

Women Run ICT Initiatives: Entrepreneurship in the Development Context



*Workshop organized with support from the
University of Manchester and HIVOS*

Workshop Report

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I. RATIONALE AND DESIGN OF THE WORKSHOP

In order to explore the possibilities for empowerment through the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in skill development and income generation, IT for Change (ITfC), with support from the University of Manchester, and Hivos, hosted a two-day workshop in Mysore. The workshop is one part of a two series exercise to highlight the potential of based ICT enterprise initiatives for women's empowerment. The workshop was held within the ambit of capacity building component of 'Information Society for the South' (ISS) program of IT for Change.

As ICTs reshape and change the social, economic and political contexts within which we lead our everyday lives, women's groups in India have successfully employed various new and old technologies through, for example, the use of videos for capturing community events, managing telecenters units, establishing computer production and maintenance centers, etc, to generate income, develop capacities and empower themselves. While a number of these examples can be found in states like Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Andhra Pradesh, there are relatively few to call upon in the state of Karnataka.

The purpose of the workshop exercise was to expose organizations working with poor women, and community leaders from amongst poor women's groups in Karnataka, to the empowerment potential of ICTs. Given that poverty is a major constraint to women's empowerment, the workshop exercise was particularly geared towards ICT-based enterprise initiatives that hold empowerment potential for women through skill development, capacity building, job creation and income generation.

Moving away from a didactic, training-intensive approach, the workshop served as an exposure to women community leaders and field-level NGO workers so that they can now begin to consider the ways in which ICT-based enterprises are a useful empowerment tool for women.¹ Rather than highlight the views and insights of ICT specialists, donors and researchers, the workshop created a medium for effective peer-to-peer communication and sharing at this level of leadership.

Using the stories, experiences and lessons of organizations and people employing ICT-based enterprises in South India, we were able to illustrate the potential of ICTs and reveal to Karnataka-based women's NGOs and women community leaders that ICTs hold enormous potential in helping them achieve their goals and objectives. In addition to presentations and case studies, discussions were held on various issues so that the potential NGOs/ leaders internalize the concept of ICT-enterprises for empowerment in terms of their own contexts and localities.

The workshop will be supplemented by a handbook in Kannada, which will provide resources and ideas that these NGOs and community leaders can access and utilize in order to begin incorporating ICTs in their present efforts.

¹ We were particularly intent on bringing together this cadre of leadership because we believe that they are the most effective change agents in the community and can hold greatest influence in initiating the community's involvement in ICT-based enterprise activities.

Through both components – workshop and handbook – we would like to break down the belief that ICTs are expensive luxury goods, meant for those who are literate, urbanized and well off, and peripheral to the struggles of small, grassroots efforts aimed at empowering rural, poor women. Just as education was believed to be the ultimate tool for employment, empowerment and social change, we would like to foster (through the handbook & workshop initiative) the idea that ICTs can open up a window of opportunities for disadvantaged groups by providing them with information, capacities and networks necessary to overcome poverty and disempowerment.

ITfC is an active player in the scene of ICTs for Development (ICTD) and community-based projects in Karnataka and has established a network with NGOs and CBOs in Karnataka and neighboring South Indian states. In the particular area of ICTD, ITfC has participated in many activities with these organizations and has planned further initiatives in this direction over the next two years under our Information Society for the South Project. This ICT-based enterprise workshop and handbook exercise will be the first in a series of events that ITfC plans to organize to further the concept of using ICTs to meet the development goals and the initiatives of grassroots organizations in India.

II. WORKSHOP DETAILS

The workshop was held on the 9th and 10th of March in Mysore. There were 24 participants from 8 ICT-enterprise organizations/ initiatives in South India and 24 participants from 5 women's empowerment organizations in Karnataka.² Seven participants were men, mostly from the staff level, and the rest were field-staff and community level women.³ From IT for Change, 12 members were present for the workshop.

The first day comprised of 45 minute presentations by each of the 8 ICT organizations, followed by 20-30 minutes of interactive discussion and question-answer sessions. The second day began with an exercise to assess how each women's organization from Karnataka could incorporate ICTs into their current activities and goals, followed by a large group exercise in which each organization communicated the kind of support and resources they would need/ needed to start an ICT enterprise and the kind of challenges and problems they would run into/ ran into when they begin such initiatives. In the afternoon, a smaller discussion was held with ICT organizations to seek their input in shaping a handbook on ICT-based enterprise. Details of both days are enclosed below.

