ICTs for Deepening Democracy

Democratic governance seems to increasingly be in the eye of a storm as marketisation of social processes systematically squeezes out the political space for collective decision making and implementation. ICTs have been used in dominant e-governance models to promote managerial approaches seeking privatisation (or outsourcing) of as many governance functions as possible and constructing the state-citizen relationship more or less uni-dimensionally as that of a service provider and consumer. ICTs are therefore seen primarily to be in a system-management role and not so much as a possibility for people's empowerment or for democratisation of the polity. In this light, it is hardly surprising that the e-governance programmes of governments often run quite contrary to the letter and spirit of other initiatives for governance reform aimed at deepening democracy like decentralisation, community monitoring and the right to information. IT for Change has attempted to advocate alternative models of ICTs for governance reform that prioritise citizenship rights of the people, while improving efficiencies and management aspects of governance.

During 2009-10, the main activities at IT for Change in this thematic area consisted of wrapping up of our project on 'Active Disclosure and the Internet' as part of the global Open Net Initiative project, field research on the Common Service Centres programme of the central government, and the development of a proposal for a two year research and advocacy project on 'ICTs for Governance Reform' which commences in mid 2010.

Research

Open Net Initiative

IT for Change is a part of the Open Net Initiative (ONI) of the International Development Research Centre, Canada. The key focus of this network is to study censorship and surveillance processes in different countries. However, in interpreting the basic spirit of openness of the Internet as a space for the free flow of information, we focussed on the right to information through digital channels. The main contention here was: since much of government information today is stored digitally, it can be made universally accessible at almost no cost. Therefore, all public information unless expressly exempt under the Right to Information (RTI) Act needs to be made available to all through digital channels.

Unlike government records on paper, where there is a cost involved in making this information available, in the case of digital records, all the information can be instantaneously published at almost no cost by connecting it to the public Internet. Not publishing such information in fact amounts to censorship of public information by the state. Significantly, proactive disclosure is an important part of India's RTI Act.

As a part of our research, during 2008-09, we had undertaken a study on the role of ICTs in facilitating public monitoring of governmental welfare programmes. This study was situated in the context of the implementation of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) in the state of Andhra Pradesh. It explored whether the putting up of crucial and

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relevant public information on the Internet, which has a direct bearing on social and economic development, makes the Internet more relevant to people's lives and results in its greater use. Our study revealed that there is significant awareness among community members that information about NREGA is being provided through the Internet. Though most of the wage seekers under NREGA are illiterate and too poor to be able to access the Internet by themselves, they do so through Community Based Organisations (CBOs) working in their area. For CBOs, using and interpreting information about the programme to wage seekers has become an important part of their work in the community.

During the year under review, we conducted a study on 'proactive disclosures' by different departments of the Government of Karnataka. We interviewed government officials on proactive disclosures through the Internet in compliance with the Right to Information Act. We found that government officials largely agree that public information must be pro-actively disclosed in digital form through the Internet and are quite conscious of the huge pressures of a 'reactive' RTI administration, wherein each RTI request is separately and individually responded to. However, officials do not have any clear ideas about the kind of systems and processes that could ensure such proactive disclosure. The challenge is therefore not technological (since almost all government departments have websites and almost all documents are digitised), but governance reform related, involving the development of new processes and systems in the administration.

Community Service Centres

IT for Change undertook field research in the states of Andhra Pradesh and Gujarat to assess the working of Common Service Centres (CSCs), which are being put up under the central government's flagship National e-Governance Plan (NeGP). Research revealed that though the NeGP website made claims of having covered a good part of rural India through these centres, there was not much to show on the ground. While delays vis-à-vis issues connected to infrastructure and development of services are perhaps understandable, what was problematic was that the CSC's corporate-franchisee based system for delivering public services appears to be in complete disarray. There was little recognition among designated franchisees about their expected responsibilities in terms of public service delivery. Neither did there seem to be any connection of the proposed delivery system to local CBOs and local self governance bodies. On the ground, it appeared that CSCs were largely still an idea (even if computers had arrived at some places, although often still unpacked), the precise contours of which no one had any grasp of – neither the community, nor the franchisee, nor the intermediary corporate body nor government officials. Everyone seemed to be looking to the other for getting things going. We also saw that the expectations of each
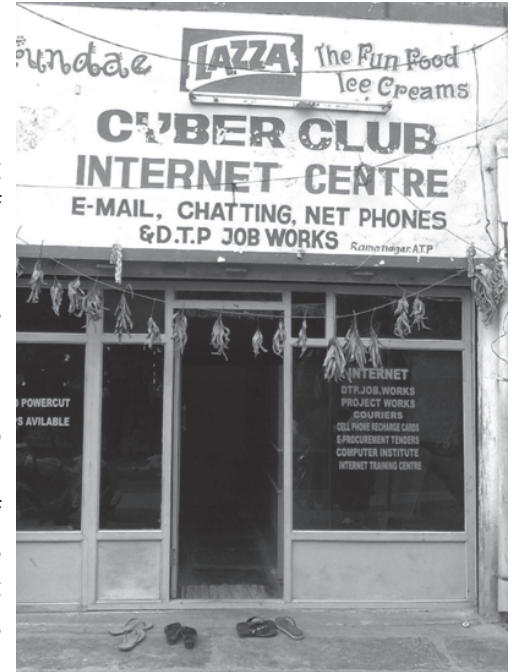
Shared Access to Internet: Telecentre in Anantapur District in Andhra Pradesh, visited as a part of our CSC research study

