Plan (2006). These Centres provide e-governance services such as utility bill collections and issue of certificates to rural communities, along with a range of private services. The main actors in this scheme are companies termed as the Service Centre Agencies (SCAs) that are selected through a competitive bidding process. The SCAs take the responsibility for selecting entrepreneurs at the village level and training them for setting up and running the village level CSCs. The scheme envisages that the SCAs will build linkages with government departments and private companies so that an increasing number of government and business services can be delivered through the village level centres in a digitised manner, enabling the village-level entrepreneurs to earn an adequate income. By the end of 2012, the Government of India plans to set up 250,000 CSCs across the country. It claims that close to 90,000 centres are already running.

" *IT for Change's study entitled 'Exploring an Institutional Model for* Samudaya Jnana Kendras' *helped us to understand the information, learning and knowledge needs of communities and steps for establishing community knowledge centres at the grass-roots level. The institutional model for such centres proposed in the said report was useful for us, in making recommendations to the government.*

Prof. M. K. Sridhar, Executive Director and Member-Secretary, Karnataka Jnana Aayoga

Our study focussed on addressing the question of whether a private sector led system can address the real issues of governance reform in India. Since 2010, we have observed the progress of the scheme in the states of Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Jharkhand and Chattisgarh. Preliminary findings from our field research reveal that the private companies involved in this scheme expectedly focus largely on building a successful business, and for this purpose, keep prodding the entrepreneurs to continually seek avenues that can draw the greatest profit. This means that considerations of equity and social justice take a back seat, producing a deep distortion in what may become the dominant governance outreach system in India.
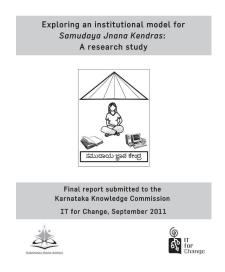
The most useful potential of ICTs in terms of enabling the participation of communities is fully disregarded in this scheme since efforts towards facilitating such participation cannot be subsumed under revenue generating models. We find that there is a huge mismatch of expectations among various actors in the CSC eco-system – the community, intermediary companies, village level entrepreneurs and government departments whose services are supposed to be delivered by the CSCs. It does not appear that the flaws of the CSC scheme can be eliminated just by taking a few corrective actions, as is currently being attempted by the government. The best option will be to devote the CSC scheme just to providing private services to rural communities, along with some public services where a fee-based model can be justified. There needs to be another countrywide initiative that is devoted to improving participatory process in governance, along with strengthening the *Panchayati Raj* (self-governance) system. The findings from this research study are being consolidated and finalised and will be completed in the next year.

Developing an Institutional Model for Community Knowledge Centres

As part of our work to influence the design of e-governance programmes, we undertook a research study for the Karnataka Knowledge Commission (KKC), aimed at developing an appropriate institutional model for *Samudaya Jnana Kendras* (SJKs), or community knowledge centres. Such centres are proposed to be set up in various rural locations across the state of Karnataka. The Commission envisaged SJKs as the loci for a new set of community-based processes that can build extensive knowledge linkages within and between all sections of local communities, as well as knowledge linkages between local communities, on one hand, and government agencies at the block and district level, and experts who hold technical/subject knowledge, on the other.

Over a period of eight months, we conducted extensive field work with communities in Mandya and Koppal districts, held consultations with grass-roots development workers in Koppal and Mysore districts, and interviewed government staff of the agricultural extension programme, continuing education centres scheme and *gram panchayat* libraries of the state of Karnataka. We studied the information, learning and knowledge needs at community level as well as the micro-level dynamics around local knowledge processes. We also analysed the effectiveness of existing government

Exploring an institutional model for *Samudaya Jnana Kendras*: A research study

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Final report submitted to the Karnataka Knowledge Commission
IT for Change, September 2011

The report outlines the research findings and a proposed model for community knowledge centres.

A focus group discussion held at Koppal district as part of the research study on community knowledge centres.

institutions in addressing the information and knowledge needs of communities.

