

Mahiti Mitra kiosks of the Setu project of Abhiyan

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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 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 *Abhiyan's Mahiti Mitra*³ kiosks.

Abhiyan's genesis and approach to development

Abhiyan is a network of grassroots organisations, including women's organisations, which came together after the 1998 cyclone in Gujarat. Their driving vision was to provide a platform for collective action involving relief and rehabilitation work in the area, and later, to address future long-term development interventions. The three major aims of *Abhiyan* are: to create institutions and innovations, to provide services and to collaborate with other organisations.

The main initiative of *Abhiyan* is its 'Setu' centres (literally 'bridge' centres) which have become a key node within the community. They have

contributed to: bringing about a movement for self-governance; strengthening *gram panchayats*⁴ by improving their functioning and mechanisms; strengthening the capacity for development decision-making, and placing development as a people's agenda rather than as an externally induced mandate.

The 15 *Mahiti Mitra* information hubs, set up in 2005 in the earthquake-affected region of the Kutch District⁵, are a reflection of the dynamism of the *Setu* programme. Their main objective is to bring the benefits of ICTs to marginalised groups through serving as a central source for all information relating to government services and local development needs. These ICT-based platforms demonstrate the effective use of ICTs in strengthening the

A balance has to be drawn between generating income and providing citizenship-related services, without altering the essential developmental ideal of the project (Mr. Bharath, ICT coordinator at the Setu in Adesar)

gram panchayat system through improving transparency and accountability of such structures in the districts of Kutch.

Abhiyan's vision is one where ownership and control of information is in the hands of the community. This is sought through the *Setu* and its linkages with the *panchayats* which aim to facilitate accountable

self-governance and long-term development. *Mahiti Mitras* enable e-self-governance, by: increasing citizen access to their rights and entitlements at the grassroots level; strengthening local governance structures through training, computerisation of records, and facilitation of citizen interfaces; improving health, through tele-medicine and health camps; increasing opportunities for employment through computer training, access to job information and livelihood-specific information. Although 'the issue [of gender] is not a blind spot', according to Ms. Iyengar (director of *Abhiyan* and visionary behind the *Mahiti Mitra* project), it is clear that gender considerations have not been a strong guiding force in the development phase of the *Setus* and the establishment of *Mahiti Mitras*.

ICTD implementation model and actors

Setu centres were set up in the days following the 2001 earthquake in Gujarat. They functioned as nodes for relief and rehabilitation work in the area. Structurally, *Setus* are cluster-level knowledge and information facilitation and support centres, each servicing 15-20 villages. A series of 18 exist, covering a total of 360 villages of the District. They focus on synergising the roles of NGOs, district and state government, and external experts with the local communities, and maintaining information and dissemination linkages among them.

Within the *Setu* strategy, the two aims of *Mahiti Mitra* are: to test

the feasibility and sustainability of a revenue model to run information centres, and to move towards e-self-governance. *Mahiti Mitra* centres are positioned as the dissemination platform of the *Setus*, linking them to institutions so they may become effective development and governance centres rather than merely computer training institutes. Where the *Setu's* dissemination mechanism for information and services lacks structure, *Mahiti Mitra* centres are able to provide the required structural support and means for information and communication dissemination.

The *Mahiti Mitra* centres are located in central public spaces, such as a bazaar, and are usually located within a *panchayat* space in order to establish strong ties with the local governance structures. *Mahiti Mitra* centres are operated by local persons who are trained, guided and monitored by the *Setu* team. They are in charge of daily activities at the centre and carry out all of the information and communication processes at the community level. Four of the 18 operators, at the time of the data collection, were women.

The ICT services and applications used are developed and made available free of charge by K-Link⁶. *Abhiyan* bears the cost of the infrastructure and materials, and provides a fixed salary to the operator. Keeping the content localised is critical to improving the efficiency of the ICT training provided, and is in itself a good 'marketing' tool for the activities of the

centre. Computer training is provided for both local self-governance representatives and community members. The centres also house several applications, such as a legal portal or a portal addressing issues surrounding the Right to Information Act, which help local communities understand their local governance structures. Community members collect community-level data on the content and services that are in demand. Data are analysed at the *Setus*, where decisions for new services and content are made.

Community members view the *Mahiti Mitra* centres as the focal point for dissemination of services and information on a variety of development topics. Interviews show how the centres have enabled marginalised populations to directly access information without having to go through village leaders. However, owing to problems with the location, the centres are not easily accessible for women, which shows that conceptualising projects in a gender-neutral way may not have the positive outcomes expected.

Challenges and positive outcomes

While the access and participation of marginalised populations in *Mahiti Mitra* centres continues to be an area of concern, some changes have been introduced to increase their engagement both in centre activities and, more generally, in those of the *Setu*. Future goals

of the *Mahiti Mitra* project thus include increasing centre use by women and other marginalised sections; providing relevant governmental information, especially on entitlements, for access by these groups at the centres; and developing the capacity of the *panchayats* to engage with the related governance mechanisms through the centre.