Rural-e-Seva telecentre in Andhra Pradesh, visited as part of our CSC study

community development in India. We also presented a schema to identify which public services can be delivered through the CSCs and which require to be delivered by the proposed community-owned telecentres. The paper also provides suggestions on how this new proposed programme of community-owned telecentres could be funded. These ideas were initially presented by us at a workshop on the ICTD project of the Government of India and UNDP that was held in Udaipur, Rajasthan, in November 2009.

Looking Ahead

Perhaps the most significant challenge in the area of ICTs and governance is that while most development actors interested in issues of empowerment and equity normally see democracy and governance as key areas to work on, ICTs in governance are still largely looked upon as a technical area which technologists are expected to take care of. Most development actors are not completely alive to the deep structural implications of ICT-induced changes in governance systems, and the need to urgently engage with these. Our research and advocacy efforts, while being directed at policy makers, need to be as much directed at the community of development actors committed to people's rights and institutional accountability. We plan to develop a network of these actors engaged in the area of participatory development to encourage a wider and deeper ownership of the agenda of ICTs for governance reform and for deepening democracy.

Our existing work on e-governance strategies and programmes of governments will feed into a two year research and advocacy project on 'ICTs for Governance Reform' that we are

group from CSCs were so hugely different that it appeared that going forward would be difficult. This initial research will be followed up by more field visits in the coming year to assess progress of the CSC scheme, which is promoted as the key to the transformation of rural governance in India.

Advocacy

IT for Change submitted a solicited paper on the role of CSC's in community development in India to the e-governance division of the Department of Information Technology of the Government of India (see, www.itforchange.net/gov-ict/73-governance/ 280-csc-model.html). In this paper we argued that CSCs have a role in the overall socio-economic development of the village community, including the delivery of some kinds of public services. However, the CSC programme has to be complemented by another rural telecentre (or community informatics) programme which is based not on a corporate-franchisee model but is centred on the community, and owned by CBOs. This alone will ensure the optimal use of the ICT opportunity for

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commencing in mid-2011 with support from Ford Foundation. This project will critically examine the existing e-governance plans in India, especially with regard to their community level engagements. It will pick up threads from studying the work of groups involved with accountable governance, decentralisation, community monitoring and the right to information, and explore how ICTs can help take these initiatives forward, as well as contribute in other ways towards better governance from an equity and social justice point of view.

Through our Centre for Community Informatics and Development at Mysore, we want to implement a policy-oriented demonstration project called *Khuli Panchayat* (open local self governance system) and are in conversation with some likely funders. This project seeks to source and present all public information pertaining to a village in a community-centric manner. It will also set up regular processes of updating this information from multiple sources. The purpose of this exercise is two-fold. On the community side, the availability of all needed information regarding local institutions will be used to trigger community activism as well as engagement with local governance activities. On the side of the government, the outcomes from our mapping of information sources, processes of accessing/ updating, the manner in which the community accesses and uses information, etc., will be used to advocate for designing community-centric public information systems. Another component of the project will be to help develop community generated content and information, capturing and systematising it on digital platforms, and using the same for micro-planning.

At the Karnataka state level, we propose to engage with the Karnataka State Knowledge Commission for influencing the model of their proposed knowledge centres, and also partnering with them on possible demonstration projects.

We also plan to continue our work on the 'proactive disclosure of public information and the Internet' through an Asia-based multi-country initiative, which will take forward the work that was completed as a part of the Open Net Initiative.

I find it interesting that this kind of article can now be written with its denouncement of neoliberalism and 'free markets'. I wish it had been written a long time ago.

Prof. Timothy Barker on the UN-GAID discussion list, on reading IT for Change's article: 'ICTD: Is it a new species of development?'