Gram Sabha Facilitation Centres: A note on leveraging the potential of ICTs for participatory planning

IT for Change
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1. Introduction: The relevance of ICT-enabled Gram Sabha Resource Centres for participatory planning

This note is based upon the understanding that participatory planning is about deepening democracy. This means that it is not an one-time exercise in legitimating pre-decided plans and policies, drawn up by administrators[1]. In this vision, the two main elements of participatory planning are:
– ensuring that citizens across different social groups and regardless of their gender, are able to successfully realise their *right to be heard* in local governance-decision making and
– creating grassroots-mechanisms that ensure regular and comprehensive reporting-back of their performance, by local government bodies, to citizens.

In this note, we bring in some specific insights about the new potential that ICTs offer, for creating and strengthening such participatory planning cultures that enable citizens to a) bring up their individual and collective demands before elected local government bodies; b) seek accountability.

These insights are based on our experiences under the *Making Women's Voices and Votes Count* project (2013-2015), a joint initiative of three NGOs[2] - IT for Change, KMVS and ANANDI - that

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1   Harilal, K.N. 2013. Confronting Bureaucratic Capture: Rethinking Participatory Planning Methodology in Kerala. http://www.epw.in/system/files/pdf/2013_48/36/Confronting_Bureaucratic_Capture.pdf. Retrieved 5 July 2015.
2   The project was supported by the UNWOMEN Fund for Gender Equality

has aimed at utilising the potential of digital technologies for enhancing inclusive decision-making, gender-responsiveness and accountability of 92 *Gram Panchayats*, across Mysore, Kutch, and Bhavnagar districts. The key strategy adopted by the project has been the establishment of digitally enabled information centres, managed by representatives drawn from various sections of the community – women's collectives, elected women, male *Panchayat* members, government extension workers and citizen members of *Panchayat* committees, and operated by a young women infomediary from the local area. 13 such information centres have been set up under the project.

The centres have functioned as the hubs for the following ICT-enabled processes:

(a) Enhancing marginalised groups' access to entitlements – by using web-based sources and phone-based networking for reaching public information/ voice messages through phones and customised information portals.
(b) Facilitating application processing and tracking (to enable marginalised groups access entitlements under various state schemes) through digitalised MIS systems.
(c) Promoting citizenship education for women and other marginalised groups, through community media-based training modules on rights and citizenship, and inclusive governance.
(d) Creating digitalised household databases on demographic and development indicators, with community participation, to enhance the robustness of beneficiary selection processes.
(e) Utilising GIS-based participatory mapping exercises to expose irregularities in the allocation of food rations, highlight the marginalisation of women-headed households from civic amenities, galvanise the School Management Committee to take up the issue of poor quality infrastructure before block level authorities of the Department of Education etc.
(f) Motivating community members through IVR-based messages to participate in *Mahila Gram Sabhas*, *Gram Sabhas* and Ward *Sabhas.*
(g) Catalysing periodic community-media based learning dialogues as a strategy to bridge the gap between elected women representatives and their women's constituencies, to enable them to jointly strategise on how women's collective demands can be pushed in *Gram Panchayat* decision-making (especially the formal forums of the Ward *Sabha* and *Gram Sabha)*.

The experiences of this project clearly testify to the power of '*ICT-enabled Gram Sabha* resource centres' for deepening local democracy. The rest of this note focuses on detailing how such resource centres can be integral to realising the vision of a technological support structure for local planning **(Action Point 7d (i) and 7d (ii))** and how ICT strategies are relevant to discussions on each of the 9 dimensions of participatory planning that have been mentioned in the Action Points note circulated for the Write-Shop.

Before proceeding to the specifics of the idea, we would like to highlight the opportunity in the current context. Programmes such as the National Optic Fibres Network and *Sanchar Shakti* are taking us closer to the vision of rural connectivity. The idea of developing ICT-enabled *Gram Sabha* resource centres is a timely one. Such a move will help *Panchayats* integrate new functionalities that are above and beyond the use of ICTs for strengthening efficiencies in work flows and/or monitoring, such as through the *Panchayat* Enterprise Suite. *Panchayat*-specific initiatives such as the Mobile inspection for rural development works set up by the Sabarkantha district *panchayat* (Gujarat), the biometric attendance system set up by the Bhiwandi *panchayat* (Thane, Maharashtra), the e-bill collection system set up by the Ras *Gram Panchayat* (Anand, Gujarat) etc. have shown the way in adopting ICTs for greater efficiency. It is time now to use ICTs also for citizen participation and empowerment.

