Akshaya and E-Krishi

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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 SEWA[1]. These specific projects were selected on the basis of their representation of different development typologies[2], 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 is about the Kerala government's ICTD model – the *Akshaya* project – which seeks to provide village level connectivity infrastructure along with universal household e-literacy within a broader social process. The *E-Krishi* initiative is conceived as an online forum for agriculture, that leverages the *Akshaya* system[3].

E-Krishi's genesis and approach to development

In 2002, the *Akshaya* telecentre initiative was launched to bring about e-literacy, widespread access to ICTs and local content, and bridge the 'digital divide' in Kerala (India). The model was born out of two imperatives: the need to use ICTs as a tool for inclusion of rural communities, and the need to put in place a system for migrant workers from Kerala returning from the Gulf (west Asia) region through centres that could act as nodes supporting their skill upgradation and employment.

In 2002, 350 pilot *Akshaya* centres were set up in Malappuram District[4], of which 15 were run by women entrepreneurs. The project covered the entire state by the end of 2007. According to Mr. Salim, District Secretary of *Akshaya* in Malappuram, the idea was to develop ICT access points in the form of *Akshaya* centres in each village that would serve as 'the permanent local service provider of all government services'. Integrating the efforts of existing organisations and groups, the *Akshaya* centres run on a social entrepreneurship model, whereby income generation is seen as going hand-in-hand with a strong service orientation.

The centres offer a variety of services. In the initial period, the project focused on making one person in each household e-literate. Since then, several other programmes and services have been launched at the centre, including other kinds of e-literacy

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programmes and services such as utility bill payment, information provision e.g. on health, agriculture, education, legal rights, e-governance services, communication and entertainment services. In addition, the entrepreneur may take on data collection and data entry for local government departments. Also, *Akshaya* centres serve as a space in which activities – both online and offline – targeting different groups (students, farmers and women), are facilitated with support from the entrepreneurs. Content and services for the

centres are made available by the *Akshaya* project staff, KSITM and other bodies and are provided conditionally, upon fulfilment of social service obligations.

In Malappuram District, women constitute the bulk of the users, as beneficiaries, master trainers and social animators. Yet, bringing women to *Akshaya* centres has required hard work and innovative efforts on the part of the entrepreneurs. Ms. Sajina (entrepreneur of Marakkara *Panchayat*[5]) has trained around 1,200 people through the e-literacy programme, of which 450 were women, and narrates: 'A major challenge I faced was that women would not come to the centres for the e-literacy programme. Even though I was a woman, it was simply unheard of for women to leave their homes and receive this kind of training'. She took the initiative of taking computers to *Anganwadis* (childcare and mother-care centres) and *Madrasas* (Islamic learning centres) to ensure that a larger section of the population benefited. This initial effort changed the outlook of the community. Ms. Sajina notes that now, women, especially those who want to pursue higher education, come to the centre to look for information over the Internet.

E-Krishi, an application in the form of a web portal, was piloted in 2006 in 114 centres in Malappuram District (of which 4 were run by women entrepreneurs). This project, which built on the *Akshaya* infrastructure, was set up to connect agriculture communities with other stakeholders through a space where information and interactive platforms are made available. Through the use of ICTs, the project attempts to aggregate agricultural markets, improve the bargaining capacity of farmers and provide inputs that would enable better decision-making and improved yields for farmers. *Akshaya* centres serve as the arm for coordination and dissemination of the *E-Krishi* effort. Three institutions are involved in running the *E-Krishi* initiative: KSITM; the Department of Agriculture, Government of Kerala; and the Indian Institute of Information Technology and Management (Kerala).

ICTD implementation model and actors

In the *Akshaya* model, all financial costs are met by the entrepreneur who owns the centre, makes all the initial investments towards the infrastructure and space and holds responsibility for the successful operation of the centre. The state assists in: procuring materials at a lower cost, availing loans, and providing subsidised connectivity. The *panchayat*'s role is central in monitoring the entrepreneur and in the kinds of services offered at the centre. Even though entrepreneurs have the opportunity to earn a decent income through the *Akshaya* model, they need to be guided by the motive to serve the local community and function within the authority granted by the *panchayat*. Entrepreneurs can be disqualified if they do not follow the regulations defined by the government, which also maintains control over the range of services provided to each centre based on fulfilment of social obligations.

The initiative and outreach efforts of the *Akshaya* entrepreneur – for increasing awareness about the services, facilitating active participation of community members and ensuring adequate income generation – comprise the cornerstone strategy influencing the project's impact.

Initially, even though the emphasis was on choosing entrepreneurs from socially and economically weaker backgrounds, explicit considerations for gender equality were absent in the selection process. So, while community development and service delivery approaches do characterise *Akshaya* and the evolution of the its information and communication system, attempts to make the project gender sensitive or to cater to women's specific needs through the centres has only been an after-thought. It is in the expansion phase of *Akshaya* that a quota of one-third was set aside for recruiting women entrepreneurs.

E-Krishi began with the collection of data by *Akshaya* entrepreneurs and community representatives on crop cultivation, land-holding patterns and yields. The data is updated on a regular basis to facilitate analysis and planning by the *E-Krishi* staff. District level strategies are deliberated by a coordination committee.