III. REPORTING ON PRESENTATIONS FROM DAY I

The first day commenced at 9.30 am, with participants introducing themselves. Immediately after, Mrs. Parimala, District Program Coordinator of Mahila Samakhya, Mysore, gave the opening remarks of the day. She highlighted the way in which ICTs have become central to accessing information from all over the world; information that is current, comprehensive and authoritative. Whereas one earlier needed to visit libraries and other public spaces to access a finite amount of information, in today's world, one can sit right at home and get specialized information on areas such as gender, health, current research initiatives, geographic information

² Details of participating organizations are included in the Annexure

³ This gender break up is as per our explicit preference for women community leader and fieldworker participants, given that the workshop is on *women*-run ICT initiatives.

(through satellites), government databases, etc. Mrs. Parimala gave the example of the Bhoomi Project in Karnataka which recorded all land details for farm owners. The project has created the possibility of accessing accurate information pertaining to land from the Panchayat office for just Rs.15. ICTs, through email and chat services, have also eased and quickened the process of communication.

However, in this process, she noted, a certain section of the population has been left out and is unaware of what ICTs can offer them. Mahila Samakhya works with this section of the population – women from weaker sections of society – who face many barriers in their everyday existence. They have to be made aware of the potential benefits of ICTs first and for this, MSK has entered into partnership with IT for Change. In this partnership journey, she hoped that the sangha women would be taken along and that the experts present at the workshop would show them the way.

Venkatesh, from IT for Change, served as the workshop facilitator and remarked that this information era is characterized by a division based on the information rich and the information poor. ICTs provide the means to address this divide. Thus far, ICTs have been largely associated with formal education but by the end of the workshop, he hoped that this myth would be broken through the sharing of experiences of all organizations. He welcomed all participants to Mysore.

Right at the time of introductory remarks and through the workshop, one of the most inspiring elements was DDS' Humnapur Lakshamma's filming of the event. Although women from various projects occasionally came up front with their digital cameras to take photos of the event, it was the confidence and poise with which she came forward with her handy camera and squatted in front of the presenter to capture their stories, that most caught the attention of the sangha women. Also, her socio-economic background- poor, rural, dalit - most closely resembled that of the women we had invited to participate from organizations in Karnataka.

M.S. SWAMINATHAN RESEARCH FOUNDATION, TAMIL NADU

MSSRF represented by Velvizhi and Sooriyanarayan, managers from the Thangatchimadam and Thiruvaiyaru Village Resource Centers (VRCs) respectively, began with a detailed overview of the MSSRF model. Through the “reaching the unreached” programme, MSSRF has developed a pro-poor, pro-women, pro-nature and pro-livelihoods approach, collecting information from various sources that is local-specific and demand driven, and making it available through the VRCs. The community invests in the center by providing the building, electricity and knowledge workers to manage the center. In addition to the centers, other types of media are also encouraged- for example, a public broadcasting system, a local database, a newspaper, etc.

Their detailed presentation had to be cut short to allow for questions and answers. The first question was on how they were able to provide ‘demand driven’ information when they were dealing with the poorest of the poor who don’t always articulate their needs. Velvizhi answered that a preliminary needs assessment and ongoing studies are undertaken with those identified as Below the Poverty Line (BPL). On questions raised relating to cost and charges, the response was not clear, but seemed to suggest that while the VRC services are free, the ‘demand driven’ information provided by knowledge workers are charged at Re.1, print outs are charged Rs.2-3 and e-government services are also charged similarly. The final question was on social-political

issues within the village and how these are addressed through ICTs, but no response was provided.

AKSHAYA PROJECT, KERALA

Next, was Akshaya Project of Kerala, with telecenter managers from Mallapuram District, Rajashree and Jaseela, showing a short video on an Akshaya center followed by a presentation on the Akshaya project, how it evolved, what are its goals and how it is implemented.

The question-answer session raised important issues about the project. In terms of cost, Ms. Rajashree explained that the Akshaya e-literacy programme is subsidized by the government, wherein candidates pay Rs.20 for a 15 hour basic computer course and the government pays Rs.100. In terms of connectivity support, the government provides special internet schemes for the telecenters with varying download and connection speeds.

A series of questions were around women's use of telecenters. The participants answered that because the centers are run by women, other women, including the elderly, come confidently to the telecenters to make use of the services offered there including internet telephony, payment of bills, surfing the net, etc. As computer literacy is part of the school curriculum in Kerala, women feel that they need to be computer literate in order to teach their children. Also, as at least one person in every household in Mallapuram works in the Gulf region, women find the use of internet telephony extremely useful to stay in touch with relatives at a low cost. Finally, in response to a query on literacy being a pre-requisite to use the telecenter, Jessila clarified that Mallapuram is a 100 percent female literacy district, and so both literate women from the district and semi-literate women from nearby coastal areas come to access the centers.

