

DHAN Foundation's Village Information Centres

IT for Change
2008

This case study is a part of the broader research study *Locating gender in ICTD projects: five cases from India*, undertaken by IT for Change, which sought to understand how principles promoting women's inclusion and gender sensitivity can be incorporated into Information and Communication Technologies for Development (ICTD) projects through an analysis of five interventions: *Abhiyan's Mahiti Mitra* kiosks, DHAN Foundation's Village Information Centres, the *E-Krishi* application within the *Akshaya* project, rural *eSeva* kiosks and the Community Learning Centres and Trade Facilitation Centres of SEWA¹. These specific projects were selected on the basis of their representation of different development typologies², geographical coverage, scale, type of ownership (government or civil society sector) and their stated approach to gender and social justice. In addition to the field research undertaken between February and April 2007 using qualitative methods, the research also built on secondary sources. Each of the five interventions aims to improve community development and linkages with external institutions to better address community needs, while women's empowerment was not necessarily an explicit objective for all cases. This case study analyses the Development of Humane Action (DHAN) Foundation's Village Information Centres (VICs)³.

Village Information Centres and DHAN Foundation's approach to development

The Sustainable Access in Rural India (SARI) project is a demonstration project that seeks to invent and deploy innovative and context-appropriate technologies, applications, and highly localised content that lead to economic and social development and through this, create business models. It was initiated in 2001, when 162 VICs, called *Thagavalagams* in the local language, were set up by DHAN Foundation in Madurai District⁴ and coastal districts of Tamil Nadu. Their objective is to make ICTs accessible to the poor, facilitating socially relevant programmes and collaborating with institutions,

in order to reach a broad range of developmental goals. Young women are the operators of the VICs, facilitating their role as community mobilisers. DHAN Foundation, in collaboration with the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT, Madras), trained 27 women members free of cost in hardware maintenance, software and other aspects, and later selected 10-12 of these women as village operators for the SARI project.

DHAN's larger aim, in the words of Mr. Muthukumarasamy (Project Executive of the ICT component of DHAN foundation, henceforth Mr. Muthu), is to 'give back to society' and focus on women's development, through targeting 'those who are disadvantaged and isolated from the mainstream'.

'We should not force the community. We need to get them to realise the value of the services offered and build on the network before they are ready to pay charges for services.' (Mr. Muthu)

DHAN also believes in the empowering potential of ICTs for marginalised populations.

DHAN promotes a holistic approach to development, taking into account the multiple needs and constraints at the village level. Unlike many other telecentre projects in India, which may exclusively implement agricultural or e-governance services, DHAN

offers a package of services catering to a variety of development and livelihoods needs. In this process, women are the main focus and form the bulk of telecentre operators.

ICTD implementation model and actors

Tele-conferencing facilities for agriculture, health, veterinary science and educational support, as well as basic computer training, are the main services made available at the centres. In addition, communication services and information on development topics and government schemes are also offered. The development focus is always maintained through efforts to restrict certain kinds of activities at the centre, e.g. leisure browsing or Internet 'malpractices'.

The selection of technology platforms is not completely planned and is a result of the emergent context with its multiple circumstances and experiences. Thus the development of appropriate technology choices evolves according to the communities' needs and demands. In the initial stages, specific obstacles impacted community participation, e.g. the quality and cost of electricity supply. The overall approach to content and applications development is to ensure that the technology 'blends with the day-to-day activities of the villagers' and meets the specific needs of the community.

DHAN Foundation emphasises the importance of monitoring the

actual impact of interventions in the lives of those who have accessed them. In this regard, there are several prerequisites: having domain-specific information in regional languages and in formats that are comprehensible to local people, and which involve people's own contributions in the creation and modification of information and services based on their needs.

In the selection of the operator, there was a strong effort to employ young girls or women. The motivation levels of the operators, their orientation towards the community and ability to work in a team were critical factors, much more than their age or education level.