The project also involved case study analyses of a variety of telecentre initiatives across the country such as M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation's village knowledge centres, the *Akshaya* scheme of the Kerala Government, and the telecentres set up by the Kutch *Nav Nirman Abhiyan* in Gujarat. It enabled us to understand the trade-offs between standardisation and contextualisation of knowledge, and community-end processes, in the development of knowledge systems. Furthermore, it shed light on the difficulties in reconciling service delivery functions and knowledge development objectives, in the design process of ICT-enabled community level centres.

The research findings revealed the need to keep the following structural elements in mind for designing any institutional model for community knowledge centres:

- Separating service delivery and information-knowledge functions, to the extent possible;

- Keeping the centres autonomous from the local governance agencies;

- Community ownership and management of the centres;

- Autonomy in local level functioning with resource support and guidance from a dedicated agency to be set up by the state government;

- Co-funding by different government departments whose informational functions will be served by the centres;

- Involvement of NGOs in resource support, monitoring and capacity building of SJK functionaries

Our report, outlining the research findings and a proposed model for the community knowledge centres, was accepted by the Karnataka Knowledge Commission in January 2012. The Commission has recommended to the state government that community knowledge centres be set up in the state. It has identified the Department of Rural Development and *Panchayati Raj* as the nodal agency for this process. The report can be accessed from the websites of IT for Change (http://itforchange.net/node/969) and the Knowledge Commission.

> ❝ *I am glad to note that IT for Change has been associated with* **Akshaya** *activities particularly as part of their study on dissemination of information at the grass-roots level. Dissemination and e-governance being the major initiatives of the present day, your endeavour is relevant and attuned to the aspirations of the masses utilising ICTs in an effective, efficient and innovative way.*
>
> *Mini E. R., Assistant District Coordinator,* Akshaya, *Ernakulam*

Advocacy and Networking

Community Information and Service Centres: A New Village Institution for Governance and Democracy

IT for Change organised a two day workshop on 'Community Information and Service Centres: A New Village Institution for Governance and Democracy' between 30-31 May, 2011 (http://itforchange.net/CSC workshop). Department of Information Technology, Government of India, and the Indian Institute of Management, Bengaluru, partnered with us in organising the workshop. The workshop brought together policy makers, research scholars and practitioners from various parts of the country, for focused discussions on the

role of ICT-enabled village information and service centres.

Discussions at the workshop revealed how conflicting expectations hoisted on the idea of a telecentre have affected the CSC scheme. Under this scheme, the village level telecentre is expected to be a service delivery centre, a hub for the information economy and also function as an anchor for knowledge processes along with leveraging possibilities for citizen participation and strengthening the self-governance system! The discussions focused on possible ways of separately addressing the respective imperatives for service delivery, meeting the community's information and knowledge needs, and strengthening local self-governance. It was suggested that three different e-governance initiatives should address these very different imperatives. Later, three sub-groups separately deliberated on each of these imperatives and the respective institutional needs. The workshop also discussed how decentralisation efforts were being frustrated by vested interests. It also examined issues pertaining to the politics of information and knowledge.

Task Force on Proactive Disclosures under the Right to Information Act

IT for Change was asked to be a part of the Task Force on effective implementation of the proactive disclosure provisions of the Right to Information (RTI) Act, set up by the Department of Personnel and Training, of the Government of India. We led the digital technologies track of the Task Force's work. As a member of the Task Force, we organised a regional consultation workshop in Bengaluru in June 2011. Some of the main recommendations that emerged were: The need for displaying extensive information on the websites at all levels of government, following open technical standards, and the need for user-centric presentation of online information. The insights from the consultation were presented as a report to guide the Task Force's deliberations (http://itforchange.net/task_force_effective_implementation_RTI). Later, in July 2011, we helped co-organise the national level consultations on implementation of Section 4 of the RTI Act on the basis of which the final report of the Task Force was written. We collated contributions for and wrote the draft of the chapter on use of information technology. We also suggested setting up a common RTI portal for all government departments, a suggestion that has been included in the Task Force's report. We also made important contributions to other sections of the report, especially the all-important part on monitoring and enforcement aspects.