DECCAN DEVELOPMENT SOCIETY, ANDHRA PRADESH

The DDS presentation began with the viewing of the video "*Ten Women and a Camera*", later followed by another short video called "*A Radio of Their Own*". Humnapur Lakshamma sat in the front, capturing people's reactions to the videos, and the sangha women were quite amazed upon identifying Lakshamma and Narsamma from the videos.

The women explained how they were selected for the video and radio training. In the case of the former, one sangha woman was chosen from each center and an expert from Pune came down to train them once a week for a period of six months. The women then began to make films on all types of activities and DDS pays them for their labor hours and covers the rental of the camera. In one example they highlighted, a film was made on the BT cotton case, wherein the promises of high productivity assured by the government and the company selling the seeds were not realized by poor, cotton growing farmers. DDS documented the voices of the farmers and was successfully able to change the government decision to sell the GM cotton seeds. In the case of radio, the need for a community radio station came up at an annual meeting of DDS and with UNESCO support, training was provided to select women. DDS now has more than 500 radio programmes. But, the biggest constraint they face is that the government has not changed legislation in favor of issuing licenses to community radio stations.

A lively question-answer session followed, in which the participants asked various questions related to the videos and also elicited details on the income earning potential of their activities.

TEL-NEK, KARNATAKA

Tel-Nek is an organization based in Ramavaram, Bangalore Rural, and provides computer training to both women and men in the area. They played a video in English about the project and interjected with details on the evolution and implementation of the project. They highlighted that the main aims of the project are to reduce rural-to-urban migration and empower disadvantaged groups through “emerging, innovative ICT models”. As the area of intervention is surrounded by an industrial belt, the training provided by Tel-Nek centers in locally-adapted software has been extremely useful in ensuring that most women get jobs in administrative and data-entry positions, without having to migrate from their communities.

Questions raised were mainly around whether the services are offered for free- to which they answered that nothing provided for free is really valued by the people and a nominal fee is charged on affordability-basis which brings in some revenue but isn't enough to cover their monthly operating expenses. Other questions were on whether all women are placed in jobs after the training and whether the programme has stopped migration from rural areas. They responded that 70% of the women had been placed in surrounding companies and the project had definitely reduced rural-urban migration in the area.

KUPPAM PROJECT, ANDHRA PRADESH

The Kuppam project, represented by three young women, focused on explaining how they had been initiated into the project. After receiving training, the women were equipped with laptops, digital cameras, printers and solar kits to charge devices. Initially, the community was not interested in being photographed, so the women gave out free copies until the community began to see value in it. Digital photography also allowed the women to take multiple photos until the customer was happy with the image. They noted that rural women are now more forthcoming about being photographed because earlier, they'd have to go to photo studios in the nearby towns run by men, to be photographed. Now, they can freely consult with the Kuppam women on the right look, scenery, etc before getting their photos taken.

In addition to photos, they have proved their worth by capturing local events such that journalists now approach them to get fast information on events/ happenings in far flung places. They also use their laptops for a variety of other purposes- to show entertainment films to the elderly, to play songs, games and other educational software for children, to relay latest agricultural information for farmers, and to provide information on various topics including maternal health for rural women.

In terms of questions raised on cost, the Kuppam women answered that they charge Rs.20 per information sought, Rs30 for 2 maxi photos and 4 passport photos. The audience seemed to find these costs exorbitant, given their own economic standing. The Kuppam women strongly justified the benefits of their project. While they charge 30rs for two photos, they rationalize that it would cost much more if an individual were to go to a nearby town to get it done, and it had to be realized that the Kuppam women were investing their own time and money in going to each village. They also save the time of villagers, who have benefited from having their passport photos ready in a short period to obtain ration cards and other forms when government officers are present.

RURAL DIGITAL SERVICES, KARNATAKA

The Rural Digital Services Project was presented by Mr. Hegde, a government representative, who explained how the project functioned and what were its benefits over the previous manual system. Although the presentation was not directly catered to local women, the participants from Karnataka recognized the potential relevance and listened keenly. The project does not have an explicit gender orientation, but Mr. Hegde mentioned that 17 out of 82 are run by women and all 5 kiosks in Anaikkal Taluk are run by women. Although two kiosk operators had come with Mr. Hegde, they did not speak as part of the presentation.

The main question raised by the sangha women was about whether similar services could be provided in Mysore and other districts. Mr. Hegde answered that there were no plans yet to expand beyond Mandya district. On being questioned about how the local communities and Panchayats had been integrated into the project to run or supervise the kiosks, the response was that they hadn't yet been integrated, but perhaps would be in the future.