2. Inputs for Action Points 7d (1) and 7d (2) - The specifics of ICT-enabled Gram Sabha resource centres

2a. Structure:

- *Gram Sabha* Resource Centres will be housed in *Gram Panchayat* premises, and equipped with a computer with Internet connection, telephone, printer, a tablet with preloaded audio-video content, and a laptop and projector for community screenings. The fund for this can be drawn from public information outreach budgets of all departments/ budget from MGNREGS' Rajiv Gandhi Seva Kendra component; continuing education centres, GP libraries etc.

- Each Resource Centre will be womaned by a team of 3-4 infomediaries selected from among the *Panchayat* villages of the respective *Gram Panchayat,* preferably women who are part of local self help groups. The role of the infomediary is to handle the ICT-enabled information outreach, entitlements-processing, community media-based awareness generation processes, GIS-enabled participatory mapping, creating community databases for effective local planning etc., the specifics of which are detailed in **Section 2b**. The honoraria for the

- To ensure that Resource Centres function in a public spirited and non-partisan way, a Managing Committee will be set up comprising of the following representatives – member of a woman's collective and ASHA from each village of the *Panchayat, anganwadi* teacher and school teacher from each *anganwadi* and school in the *Panchayat,* one elected woman representative, an SC/ST elected member, and the President of the *Panchayat.* The Managing Committee will meet every month to take stock of the work of the infomediary team, and discuss how to overcome any impediments/ challenges reported by the infomediaries, as well as take stock of key issues/concerns at the community level based on the digitalised community database on key demographic and human development indicators maintained by the centre, and accordingly plan the agenda for the resource-centre's work, the following month.

- At the state level, a dedicated state agency / mechanism that will provide overall guidance, and channelise resource support to the *Gram Sabha* Resource Centres must be identified to oversee the *Gram Sabha* Resource Centre programme. A resource support and monitoring mechanism at the district and block level must be designed keeping in mind the principle that the *Gram Sabha* Resource Centres must be given maximum autonomy in deciding action-agendas, in a manner that does not deviate from the core norms of deepening democracy at the village level, firm commitment to inclusion of marginalised groups and impartial public information outreach.

- An Advisory Team comprising 7 to 8 development practitioners/ academics/ NGO staff with expertise in women's rights, livelihoods, community development, health and education and a long-standing field presence and history of working on rights and inclusion issues, will be set up at the block level and supervised by the state agency. This Advisory Team will be the

resource team involved in / contracted for developing and implementing periodic capacity-building programmes for infomediaries. A 2 day residential programme once in 2 months, that will focus on the hard and soft skills that infomediaries need in their work, and also provide a peer learning space for infomediaries to meet and discuss the challenges and issues/ concerns that emerge in their work, which often involves going against prevailing gender norms, and challenging entrenched power elites who control access to public information and entitlements. The training can be undertaken for batches of infomediaries in the Panchayat Bhuvans and coordinated by the existing State Resource Centre.

2b. Functions that the ICT-enabled Gram Sabha Resource Centre can undertake, leveraging the learnings from Making Women's Voices and Votes Count:

Functions of the ICT-enabled *Gram Sabha* resource centre	Key insights from *Making Women's Voices and Votes Count* project on how this can be operationalised
Public information outreach	• Web-based information portal in the local language, with information about eligibility criteria and application forms for permanent schemes and temporary schemes. • IVR-enabled targeted messaging on entitlements, announcements about key *Panchayat* forums, last dates for applying for schemes, special rations in the *anganwadi,* vaccination drives etc. • Using images (photos/graphics/pictures) to make marginalised groups aware about various identity documents required for different entitlements.
Entitlements processing	• Assisting visitors to the centre in processing applications for entitlements. No fees charged except cost of photostats and print-outs of supporting documents. • Accompanying applicants from marginalised sections, especially those with difficulty in interfacing with departments, to concerned officials, in processing claims. • Maintaining a digitalised MIS of claims filed and realised, to effectively track pending applications
School for democracy: utilising locally created audio-video resources	• Infomediaries to be trained in generating community radio and community video resources in different formats (local news, critically unpacking gender and governance issues, info-videos on new schemes, *Panchayat* rules and legislations etc.), with support from local experts/ NGOs/ academia. • Radio and video resources to be screened by infomediaries when undertaking outreach visits to the communities, at the local *anganwadi,* school, *Sangha bhavan* etc. (using projectors/ tablets as per requirement). • Video newsletter (an innovative format that consists of a series of short video clips on key local issues pertaining to democracy and governance) that can also circulate on Whatsapp as a 'mobile video' in the local public sphere.

