Deepening Democracy, Strengthening Governance

One of the key elements of sustained and equitable development is governance reform. In this context, Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) contain the potential to bring about significant institutional and structural reform, rather than being used exclusively for management and efficiency considerations. Our efforts in this arena have therefore concentrated on studying the following questions: Do ICTs offer new possibilities in bringing about governance reform? Can they underpin structural reform of governance institutions towards greater democracy, equity and social justice? What are the requirements of such structural reform using ICTs? What policies and programmatic models are required in the Indian context? IT for Change (ITfC) believes that it is imperative to address both deepening democracy and strengthening governance as two strands of a single spiral.

Most current e-governance regimes almost exclusively look at improving efficiency through remote IT-based controls and rationalising work-flows. This, however, is just one side of the equation. The other, equally if not more important side, is to provide the means for closer engagement of the community and citizens with processes of democracy and governance. Unfortunately, this aspect of e-governance has remained neglected.

Two areas have been our focus this year. The first, an ICT-enabled village level institution that can become the focus of community participation in social, political, cultural and economic realms. Second, how public information systems can get recast in the information society to increase community participation in and ownership of governance processes. In the area of a new ICT-enabled village institution, we conducted field research on a number of such initiatives across India, including government-led large scale programmes like the Common Service Centre (CSC) scheme of the Government of India (GoI). We also held a national level workshop on this issue. A study is also being undertaken for the Karnataka Knowledge Commission (KKC) for looking at possible institutional models for setting up Community Knowledge Centres (CKCs) in the state of Karnataka. On the issue of public information systems, we are a member of the Task Force set up by the Department of Personnel and Training (DoPT) of GoI for the effective implementation of the proactive disclosure provisions of the Right to Information (RTI) Act. We are facilitating the sub-group on the information technology aspects of proactive disclosure.

Research

Our 'ICTs for Governance Reform' project supported by Ford Foundation, saw field research being conducted to examine the implementation of the CSC scheme under the National e-Governance Programme (NeGP). The goal of this primary research was to study what impact these programmes are having on the Indian governance system and rural communities, especially with respect to larger structural implications, and possible outcomes for the future.

In our visits to the field, we have been observing the progress of CSCs in the states of Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand. While the experience of each state is very different, on the whole, our findings reinforce initial observations that CSCs are facing a number of challenges. These challenges are not merely related to infrastructure and the provision of government-to-citizen services, but larger systemic issues related to the public-private partnership management on which the scheme is based. Our research raises the question of whether a corporate/franchisee-based system for delivering public services can achieve the stated goals of this scheme, namely enabling community participation and effecting collective action for social change. Findings so far reveal that there is a complete lack of recognition and understanding amongst the involved private companies on this

IT for Change

aspect, with the focus instead on building a successful business. In this latter pursuit too these companies have largely failed, leading to the withdrawal of many of them from the CSC scheme. There is also no accountability of the CSCs to the local governance system, the *panchayats*, which is a clear aberration. Further, there is a significant mismatch between the expectations of the various actors (the community, franchisee, intermediary corporate body and government officials), which cannot make for a viable institutional model. It is increasingly obvious that strong course correction measures are needed for the CSC scheme.

We also undertook a research study of the Mission Convergence programme of the Government of Delhi as part of our efforts to critically examine existing governance plans in India, especially with regard to community interfacing strategies. The rationale behind the programme is to converge the social welfare schemes and services of government departments so that benefits can reach the underprivileged through a single window delivery system based in the community and managed by civil society organisations. The programme has adopted a Public-Private Community Partnership (PPCP) model to make the system responsive to the needs of citizens, while also maintaining a simultaneous focus on empowering women through health initiatives, legal awareness, vocational skills training and the formation of self help groups. In addition, ITfC also conducted a study on the *Abhiyan* network in Bhuj, Gujarat, India, which has created a bottom-up ICT network where good governance and deepening democracy are intertwined. This is in sharp contrast to a large

A worker at a field centre of the Mission Convergence programme in Delhi verifies data collected by community workers to determine vulnerable groups

number of rural ICT initiatives which develop techno-managerial systems that seem inclined to subvert, rather than serve, democracy. The use of ICTs in *Abhiyan* is oriented primarily towards making governments more open and participatory, in pursuance of the

Khavda village in Bhuj (Gujarat, India): Panchayat members use Skype to communicate with other villages on local development plans

agenda of greater equity and social justice, in close association with *panchayats*.