RURAL E-SEVA, WEST GODAVARI, ANDHRA PRADESH

The presentation by Rural E-Seva focused on the uniqueness of their project, in that the innovation and complete support of the District Collector ensured that the project moved forward successfully, even after the collector position changed. The government worker is a knowledge worker in this model and his/her role is to bring about transparency and accountability. In the 200 centers established, 75-80% is run by poor women, who are given loans from the district administration as well as finance and training to get started. The *nirwahaks* who run the center purchase the computers and peripherals and the government investment in the entire project is nil, beyond a one time investment in purchasing the web server. The E-Seva center provides online Government to Citizen and Citizen to Citizen services in all mandals where it functions.

One of the *nirwahaks* explained the process of bill processing and collection, a major component of E-Seva. She works from 6 am to 6 pm and goes with a meter reading machine in hand from door to door, reading almost 7000 meters in a month and issuing bills accordingly. One week later, she goes to collect payments. For her services, the government gives her Rs.1.35 per bill issued and Rs.2 per payment collected. She collects couriers, house tax, recurring tax, NSC, pensions, etc for which they get a Re.1 commission. Also, she provides computer-based education to children using Azim Premji software and training to adults.

Questioned on how she got involved in this initiative, she mentioned that the Collector had selected women from each SHG and even though they didn't have much education or English language skills, he trained them. On her monthly income through this center, she responded that gross income is Rs.7-8000 and after subtracting for loan repayment, it's about Rs.5000 per month. This is higher during admissions time. On how the government is involved in the effort, they responded that the government departments get into an MOU with the E Seva centers and for executing the government's work, the *nirwahaks* get a commission.

KUDUMBASHREE, KERALA

The final presentation for the day was by Kudumbashree, represented by Mr. Sreekantan Nair, program officer, and 3 women from Palghat district of Kerala. Mr. Nair presented the general model of Kudumbashree, a poverty reduction project that began in Alapuzha district and was then scaled up to all districts of Kerala. He highlighted the 9 point poverty index that is used to

identify poor households, and is superior to an income-based poverty identification scheme, as it captures human development aspects such as lack of access to safe drinking water, lack of sanitation, household headed by women, no person regularly employed in the household, etc. Women from households identified as poor are organized into neighborhood groups and a systematic process of empowerment is carried out, starting with regular meetings and moving on to financial management, needs assessments, micro enterprise, etc. Mr. Nair's presentation of the model was supplemented by a brief description by each of the women as to how they became a part of the Kudumbashree project.

As time was short, there wasn't room for questions addressed to the women from Kudumbashree and the day was wrapped up with notes and reminders for the next day.

IV. REPORTING ON DISCUSSION FROM DAY II

Day II was oriented towards using the learnings from Day I to generate discussion on initiating and sustaining ICT enterprise activities.

HOW ORGANIZATIONS CAN BEGIN TO INTEGRATE ICTS



The first activity was focused on the 5 'non-ICT' NGOs from Karnataka, who were asked to share their organizational priorities and how they saw ICT enterprise initiatives being incorporated to meet their goals more effectively. Participants from ICT organizations provided their ideas and suggestions to the non-ICT organizations in the ensuing discussion.

SAMUHA TRUST: Greg shared the following ideas for his organization:

- Using a biometric or ICT based attendance system to track girls' attendance
 - » E Seva explained the technology they use, which also roots out the possibility of corruption as it prevents the fudging of numbers
- Supplementing existing microfinance activities with ICT enterprise by training the women and also computerizing the minutes, banking and finance processes – he recognized connectivity and cost being constraints in this effort
 - » MSSRF shared that they already have a software package that allows SHGs to present their accounts on a single sheet to banks and lending institutions
- Training girls who are collecting village data in computers so that they can enter data into computers and share it
 - » DDS questioned if such processes would reduce the need for human power and increase youth unemployment to which Kudumbashree responded that computers have actually generated hundreds of jobs and this was supported by Tel-Nek, who felt that by giving opportunities to SHGs, we aren't denying the chances of others,

we are only reducing the labor, time and energy of sangha women and building on their skills – just as DDS had done with other ICTs.

MYRADA spoke of the advantages of using technologies in their work revealed in the fact that if everything was manual, then each presenter would have had to bring tons of documents and pictures to the event, but due to ICTs, they were able to bring a wealth of information on a single CD and share freely with all. In terms of their own organization:

- They are already using computers in their office, but the cost of training the staff is high. After listening to MSSRF method of training and sharing information, they now felt that they also could and should do it. MYRADA needs to coordinate with organizations who offer training so that they don't have to rely on bringing people into the office to use the computers for various purposes
- E-payment of utilities bills and taxes for each Gram Panchayat in their area of functioning would be another service they could incorporate
 - » The kiosk operators from RDS mentioned that the services they offer save time, energy and finances of the people. All forms are available online and people who come to the kiosks are serviced within one week. At present the kiosks are placed only in some villages in Mandya district.