DHAN has developed detailed training modules (technical aspects, accounting, handling classes, public speaking, etc.) in order to build the capacity of the operators from the beginning and through their work. Experienced operators assist newer ones in holding events and preparing reports. Mr. Muthu stresses that operators 'must recognise the cause and the service motive and understand what working in the development sector is about'. A parallel strategy is used in convincing the operators' families and fellow community members of the significance of their work.

Although the centre was first located in a central place, DHAN Foundation realised quickly that such location prevented women from visiting because men were crowding around the centre much of the time. The

centre was therefore moved to a 'home-like environment' so that the location did not hamper access by any group. In addition, while the project was rooted in the very strong *Kalanjiam* self-help groups (SHGs) movement indigenous to that region and supported by DHAN, a careful balance had to be struck between recognising the importance of the SHG women, but without giving them exclusive access to the centre or the information available. Accordingly, the usage patterns in telecentres revealed no difference between SHG members *vis-à-vis* other village women or community members.

As many of DHAN's ICT services are likely to challenge existing power relations, especially those with government officials, the organisation has adopted a multi-pronged approach to securing their cooperation and support. This includes: the participation of local officials in video-conferencing facilities; stressing the potential of better access to government services for communities; encouraging relationships between operators and officials; and inviting officials as special guests for functions and inaugurations.

Challenges and positive outcomes

DHAN's empowerment strategy has brought about significant gains for operators, evidenced by their testimonies. Many women operators have stayed with the programme since its initiation. The empowering outcomes have benefited not just the

operators in their own personal life and growth, but also the organisation. Indeed, the presence of women operators has had a definite impact on women users frequenting the centre for a variety of services like access to birth certificates or tele-medicine facilities. Also, it was repeatedly pointed out that while male operators were reluctant to 'canvass' and inform people on the nature of the information and services offered, women operators treated villagers, including young men and *panchayat*⁵ leaders, as their relatives and spoke to them informally. Women's greater involvement in development activities compared to men, according to Mr. Muthu, is sufficient ground for their recognition as a key resource in implementing these kinds of initiatives and creating a certain standard for the centre.

Operators noted that, after some time, going door-to-door to build awareness in order to secure the community's participation in the centres was no longer necessary, as community members would consult them in securing additional information, content or services, and invite them to events and functions to provide their inputs. The community's role lies not just in participating, using and benefiting from services, but also in playing a strong role in monitoring the centres. *Thagavalagam* Village Associations, comprising members from different user groups (farmers, SHG members, etc.) meet on a monthly basis

to review the activities of the operator, discuss and plan for the upcoming month, and take action or make decisions as necessary.

DHAN's ability to establish the centres as spaces dedicated to community development is further exemplified in its perception of sustainability. Dismissing the priority given to income generation in other projects, Mr. Muthu debunks the myth of demand-driven change, and comments: 'We should not force the community. We need to get them to realise the value of the services offered and build on the network before they are ready to pay charges for services'. He further argues that financial sustainability has to be considered once centres have matured, that is, when people's needs are met, and operators can equip themselves to play their role, while DHAN could keep up its commitment of developing technology models. Thus, DHAN perceives that in the longer term, the financial ownership of the centres would shift to the village monitoring committees.

What do DHAN's VICs tell us about gender in ICTD projects?

Emphasis on service versus services

A clear emphasis in the DHAN project is that *Thagavalagams* are not centres designed to

conduct training or provide revenue-based services, but are vehicles to carry forward DHAN's larger goals of serving the community and bringing forth development in line with the community's needs. The entire ethos of the project is reflective of the motive to serve. In this context, ICTs are seen as a tool that can facilitate change in a way that was previously not possible. ICTs therefore need to be engaged with, as they are the tools of the mainstream. However, technology does not supersede community-end processes, which form the bulk of DHAN's operations at the village level (information provision, development of 'offline' content, holding events, meetings and functions, networking with government officials). This mix of technical and social activities has ensured that the *Thagavalagams* are not isolated technical centres but are spaces that the community can reach out in order to deal with their constraints and needs.