We are also conducting a research study on CKCs for KKC. CKCs are envisaged not merely as service delivery or even as information kiosks; but as the loci for a new set of community-based processes which would facilitate extensive horizontal and vertical knowledge linkages within the community, in a context-specific manner, by tapping into the possibilities offered by new ICTs. The research study is to help in developing an institutional model for the CKCs, based on community level assessments of information and knowledge processes, and a critical evaluation of existing information and knowledge interventions at the last mile.

The scope of our research study involves:

1. Assessing the information needs as well as the knowledge dynamics of village communities at the grassroots level
2. Studying the effectiveness of the existing institutional framework in addressing the information and knowledge needs of the community
3. Developing and analysing case studies of similar initiatives by other state governments and voluntary organisations in the country, in order to understand:
   a. the difficulties in reconciling service delivery functions and knowledge development objectives while setting up ICT-enabled community level centres
   b. the trade-offs between standardisation and contextualisation of knowledge in the development of knowledge systems
   c. examining the possibility of the convergence of the many ICT-enabled centres that

IT for Change is committed to using technology to make governance processes more democratic and accountable in India. It straddles many activities: knowledge creation, experiments on the ground, citizen mobilisation, networking and advocacy. It also successfully connects the local, national, regional and global in ways that enhance its efficacy and outreach as an advocacy organisation.

Prof. Bishnu N. Mohapatra,
Visiting Senior Fellow,
National University of
Singapore, Singapore

already exist at the community level, which were set up by various development organisations and government agencies.

Advocacy and Networking

Workshop on 'Community Information and Service Centres'

ITfC organised a two-day national workshop in May 2011 on 'Community Information and Service Centres: A New Village Institution for Governance and Democracy' which brought together interested actors from the government, academia and civil society organisations. This included Shankar Aggarwal, the Additional Secretary of the Department of Information Technology (DIT), GoI, Professor M. K. Sridhar, the Executive Director of KKC and Nikhil Dey, social activist from Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS). The rationale behind bringing in a mixed group of actors was that the area of ICTs and governance reform needs to transcend a narrow technology-focus and encompass larger questions of governance and democracy.

The aim of the workshop was to examine the experiences of various initiatives that have worked towards setting up village level information and service centres using ICTs. In addition, the workshop aimed to conduct an appraisal of what we really want to achieve from telecentres and from the governance and community development processes and structures being built around them. ITfC also sought to develop a group of interested actors – both within governments and from civil society – who feel that this has become an important area of governance and development work, and would like to collaborate on shaping perspectives and advocacy positions for positive changes in this area.

A major point of debate during the workshop was vis-à-vis the multiple expectations hoisted on the idea of a telecentre; it is expected to be a service delivery centre, a hub for the information economy and also function as an anchor for knowledge processes. The resulting tensions created by overloading the centre with a multiplicity of roles, and the risk it presents of not being able to do any of these tasks properly, were examined. In this regard, the question of

possible ways to separate service needs, local governance needs and information/knowledge needs, as requiring different institutional systems, was raised. It was found necessary to study existing state and community institutions that can cater to these requirements and capture the existing gaps. Another underlying point of discussion was regarding the politics of information; whether information reflects what people want or if it is merely a top-down flow of information. Issues of accessibility, sustainability and the operational challenges faced by CSCs were prominently discussed. One of the propositions that emerged was of the need for a system that would address the informational and knowledge needs of rural communities, rather than merging everything into a single model, as the CSC scheme seeks to do. The other side of the debate, however, was about whether there is enough 'demand' in rural areas to open multiple centres, which connects to the issue of sustainability.