JANACHINTANA came up with 2 ways in which ICT could benefit their organizational goals:

- Current training to SHGs is in the areas of tailoring and embroidery, but after hearing the case of i-Kuppam and RDS the day before, they felt that similar ICT-based efforts could be initiated in their areas.
- It has also become a huge burden for field workers to keep track of the accounts and processes of 250 villages and ICTs could be used to streamline their work

MAHILA SAMAKHYA Next were the sangha women, who articulated that they are very new to technology and haven't yet incorporated any ICTs into their work. They found many ideas useful from the presentations of the day before – tracking school attendance, use of videos to document local events and issues, e-payment of bills, etc. In particular they wanted to include computer training into their current activities for kishoris (adolescent girls).

- The kishoris then mentioned that they would like to be trained in computers and use it for wider outreach of their programmes
 - » MSSRF cautioned that computers weren't the only form of ICTs and newspapers, low power transmission using TV, public address systems, community radio, etc, were also useful ways to mobilize the community
 - » Karuna Trust responded to MSK saying that they had a long history of participating in dharnas and protests and these could be documented to disseminate and use as a training tool

Finally **KARUNA TRUST** showed a video of their work with the Soliga tribe in B.R. Hills.

- They explained the problems they face with the government on preservation of the forests and in general, the constraints they face in preserving their traditional livelihoods
 - » Tel-Nek remarked that just as DDS had used video to highlight the problems of BT cotton, Karuna Trust could make videos to bring attention to the current conflict and expose who really is to blame.
 - » Also they could use ICTs to maintain a database of what and how much of forest products the tribals are really using so that the government doesn't accuse them wrongly. This way, they could bring awareness to the uses of the products as well.
 - » Akshaya felt that an initiative similar to their own www.ekrishi.org site on which farmers can directly sell their items and eliminate the middle-man could be started by Karuna Trust to preserve tribal culture and products
- In a recent initiative in Arunachal Pradesh to take over 9 government PHCs in tribal areas, they felt that they could bring in ICTs in various ways so that the community could be economically empowered.

SUPPORT NEEDED TO INITIATE ICT-BASED ENTERPRISE & PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED



Each NGO, ICT or non-ICT, was given a chance to discuss in a small group the specific support they needed or would need in their local contexts to initiate an ICT enterprise activity and the problems they actually encountered or are likely to encounter when they undertake such efforts.

The responses have been synthesized as they were very similar across all NGOs.

In response to the kind of support and infrastructure needed to start an ICT enterprise for women:

1. Government/ government officials' support and endorsement – senior officials as well as local government representatives and other influentials.
2. Government support in resource provision – through loans, subsidies, favored contracts, etc, so that entrepreneurs don't have to rely on commercial loans, who are usually reluctant to fund women's ICT enterprise
3. Technical support and in particular a mechanism to ensure prompt support
4. Guidance from experts in related areas, especially marketing, management, etc
5. Local language and adapted software
6. Ongoing training from the project initiator and self-motivated efforts by the entrepreneur to keep herself up-to-date and competitive in her skills
7. Support in obtaining space and infrastructure
8. Reliable power and connectivity
9. Public support- through awareness building and the provision of quality services so that the public begins to demand services and ensures that service provision continues through changes in the political system.

10. Public support also towards women-owned and run initiatives so that there is no resistance on gendered grounds against the project.
11. Community involvement from project design, participatory decision making and programmes to reflect community needs
12. Catering to the varied needs of different constituencies of the population – children, elderly, women, youth, etc.
13. The right balance between entrepreneurship and community services
14. Support from the household so that women can carry out their activities confidently and travel if necessary for training and exposure visits

Some of the problems encountered along with potential solutions to the problems were discussed

1. Power, power, power: Electricity was probably the single biggest constraint that all projects faced. Some of the projects had found solutions through solar powered technologies and chargers, UPS back up systems (which are expensive)
2. Change in political systems affects those projects initiated by a government officer. The way out is to build the public as a constituency so that they continue to demand services and prevent the project from declining
3. Government permission and favorable legislation, as in the case of the community radio stations
4. Lack of public interest in services – people may not be aware of the benefits/ value of the service and so concentrated efforts towards building their awareness and explaining the use of the services is necessary
5. Lack of public support for services – vested interests may create hindrances or people may not appreciate a gender-sensitive, women-focused or a pro-poor, pro-dalit approach. This requires social mobilization and awareness efforts as well as needs analysis to understand the requirements of all people.
6. Constraints that women face in carrying out their work, travel, securing support, etc.
7. Problems that aren't specifically women focused run into problems of integrating women and empowering them
8. Reliability of information sources
9. Difficulty of obtaining new technologies and replacing parts- reliance on urban areas to get technology fixed and replaced
10. Sustainability: continuing services after funding and support is stopped

FRAMING A WOMEN'S ICT-ENTERPRISE HANDBOOK

a. The Roles of Different Players

In the concluding session of the workshop, various questions were posed only to the participants from ICT enterprise organizations. The central one focused on the role of different actors in supporting ICT enterprise activities for women.