Mongolian Delegation's Visit to Study e-Governance in India

As part of our commitment to explore new possibilities on how ICTs can make governments more responsive and accountable to the communities they serve, we organised a study visit on e-governance for a 17-member delegation from Mongolia. This delegation was led by the Deputy Chief of the Cabinet Secretariat Mr. Nyamjav Darjaa, Government of Mongolia, and included members of Mongolian government and civil society. The study visit was organised between 18th and 26th of November, 2011, in partnership with Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation (SDC), South Asia.

Mongolian delegates interacting with sangha *women during their visit to Mysore district, who own, manage and operate a village information centre under IT for Change's* Mahiti Manthana *project.*

The study visit was organised (http://itforchange.net/Mongolian_deleg ation_study_visit) with the primary aim of enabling the participants to witness

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and understand e-governance initiatives in India. It was hoped that the ensuing learnings could aid in informing the implementation of the One Stop Shop programme (OSS) in Mongolia, funded by the SDC. The OSS programme attempts to bring about single window convergence of service delivery in Mongolia. The study visit hoped to identify lessons learnt for institutional design of ICT-enabled convergent service delivery. It also aimed at exposing participants to different monitoring and evaluation frameworks for public service delivery.

The design of the study visit was firmly rooted in the experiential learning framework. Hence, care was taken to ensure that the study visit involved a combination of expert lectures, interviews with e-governance officials and field experts as well as guided field visits to some e-governance initiatives in India. Field visits were conducted to the *Akshaya* project in Kerala, Mission Convergence project of the Government of Delhi and IT for Change's field project in Mysore, Karnataka. Presentations were made by a Senior Secretary from the Evaluation and Monitoring Unit of the Cabinet Secretariat of Government of India, a director of the Centre for e-Governance, Karnataka, officials of Kerala IT Mission, and a director from the Department of IT, Government of India, as well as by a team member of the Public Affairs Centre, Bengaluru, and the directors of IT for Change.

We were later informed by members of SDC Mongolia that there has been a considerable impact of the study visit on further plans to consolidate the OSS, especially to introduce ICTs. Pilot projects are being planned in this regard, incorporating some learnings from the study visit.

> " *IT for Change organised a study visit for a delegation from Mongolia in order to learn from India's diverse experiences with ICT-based service delivery models. In particular, the Mongolian delegation was interested to understand the functioning of different 'one-stop-shop' type service delivery centres, which the delegation visited together with IT for Change, throughout the country. Both the organisation and the content of the study visit were very professionally handled by IT for Change. The Mongolian delegation was particularly impressed with the deep knowledge of the staff at IT for Change in the areas of both ICT and service delivery, which is a unique combination. We would like to thank IT for Change for the fruitful cooperation, and we hope to be working together again in the future.*
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> *Diepak Elmer, Deputy Country Director, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation*

Looking Ahead

Over the next year, we seek to further strengthen our advocacy work with the Department of Information Technology, Government of India, and other central government agencies like the Department of Rural Development and the *Bharat* Broadband initiative of the Department of Telecom that have interest in ICT-based community-end infrastructure. We also plan to engage with state governments, especially in Karnataka and other southern states. We will continue our collaboration with donor agencies like United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), UN Women and SDC, with whom we have existing relationships. We will also continue in our efforts to engage actors from the development and governance sectors by catalysing a network that can continually take note and act on emergent issues relating to e-governance in India.

On the research front, we plan to carry out four key research initiatives, next year. We will first carry out the important task of mapping the overall developments in the areas of e-governance and ICTs for development, building overall analytical frameworks. Secondly, we will compile examples of ICT-based initiatives that provide useful learning in different areas, to build theoretical and practical guidelines. A third research study will examine how the dominant scheme of e-governance in India is creating deep architectural changes to our governance systems, pushing towards privatisation of what are considered core public functions. Interestingly, this is happening in a manner that not only has no political mandate (there is no e-governance policy in India) but also with little involvement from civil society. A fourth research will look into how community-based ICT-enabled infrastructure, if designed with clear focus on equity and social justice, can bring government closer to the people, in contrast to the dominant model of profit-based initiatives.