Women's needs within a set up that is 'open to all'

The organisation's perception of its image within the community reveals an interesting paradox. On one hand, there is a repeated emphasis on the critical role that women, particularly the *Kalanjiam* groups, play in community development processes and their initiative

Testimonies showed how the choice of women as operators seemed to be not only based on the potential for their empowerment but also on the need for the project to succeed.

in engaging in any process of progressive social change. Yet, on the other, the organisation seems particularly cautious about cultivating a picture of a 'woman-only' space or a 'Kalanjiam-oriented' project. Creating a space that is open to all has led to only little development of women-specific content or services. Women's ownership of the space was seen as sufficient to ensure women's effective use of the space for their needs.

Individual empowerment versus collective empowerment

One element that emerges very strongly is the extent to which the project has brought about changes in the lives of individual women. The reflections of the operators themselves and Mr. Muthu's analysis reveal that their role in the management of the telecentres has created significant changes in their personal and family lives and in their perceptions within the larger community. However, the ICT project has not provided collective empowerment as evidenced by the absence of specific instances where women confronted power relations

or unfair gender practices in society. Even though ICTs were very clearly seen as critical knowledge and learning tools, this view was not complemented by an articulation of how women's collectives could use them for their own agenda.

Gender in the development process: means or ends?

Another issue that emerged was whether the empowerment of individual girls was a positive offshoot of the programme or a deliberate attempt within the larger theory of change. Testimonies showed how the choice of women as operators seemed to be not only based on the potential for their empowerment but also on the need for the project to succeed. Women were considered as a critical instrument in the success and sustainability of the project, whilst also gaining critical knowledge and experiences for themselves.

Sustainability defined as community appropriation and not financial viability

DHAN has 162 centres running in Tamil Nadu with a majority of its staff consisting of girls who

have been selected to participate from the very beginning. The project has given much attention to building ownership amongst various stakeholders. Content and applications are not considered as ends in and of themselves but as possible solutions that need to be tested and adapted based on people's usage and appropriation of the applications. There are systematic efforts to maintain people's interest in the services offered at the centre, through canvassing efforts on a daily basis or functions and events on an annual basis. All of these measures, whilst strengthening the long-term financial viability of the centres, have, more importantly, ensured that the centres became critical spaces in the community that are owned and accessed by all sections of the population, including women.

Reference

Gurumurthy A., Swamy M., Nuggehalli R., Vaidyanathan V. (2008), *Locating gender in ICTD projects: five cases from India*, Bangalore: IT for Change. The study can be found at www.ITforChange.net/images/locating.pdf.

Four films have been made about these case studies. Write to communications@ITforChange.net for a copy of the CD.

Endnotes

- 1 Gurumurthy A., Swamy M., Nuggehalli R., Vaidyanathan V. (2008), *Locating gender in ICTD projects: five cases from India*, Bangalore: IT for Change. Available at www.ITforChange.net/images/locating.pdf. The study was part of the ICT for Development project implemented by the National Institute for Smart Government (NISG), supported by UNDP and the Department of Information Technology, Government of India.
- 2 The ICTD framework used in this research to typify different approaches includes the following:
 - i. ICTs as a vehicle for market extension.
 - ii. ICTs as efficiency enhancing tools for development institutions, including of the government.
 - iii. ICTs as community-centred development tools that can be used to specifically address education, health, livelihoods, agriculture, and other goals.
 - iv. ICTs as a new strategy for empowerment that can shift social power relationships and facilitate institutional transformation towards the realisation of rights of marginalised groups.

DHAN Foundation's VICs were selected to represent type 3.

- 3 More information about DHAN Foundation on www.dhan.org.
- 4 The district is the node of local governance at the state level in the Indian administrative system.
- 5 *Panchayats* (or *gram panchayats*) are village level self-governance institutions in the Indian administrative system.

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