The role of the NGO was seen mainly as a facilitator and social mobilizer. They also play a central part in implementation of the project and in serving as a liaison between the government/donor and the community.

The role of the private, for-profit sector is significant in taking up and sustaining IT enterprise activities, particularly in Karnataka, where IT industries are highly prevalent.



The undisputable role is that of the government in providing initial support and handholding, in targeting BPL and vulnerable families, and in linking existing schemes such as Swarnjayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana⁴ to support community based ICT enterprise activities. While citizen to citizen interfaces can be lead by NGOs, government to citizen interfaces must be directed by the government. Government endorsement of the project is also essential to build public credibility in the initial period when people/ corporates are skeptical about the value of ICT-based services and their support serves to catalyze tie ups with organizations such as banks, phone and internet companies, etc – this is something NGOs cannot carry out independently. Finally, government backing means that projects can be scaled beyond a local area and benefit a larger population.

The role of the individual entrepreneur is to provide reliable services and ensure that the quality of service is maintained at all times.

b. The Uniqueness of ICTs

Organizations were asked what was uniquely woman-friendly about ICT enterprises. They responded that:

- » Unlike the perception that ICT enterprises require a high skill set, in reality, any woman or women's group with some support and guidance can start an enterprise
- » In contrast to other skills taught to women, where materials and resources were necessary to make and sell a product, ICTs are a tool that women always possess and can be used to handle relevant village issues

⁴ "The objective of the SGSY is to bring the assisted poor families (Swarozgaris) above the Poverty Line by providing them income-generating assets through a mix of Bank Credit and Governmental Subsidy."
<http://rural.nic.in/book00-01/ch-5.pdf>

- » In the current context where women face barriers to mobility, ICTs can help women access and share information and gain economic independence working from home
- » ICTs give women social status and are dynamic and versatile tools, offering a number of potential enterprise activities for women. Given the gender inequalities in society, ICTs are a step to bring women and men on the same plane and women, by learning a new skill, can become confident.
“With increasing awareness of ICTs among women, people have started realizing that women’s brains are located on the top of their head and not at the bottom of their feet!”

c. Sustainability

The final issue of discussion was sustainability, a key consideration given the heavy investment and support that goes into setting up ICT enterprise initiatives. Various opinions were generated around this:

NGOs noted that they were limited by donor agendas and sometimes have to find compromise between what they are expected to do and what the community really needs.

Services cannot be offered for free because it isn’t viable in the long run. A minimum training or user fee must be charged, or a higher fee must be charged for those who can afford to subsidize the poor. Alternatively, e-business activities could be carried out to bring in revenues.

A couple of organizations felt strongly that if quality and valuable services were offered they would automatically sustain as citizens would demand the services and the government would recognize their expertise and provide opportunities for them.

Once women are trained to use ICTs, they can in turn train other members of the community and earn an income. Although women’s enterprises need support initially, women must constantly upgrade their knowledge and experiences, develop contacts and network, and diversify and innovate their services they offer so that they can stay competitive even after support is withdrawn.

The workshop concluded with a vote of thanks and participants were requested to share their contact details so that future networking could be undertaken.

V. OUTCOMES AND FOLLOW UP

A constraint we faced at the workshop was in getting the experts to share the project details in a way that it resonates with the community women from Karnataka who are new to the area of ICTs. In most presentations where a male staff member was present, they tended to dominate the presentation, giving little room for the women entrepreneurs to share their experiences. We had to repeatedly remind them to let the women speak and share their stories. Also, the staff-level presentations tended to be technical, focusing on the kind of technology that is used and how it is used, and again, we had to remind them to focus on how the project functions and benefits the women and the community.

Despite the linguistic and cultural differences of the participants, the workshop created an effective space for parallel sharing, discussing and learning. Participants from ICT and non-ICT backgrounds were forthcoming in asking questions about the projects and sharing their views on various topics. ***As a result of the workshop, it has been demonstrated that it is possible to bring together grassroots level individuals and practitioners to share their insight and stories, rather than use higher levels platforms of sharing that rely on the ‘trickling down’ of information to the local level.***

The objective of the workshop – to expose and begin dialogue on how grassroots organizations in Karnataka can begin to consider ICT possibilities – was successfully met! As mentioned in the report, the presentations by women on ICT initiatives opened up a realm of possibilities for women from non-ICT organizations in Karnataka. They clearly saw that ICTs were not just for educated elites in urban areas but very central and relevant to their own lives and struggles. The *kishoris* (adolescent girls from the Mahila Samakhya programme) particularly were enthused after seeing older women learn and control technology and were determined to get started on similar efforts in their own villages and taluks.