Promoting dialogue between disenfranchised members of communities and elected representatives, using community media where appropriate	• Participatory community media strategy where community radio and community video resources on gender and governance, created with the support of marginalised women's collectives, are screened at meetings, bringing together marginalised women and their elected women representatives, to trigger dialogue and debate. • Awareness programs for marginalised women and other disadvantaged groups in the community about *Mahila Gram Sabhas,* Ward *Sabhas* and *Gram Sabhas* so that they can shape these forums in their true spirit, and prevent them from being reduced to a formality.
Creating community databases that enable evidence-based dialogue between citizens and the local government	• Household level surveys undertaken by infomediaries in all *Panchayat* villages of the concerned ICT-enabled resource centre, to identify individuals who are eligible for social security schemes, and also map high-risk and vulnerable households (that will then be specific focus for targeted information outreach efforts and follow-up visits). Such surveys should be conducted once in 6 months to ensure accuracy of the database thus created. • Preparation of Gender Score Cards along key areas such as health, nutrition, education, with the help of elected *Panchayat* members, ASHAs, *anganwadi* workers, and school staff to create a dedicated line of action at the local level, in the fight against gender inequality.
GIS-enabled participatory mapping	• Half-yearly mapping of status of public infrastructure (roads, drainage, street lights etc.) in the concerned *Panchayat,* to enable appropriate infrastructural planning by local government. • Participatory mapping of household-level subsidy/ grant allocation under schemes such as Swach Bharat Abhiyan and rural housing; and allotment of food grains under PDS; as part of creating an evidence-base for social audits.

2c. Functions that the Gram Sabha resource centre can undertake, based on insights from other experiments in the area of utilising ICTs for deepening democracy

Functions	Insights from other experiments
Creating a culture of data-backed citizen journalism	• The team of infomediaries can work closely with facilitators of *Gram Panchayat* libraries and/or Continuing Education Centres to train local youth in generating local news reports. The *Khabar Lahariya* initiative of the NGO Nirantar, that has trained rural women in Bundelkhand, Uttar Pradesh, creates such data-backed news stories about socially marginalised groups
Building a local knowledge commons	• As has been tried in the *Ente Gram* initiative of the Government of Kerala, the ICT-enabled *Gram Sabha* resource centre can focus on creating local *Panchayat* wikis about the social histories of the area, documenting local knowledge about bio-diversity, agricultural practices, traditional healing systems etc, as well as provide an overview of key facts about the *Gram Panchayat* and its functions (a citizen guide to local governance).

Opening up economic opportunities	• The ICT-enabled resource centre in partnership with local NGOs can also explore the possibility of conducting periodic ICT literacy courses for the local youth. Using funds from programmes such as the National Digital Literacy Mission, such trainings will focus on equipping participants in the following areas: use of office suites, basic awareness about the Internet, online privacy, introduction to Free and Open Source Software, skills in creating local language wikis, using blogs for self-expression, using government websites, effective use of social media and networking platforms etc.

3. Action Points 1 and 2 - Suggestions for how ICTs can be used

1. Identifying Resource Envelope: *Panchayat*-specific data sets created with community participation, enable far greater levels of granularity. This can be an effective foundation for guiding participatory decision making processes at the local level, complementing data-sets created through top-down surveys and data collection exercises.

2a. Environment generation for participatory planning:

– Digitalised public sign boards that display key *Panchayat* statistics, and decisions taken on beneficiary selection, public infrastructure spending etc. will be an useful tool for transparency.
– In addition to issuing letter advisories on citizen forums to key public institutions and community members, circulating short video newsletters, audio clips on IVR etc., encouraging citizens to participate in Ward *Sabhas,* Mahila Gram Sabhas and Gram Sabhas, will be useful.

2b. Situation analysis:
– GIS mapping of public infrastructure and status of civic amenities will be useful.
– Community score cards on human development indicators, that represent data in infographic and other visual formats, are a useful tool for situation analysis.
– Local portals that connect skilled and unskilled labor to suitable employment opportunities, need to be set up. They must be accessible in the local language through the computer and through mobile.

2c. Needs assessment: In addition to assessing individual needs through community surveys, *Mahila Sabhas* at the Ward level, *Ward Sabhas* and *Gram Sabhas* must be utilised effectively for scoping collective needs of the community.