Consultation Meeting on Proactive Disclosures under the Right to Information Act

ITfC organised a one-day consultation meeting in Bengaluru in June 2011 on 'Guidelines for Digital Publication under RTI supporting Proactive Disclosure of Information'. This consultation was organised as part of ITfC's role in facilitating the information technology sub-group of a Task Force set up by the DoPT of GoI for the effective implementation of the proactive disclosure provisions of the RTI Act. The aim of this meeting was to gather inputs from RTI actors in Bengaluru for the report of the Task Force.

Some of the main recommendations that emerged point to the need for putting extensive information on the websites at all levels of government, especially the ones which most concern citizens. It was also felt that the information should be presented in a form legible to lay persons, through open technical standards and in reusable forms. Proactive disclosure also requires proactive monitoring, whereby the websites of all government levels should be pro-actively monitored vis-à-vis agreed disclosure norms. For this purpose, appropriate indicators and benchmarks should be developed. It was

The team at IT for Change come across as true professionals and I have seen them go beyond the role which is typically taken up by NGOs in the arena of information technology. [...] IT for Change presents a balanced view point on most technological issues and their reports on various topical issues are well researched and analysed. We have benefited from our interactions with them on issues like Common Services Centres, IT Policy and the Electronic Service Delivery Bill.

Abhishek Singh, Director of Department of Information Technology, Government of India

IT for Change

also felt that the monitoring and enforcement functions should take place from the Information Commissioner's office and that efforts should be made to ensure that information kiosks are set up in or close to all communities so that they can use digitally published public information. Other important issues like the information audit of government websites and monitoring of proactive disclosure by district, block and village level information councils, also came up.

Other Engagements

In November 2010, ITfC facilitated the Information Technology track of the Regional Conference on 'Delivering Social Protection to Unorganised Workers' organised by the Department of Labour (Government of Karnataka) and GTZ (Germany) in Bengaluru. A policy brief was prepared for the conference which examined the typical tendency of using ICTs in an unstrategic piece-meal manner and to implant governance models that are market-oriented, without an examination of the essentially political rather than technical choices. The paper is available at: www.ITfor Change.net/Social_Protection_Systems.

In May 2010, ITfC was part of a study tour to Brazil and Chile with members of DIT, GoI, with the aim to learn and share the experiences in ICTs for development. The study tour was planned by the department and supported by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Delhi. Since India is in the process of implementing a strategy to reach out to far-flung areas in rural India and set-up last mile connectivity, and Chile is also planning similar initiatives in hilly territories, it was felt that interactions and exposure to systems of implementation would be useful.

As part of our e-governance efforts, we participated in the OpenNet Initiative (ONI) 2010 Global Summit on 'Should Cyberspace be Secured as an Open Commons?', in June 2010 in Ottawa (Canada). This event featured three high-level panels of experts and practitioners on prominent topics related to cyberspace governance, security, and advocacy. Gurumurthy Kasinathan was a panelist in the session: 'What is to be done? A Conversation with the OpenNet Initiative's Global Partners'. While the focus of the discussions was on governmental controls over cyberspace through surveillance and censorship, ITfC highlighted the danger to cyberspace from the privatised governance imposed by large multinationals that dominate cyberspace.

During the year, the policy on open standards in e-governance was notified by the GoI. ITfC played an active role in advocating for its adoption and had engaged both with RTI networks in the country and with the DIT, details of which are available in last years report. The Secretary of Information Technology, GoI, wrote to ITfC commending and thanking us for the role we played in preparing the open standards in e-governance policy.

We were invited by Manipal University to make a presentation on e-governance, the CSC programme and ITfC's work in these areas in November 2010. The presentation sought to set out the context and objectives of e-governance in India, and called for developing necessary policies. It also examined the need for re-configuring ICTs for development in a more community-centric manner. The presentation is available at: www. ITforChange.net/Gurumurthy%27s_intervention -at_Manipal_University.