On another level, the workshop also created a platform for sharing among ICT organizations. Each organization, GO or NGO, had a very different project objective, very different approach to development and gender and a different handle on project and financial sustainability. Discussion at the workshop exposed them to alternate methods and approaches of carrying out similar activities as well as innovations that they could incorporate to enhance their services. We observed participants taking down notes, web and email addresses, and exchanging contact information and networking ideas during the workshop. Thus, we expect that the linkages between those organizations that are already using ICTs and are eager to learn and innovate further, as well as between the ICT organizations and those who have only begun to see the new possibilities, will be strengthened and taken forward from this workshop.

In terms of our *own* learning of ICT enterprise initiatives, the workshop brought up many issues that need to be documented and disseminated to inform future such initiatives as well as policies relating to such initiatives. One such issue that came out strongly was the central role of the government in guiding and supporting ICT enterprise projects to ensure greater outreach and sustainability and better outcomes for women. Another, was the need to explicitly orient ICT enterprise projects towards women and their needs, whether in low literacy areas of Andhra Pradesh or high literacy areas of Kerala, in order for these efforts to have maximum positive impact for women and the community as a whole.

The Mysore workshop is the first step in a series of initiatives that will be undertaken by IT for Change. An immediate output of the workshop is a women’s ICT enterprise handbook that corresponds to the central aspects discussed at the workshop – this simple handbook will be made available in Kannada and distributed to organizations and individuals working with poor women as an exposure into the possibilities offered by ICT enterprise activities. Similarly, IT for Change is making a film on women’s ICT-enterprise initiatives in South India, with the same objective of exposure, but geared towards community women who are not literate (and so, cannot benefit from the insights of the handbook). We also hope to create a network with the participants of the workshop to continue the process of sharing, dialogue and support.

ANNEXURE I: AGENDA OF THE WORKSHOP

March 8th, 2006

Arrival of workshop participants in Mysore

Day I: March 9th, 2006

8:30-9:30 - BREAKFAST & REGISTRATION

I. 9:30- 10:00

How are ICTs relevant to community projects?

~ Opening remarks by Mrs. Parimala, Mysore District Programme Coordinator, Mahila Samakhya Karnataka & Venkatesh Prasad, Field Coordinator, IT for Change

II. 10:00- 10:45

What kinds of information and communication services are relevant in rural areas and particularly for women?

~ Presentation by representatives of M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation on Village Knowledge Centers in Tamil Nadu

III. 11:00-11.45

Combining community service and entrepreneurship: What is a community enterprise model?

~ Presentation by representatives of Akshaya Project, Kerala

IV. 12:00- 12:45

Use of new technologies in the empowerment processes of a grassroots movement

~ Presentation by representatives of Deccan Development Society

1:00-1:45 – LUNCH BREAK

V. 2:00-3:30

Skill building and employment opportunities through ICTs

~ Presentation by representatives of Tel Nek, Bidadi, Karnataka

~ Presentation by representative of i-Kuppam Project, Karnataka

3:30-3:45 – TEA BREAK

VI. 4:00-6:00

How can the government play a role in setting up community enterprise models for women's empowerment?

~ Presentation by representatives of Rural Digital Services, Karnataka

~ Presentation by representatives of Rural E-Seva, West Godavari, Andhra Pradesh

~ Presentation by representatives of Kudumbashree, Kerala

VII. 6:00-6:15

Closing remarks ~ IT for Change

Day II: March 10th, 2006

9:00-9:30- BREAKFAST

- I. 9:30 – 12:00:** Combined workshop exercise for all participants
~ *The way ahead – building networks and linkages to support ICT activities*

12:00-1:00- LUNCH BREAK⁵

- II. 1:00-5:00 –** Workshop exercise continues for participants from ICT-based projects in South India
~ *Discussion on important issues related to women's ICT-based enterprise in rural communities within the context of development. The output of the workshop will be used to put together a handbook in Kannada for women owned ICT-enterprises in rural Karnataka.*

Workshop exercise topics:

- I. What are the information/ communication issues in villages, particularly for women? How can ICTs be used to address these issues/ problems?
- II. What are the basic skills/ infrastructure/ support necessary to get ICT-based enterprise initiatives started in rural areas? What are the typical problems faced when these initiatives are started?
- III. Is there a conflict in combining development objectives and entrepreneurial objectives? How can government/ NGO support be combined with a revenue-based enterprise approach to ensure that the best of both the worlds is possible?
- IV. How does a community enterprise model differ from the general (business) model of entrepreneurship?
- V. What is uniquely women-friendly about ICT enterprise when compared to other forms of enterprise or small business activities that women can undertake?
- VI. What is the government's role in rural development and women's empowerment? How can ICTs be used to reach government services better to rural women? What is the government/ donor role in supporting ICT initiatives in rural areas, including enterprise-based initiatives?
- VII. What is essential to run a successful ICT-based enterprise? How can sustainability be built into ICT-based enterprise initiatives? What are the potential difficulties in building sustainability in ICT-based initiatives?

⁵ The workshop for participants from women's organizations in Karnataka will conclude with this session. Participants can arrange their departure from Mysore after lunch on March 10th.

ANNEXURE II: LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

Organization	Participants
1. Tel-Nek, Bidadi, Karnataka #14, Ground Floor, Gurukrupa Mansion, Krishna Reddy Layout, Domlur, Bangalore-560071, KN	1. Ms. Asha Jayaraman, Resource Development Manager 2. Ms. Vani, Trainer and Student 3. Ms. Sudha-Entrepreneur 4. Mr. Karthik, Technical Coordinator
2. Rural Digital Services, Government of Karnataka	1. Mr. Subramanyam Hegde 2. Two kiosk operators
3. Rural E-Seva, West Godavari, Andhra Pradesh	1. Mr. G V S R Sarma, Scientist B, NIC 2. Ms. Donepudi Surya Kumari, e-Seva Nirwahak, Denduluru Mandal, West Godavari 3. Ms. D.P.Kumari, e-Seva Nirwahak, Pedapadu Mandal, West Godavari
4. Deccan Development Society, Andhra Pradesh 101, Kishan Residency, 1-11-242/1, Street No. 5, Shyamlal Buildings Area Begumpet, Hyderabad - 500 016, AP	1. Ms. Shobha Rani 2. Ms. General Narsamma 3. Ms. Humnapur Lakshamma
5. i-Kuppam, Andhra Pradesh	1. Ms. Manjula 2. Ms. Dharamavathi 3. Ms. Eashwari
6. Kudumbashree, Kerala State Poverty Eradication Mission TC 14/582 (1), Opp. Valsala Nursing Home, Nandavanam Thiruvananthapuram - 33, Kerala	1. Mr. S. Sreekantan Nair, Programme Officer & State Co-ordinator for IT Units, Kudumbashree, Thiruvananthapuram 2. Mrs. Suja Kumari, Secretary, Technoworld Computer Digital Technologies, Shornur, Palakkad Dt. 3. Mrs. Prammela, Group Leader, Kudumbashree Technoworld Computer Centre, Palakkad Dt. 4. Mrs. Divya, Group Leader, Vidyashree IT @ School Unit, GVHSS, Kizhakkenchery, Palakkad District
7. M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation 3rd Cross Road, Institutional Area Taramani, Chennai 600 113	1. Ms. S Velvizhi, Thangatchimadam Village Resource Center Manager, Fisheries 2. Mr. S Suriyanarayanan, Thiruvaiyaru Village Resource Center Manager, Agriculture & Livestock
8. Akshaya Project, Kerala Kerala State Information Technology Mission Department of IT, Government of Kerala, ICT Campus, Vellayambalam Jn. Thiruvananthapuram- 695 033	1. Rajashree N, Entrepreneur, Mallapuram District 2. Jessila C.P., Entrepreneur, Mallapuram Distict

Organization	Participants
9. Mahila Samakhya, Mysore District, Karnataka	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ms. Savitha, Resource Person, Mahila Samakhya Mysore 2. 8 Kishori Sangha members 3. 2 Telecenter Samparka Sakhis 4. 7 Sangha members from Mysore District
10. Samuha Trust, Karnataka	1. Mr. Gregor, Volunteer
11. Karuna Trust, Karnataka B.R.Hills, Chamarajanagar, Karnataka 571441	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Mrs. Sheela Khare, Consultant, Gender and Development Programme, VGKK 2. Mrs. Sushma Bolgarkhar, Incharge, Mental Health Project, Karuna Trust
12. Myrada, Karnataka No.129, Tank Road, 6th Cross, N.R. Mohalla Mysore 570 007	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ms. Kavitha 2. Ms. Bhagya
13. Jana Chintana, Karnataka Basaveshwara Street, Tarikere Block, Chikamagalur, Chitradurga District	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ms. Bhagyamma 2. Ms. Prema