A *Bhoomi* Club is formed in every *panchayat*, supported by *panchayat* officials, to brainstorm on various aspects related to the implementation of and training on *E-Krishi*. . It comprises farmer groups – mostly men –, and self-help group (SHG) members of *Kudumbashree*[6] – all women. Each centre also has a field level staff person who moves from village to village, gathering information from farmers, increasing awareness on *E-Krishi* and coordinating efforts with the *Akshaya* entrepreneur. Farmers may register on the online portal free of cost, post details regarding their products and post queries to experts about any agricultural issue.

Challenges and positive outcomes

The *Akshaya* project, by directing efforts to build the foundations of a digital society in Kerala through e-literacy, laid the ground for new development strategies. In Malappuram, a rather conservative social environment where women seldom participate in the public sphere, the few women entrepreneurs of *Akshaya* see their new role and position in a positive light. They believe that ICTs hold many options that can spin off into different business ideas, and furthermore, bring them recognition and hence the legitimacy to influence women's condition locally. Ms. Sajina has undertaken surveys on the status of women's health and this information has been used by the *Sarpanch*[7] to target government schemes better. This positive spillover. among many

others, has been tapped into by the *Akshaya* staff.

Even though the women entrepreneurs articulate the importance of the government's involvement in sustaining the centres, they are confident they would be able to sustain themselves through other activities and with the support of the local self-government and community bodies in case the government services withdrew.

Riding on the *Akshaya* information and communications architecture, *E-Krishi* is slowly moving towards its goal of establishing a platform for virtual and physical transactions. In Malappuram District, the project initially found that networking at national levels required aggregation strategies for adequate quantity of produce and appropriate quality assurance methods to transact effectively with large market players. This has been a tough challenge given the highly distributed geographic community of local farmers. The project now focuses on building local level networks and strengthening local institutional buyers.

E-Krishi has given a new lease of life to the *Akshaya* project. Indeed, while *Akshaya* centres had CD-based content on various topics such as agriculture, the demand for viewing these CDs from the community came only after the *E-Krishi* campaign was launched. Yet, from a gender standpoint, an undifferentiated

approach has been followed because the high socio-economic indicators of Kerala are believed as sufficient to ensure that women will participate in these kinds of initiatives. Furthermore, by default, the *E-Krishi* project targets male farmers, and mostly 'progressive' farmers who tend to own larger farms, are less risk averse and able to afford innovations and experiments like *E-Krishi*. All of this has led to a relative neglect of the needs and demands of small and marginal farmers, including women farmers, and of agricultural activities in which women are typically involved, which are usually not geared for the market.

What does E-Krishi tell us about gender in ICTD projects?

Women's needs within a gender-'neutral' framework

Even though the *Akshaya* project does not incorporate a gender-sensitive framework, meetings with project representatives at various levels showed that gender-related considerations had been operationalised to some extent through the implementation, with moderate success. One explanation can be the project's need to be actively anchored by the local government, which includes 40 per cent women representatives. Another is the specific context of Malappuram where a significant proportion of adult males work abroad, because

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of which women comprise the majority of the trainees and users of *Akshaya* centres. In addition, Mr. Sivasankar points to assumptions based on gender roles that he believes influenced women's participation; e.g. the belief among women that learning IT could help them support better their children's education in school.

The 'default' gender scenario is reflected in the gender-neutral nature of the content provided at *Akshaya* centres, which is largely in the form of bill payment, e-mail/chat facilities, and e-literacy programmes. Although some CDs have been developed by KSITM, there is no space for communities or marginalised populations to voice their needs. Yet, more than one representative felt that the very presence of *Akshaya* centres with their social inclination, had had a positive impact in the community, bringing women out of their homes.

Facilitating women's participation despite social constraints

Women's ownership of the centres was articulated as an important factor in bringing in more girls and women to use the services provided. More women trainers and tutors were appointed. Despite the positive effects of such measures, 'ownership' *per se* by women entrepreneurs was not perceived as critical by some representatives. Nevertheless, experience has shown that the *Akshaya* centres become the first step for women to explore the world outside their local context.

Centring E-Krishi within a pro-poor and pro-woman approach

Because the *E-Krishi* project is still nascent, it is critical to think about gender in a systematic manner to strengthen the positive outcomes of *Akshaya*, while holistically integrating women's needs. This is a challenging task because although 60 per cent of the population of Malappuram is engaged in agriculture, women's role in farming is minimal. Women often remain dependent on the income of male family members, and furthermore, the region's economy is largely supported by remittances from family members working abroad. Agriculture itself has become a secondary source of income. In the absence of the practice among women working in the family homestead to grow for the market, new practices based on women's collectives may be useful. In the expansion phase, and with other groups of women outside Malappuram, *E-Krishi* has begun to factor in the needs of women members of Kudumbashree production units, and a separate portal is being developed for SHGs to make available their produce in an aggregated manner. Since *Akshaya* entrepreneurs interact quite frequently with the SHG members and understand the 'pulse' of the groups, they would be in a good position to dispense credit to those who most require it. Much of what *E-Krishi* can do and how the *Akshaya* model can trigger gender transformative change seems to lie in the realm of the future, and will therefore need appropriate and dynamic political vision.

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.
    E-Krishi was selected to represent type 3.

3   More information about *E-Krishi* on www.e-krishi.org/site.

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.

6   *Kudumbashree* is a poverty eradication programme of the Kerala government. Its core strategies are micro-credit, entrepreneurship and women's empowerment, through the formation of SHGs. More information on www.kudumbashree.org.

7   A *sarpanch* is the head of a *panchayat*.

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