



National Workshop on
**Community Information and Service Centres:
A New Village Institution for Governance and Democracy**
May 30-31, 2011 – Bengaluru

The last decade has seen a number of initiatives in setting up some kind of community information and/or service centre in villages in India. Some have been led by governments, others by civil society and almost all involve the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). The expectations from such centres has been extraordinarily high, coming from the way in which ICTs have had a disruptive and re-constitutive impact on so many social processes and institutions around us. A primary question driving many of these initiatives is: what can ICTs do for improving governance and democracy in the Indian villages? However, some initiatives have been more concerned with issues of economic development and market linkages.

Many existing initiatives like the Common Services Centres (CSC) scheme of the Government of India, Akshaya in Kerala, E-Gram and Setu (of Abhiyan Collective) in Gujarat, Mission Convergence in Delhi and Information Centres of the Development of Humane Action (DHAN) Foundation and of the M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF) in Tamil Nadu have all struggled to find the right institutional model to be able to meet the expectations that have come to be associated with a community information/service centre.

The proposed workshop, organised by IT for Change, along with the Department of Information Technology (Government of India) and the Centre for Public Policy (Indian Institute of Management), on '**Community Information and Service Centres: A New Village Institution for Governance and Democracy**' will bring together interested actors – from the government and civil society organisations – to look at emerging learnings from various initiatives. It will specifically explore what kind of model of a community

information/service centre best serves the needs of governance and deepening democracy. It will also look at whether different models are possible, and needed. Issues of ownership, partnerships, linkages with different department and NGO/ community based organisation (CBO) activities, IT support required etc., will figure prominently in the discussion.

While important lessons have been learnt, most of these first generation initiatives have had limited success. Despite this, a general feeling persists that some form of such a centre does have a central role to play in the emergent village institutional ecology. However, considerable doubts remain about what these centres are supposed to do, who should set them up and what kind of partnerships should be involved. There are also other questions, such as

1. Whether these centres should primarily be a government (supply side) or a community (demand side) institution, while there is no doubt that they do represent a meeting of supply and demand sides
2. Are they primarily centres for knowledge and information (like a library, school or community media) or spaces for delivering services (a government office or a commercial establishment)?
3. Are they institutions of building citizenship or of extending markets?
4. Do these centres merely represent a specific place with a computer and a service provider, or do they represent the focal point for a new set of empowering community based processes made possible by the use of new ICTs?

A likely response may be that they are all of these. This might well be, but each of these different possible forms and functions have varied antecedents and moorings in the state, market, education, media or civil society sectors and mixing these is not easy. It is this question of a community information/service centre breaching existing institutional boundaries that has resulted in difficulties in getting the model right. For instance, it has been difficult to fix what roles government departments, private companies, NGOs and CBOs, *panchayati raj* institutions, district administration, etc. should play in what could be a new governance system built around the village information and service centre. However, these challenges also herald an exciting new opportunity for governance reform and deepening democracy in a bottom up manner, starting from, and focussing on, the village community.