ITfC has also been interacting with DIT, GoI, as part of its advocacy efforts to share its findings from the CSC field research and propose recommendations to the scheme before the second phase of implementation commences this year. We also sent comments to DIT on the draft Electronic Delivery of Services (EDS) Bill. The Bill is a positive move in many ways and proposes that digital means can be used to deliver services in a completely transparent, accountable and efficient way. However, the assumption that all public services can be delivered online entirely is open to question. We also provided inputs to the draft of the E-District Guidelines, which appear to be the operationalising framework for EDS. We find the setting up of a privatised mechanism for EDS a very problematic move. We feel that at the least, such drastic changes to India's governance system should be subject to thorough political scrutiny.

ITfC made a presentation at the workshop on 'Public Sector Information Online: Democratic, Social and Economic Potentials' organised by

The last conference organised by IT for Change on governance reform was extremely useful. The high quality of participation and discussions was evidently due to the care taken by the organisers to invite a mix of relevant stakeholders, including practitioners, experts, and civil society activists. [...] My engagement with IT for Change has also been over the course of ongoing discussions on the Mission Convergence programme in Delhi. [...] The team of resource persons/experts involved in the study have done a good analysis of the programme through interactive sessions and field work.

Rashmi Singh, Executive Director, National Resource Centre for Women, National Mission for Empowerment of Women, Ministry of Women and Child Development, GoI

the European Public Sector Information (EPSI) platform at the annual meeting of the UN Internet Governance Forum (IGF) in Vilnius (Lithuania) in September 2010. We presented the general situation/ issues/ developments in India on (1) the issue of copyright licenses for development related information/content produced by government agencies in India and (2) non-governmental initiatives to repackage public information for better and more useful access by citizens. We continue to work with the EPSI platform and will also be participating in their workshop on 'Public Sector Information Online: Towards a Global Policy Framework' at the 2011 meeting of the UN IGF.

Looking Ahead

In the coming year, we plan to focus on building awareness on the positive and negative potential of ICTs in relation to governance actors in the larger domain of governance and democracy. We expect to be able to build up a constituency that will be able to push for a more progressive community-centric application of ICTs and governance, and resist attempts of the wholesale privatisation of governance systems in India, under the pretext of promoting e-governance. At the same time, we plan to increase our interactions with IT departments of central and state governments, to help make changes from within. Often, the problem is the non-availability of alternative models of thinking and practice that progressive officials can support and adopt, and we are making good progress in being able to provide these. While working at the policy level, we plan to intensify field-level work on building community ICT systems that can provide the required models for the next generation of ICTs in governance and ICTs for development approaches in India. We expect to find strong institutional partners from within governments to work on these demonstration projects, for which plans will be finalised over the next few months.

During the coming year, we also plan to complete the research study on CKCs for KKC. The research study will follow a qualitative design involving community level assessments of information, learning and knowledge processes. It will also involve an institutional mapping of existing state interventions that try to influence information, learning and knowledge processes at the community level. Further, it will build upon our research study on CSCs and other telecentre initiatives to identify new institutional possibilities for setting up a community level knowledge intervention.

In the area of participatory public information systems, the demonstration models we propose to undertake will also present new possibilities in this regard. We will seek to work with governments on promoting proactive disclosure through the Internet. We would like to promote the concept of RTI as a key design principle for business process re-engineering involved in the EDS, which is expected to proceed at a good pace after the expected adoption of the EDS legislation over the next year. We are already in contact with the DoPT (which is the nodal department for RTI) and DIT, GoI, in this regard, and hope to be able to provide detailed guidelines to operationalise this principle.

A Village Level Entrepreneur collects payment for an electricity bill in West Bengal, one of the few states where some government-to-citizen services are available at the CSC, India