Discussions on financial sustainability of the Mahitri Mitra project raised opposing views from representatives at different levels of implementation. Financial sustainability is listed as one of the important objectives of the project, but Mr. Bharath (ICT coordinator at the *Setu* in Adesar, one of the sites of the research) believes that a balance has to be drawn between generating income and providing citizenship-related services, without altering the essential developmental ideal of the project.

The social and cultural norms of the region have kept the levels of women's involvement in the *Setu* and *Mahiti Mitra* intervention low, except in the tele-conferencing programmes on health which address women's specific needs. As only four of 18 operators are women, seeking the participation of community women in the centres has been a huge challenge. Bringing sustainable change would mean having more balanced gender ratios among both *Setu* teams and *Mahiti Mitra* operators, in order to include a gender perspective at the strategy design levels. This would involve: revising selection

norms by reducing the minimum literacy requirement; shortening the duration of the training programme; bringing resources and trainers to local areas rather than taking women to cities for capacity building exercises; providing certificates at the end of training as a motivation tool and convincing the community of the importance of women's inclusion.

In places where efforts have been made to modify the timings and location of the centres and to find women operators, there has been an increase in women's participation in information processes and training sessions. Even though the Kutch region is heavily networked through women's self-help groups (SHGs), increasing women's agency requires more relevant and easily accessible content in the centres.

What does Mahiti Mitra tell us about gender in ICTD projects?

The empowerment possibility within the vision of change

It is widely recognised that access to information is a basic right that is empowering by its very nature. Therefore, a project design focused on improving community access to, use of and control over

information is a key factor for promoting participatory development through ICTs. While this constitutes a pre-condition for women's inclusion, the empowerment possibility however, in an intervention such as the *Setu*, lies in the end value of the information provided, and how it may be effectively used by women in the community.

Trade-offs between gender justice and governance reform

In order to challenge the underlying power relations in information sharing, strengthening local self-governance and engaging the community in demanding its rights were key to the success of the *Setu* project. Project visionaries and representatives felt that incorporating gender concerns from the start would have been a contentious process, as it would have involved simultaneously challenging power relations on a further front, which from a conventional project management perspective, was seen as a 'risk' to its success. Securing the buy-in of community members and the power elite, while establishing basic e-self-governance, was seen as a necessary first stage. However, encouraging women's participation in the *Mahiti Mitra* through specific

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programmes is crucial because access to and effective use of the information is where the empowerment possibility lies in the *Abhiyan* model. On an organisational front, specific efforts have recently been taken to address the gender issues of the model, e.g. development of gender-sensitive content and applications aimed at women with low literacy levels.

Gendered choices in project implementation

Community spaces are governed by gendered norms and public spaces tend to be seen as the male domain. Therefore, locating *Mahiti Mitra* centres in central bazaars (where men tend to 'hang around' all day) comes at the cost of women's access. The lack of an explicit preference for selecting women as centre operators further confirms the definite trade-off between making centres accessible to the 'general' community in a cluster of villages, and creating an

environment accessible to those who are most alienated from information sources and external linkages, i.e. women.

Strength of the community approach

There are several strong points worth noting in the *Abhiyan* model. Firstly, the process of setting up *Setu* centres with *Mahiti Mitra* kiosks has been given great attention, with emphasis on empowering the community to participate in development activities that benefit them, as well as on strengthening and incentivising the local self-government body to better perform their roles. The operator and staff of the centre are local, therefore they are in tune with the realities of the community. Even the technical experts in K-Link work in conjunction with the *Setu* staff to ensure that applications are user-friendly and fit the community's needs. Finally, despite the fact that *Mahiti Mitra*

centres are a revenue-making model, the services which are central to the community's rights and struggles are provided for free. Similarly, the highest revenue generating services (like computer literacy) are not pushed at the cost of low-revenue or free services like information on reproductive health. There seems to be enough groundwork in building a community-owned and oriented model in *Abhiyan*, and alongside this, for making significant efforts in grassroots women's empowerment, to then synergise the two in order to ensure that women are not sidelined yet again as they have been in most development endeavour, also from the empowering possibilities of new technologies

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.*Abhiyan* was selected to represent type 4.
- 3 More information about *Abhiyan* on www.abhiyan.communicationcrafts.com/index.php.

- 4 *Panchayats* (or *gram panchayats*) are village level self-governance institutions in the Indian administrative system.
- 5 The district is the node of local governance at the state level in the Indian administrative system.
- 6 K-Link is the technical wing of the programme that develops ICT applications for rural development and maintains links with the community level through its close association with the *Setu* field staff.

Credits

Coordination	: Chloé Zollman
Design	: Varun Dhanda, Krupa Thimmaiah
Editor	: Anita Gurumurthy, Chloé Zollman
Editorial support	: Sophie Ault
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