

Village knowledge centres: An initiative of MSSRF

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This case study is part of a research project that sought to analyse how different telecentre models approach development on the ground, proceeding to elaborate a typology based on the cornerstones of participation and equity. To conduct this assessment, four telecentre projects were examined: the Gujarat government's *E-gram* project, the corporate-led venture by ITC called *e-Choupal*, the private enterprise model of *Drishtee*, and the community-owned telecentres of the M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF). Two main criteria were used in selecting the case studies – the diversity of ownership models, and the requirement of a sufficient scale of the intervention. In addition to the field research conducted in 2008 using qualitative methods, the research also built on secondary sources.

A review of the literature in the field of Information and Communication Technology for Development (ICTD) showed that while telecentres are viewed as contributing positively to development in general, they are largely not really seen as a space for catalysing transformative social change. Instead, there remains in the notion of telecentres for development a perpetuation of market-led approaches, wherein telecentres are viewed as a strategic means for expanding markets in rural areas, especially for corporates. In this approach, poor communities are repositioned as an opportunity for business, with ICTs as the most effective way of connecting them to the global market system. This espouses a version of inclusion that instrumentalises disadvantaged sections, overlooking the potential of telecentres to serve as a tool for equitable and participatory development. Such subjugation of local development and the local community to the neo-liberal ideology can be seen as the 'Walmartisation' or 'marketisation' of development (Gurstein, 2007:6).¹

A critical question for telecentre related policies and programmes therefore examines how ICTs can trigger structural-institutional changes that promote overall human development, going beyond exclusive market frameworks. Based on a critical analysis of findings from the field, the research attempted to examine two hypotheses. The first relates to the need for the communitisation of ICTD, as is a strong move towards communisation in other areas of development, like health, livelihoods, education, etc. Second, the development of an ICT governance regime favouring an open, inclusive and participatory socio-technical architecture. The latter seeks to empower the peripheries, acting against the strong tendency towards centralisation of power of the unregulated use of ICTs.

The following analysis of the MSSRF telecentre project will be situated within this larger debate.²

Background and approach to development

MSSRF is a pioneer in the use of new technology as an enabler for rural and social development among NGO-led development initiatives in India. MSSRF was established in 1989 to impart a pro-nature,

pro-poor, pro-women and pro-sustainable livelihood paradigm of technology development and dissemination. The bottom line of the organisation's research, education and outreach programmes is social inclusion in access to relevant technology.

MSSRF developed the concept of a Community Managed Knowledge System for

Sustainable Food Security, which includes different components like farming, energy management, weather and demographics. Village Knowledge Centres (VKCs) were set up in the late nineties under this programme, and represent one of the earliest use of computers for development in India.

The main aim of the ICT programme of MSSRF is to empower largely unskilled, resource-poor rural farming and fishing communities towards making better choices and achieving greater control of their own development through skills and capacity building for improved livelihoods, and generally, for an improved quality of life.

The ICT potential for equalising access to information and achieving network effects form the basis of MSSRF's telecentres initiative. It emphasises the provision of a broad range of information to enable improvements in livelihood related activities as well as access to general entitlements of rural citizens. The emphasis is on the information flow towards hitherto information-poor groups, alongside a keen recognition of traditional knowledge sources.

Mr. Senthilkumaran, the coordinator of MSSRF's telecentre programme, underscores the approach that guides telecentre deployment at the implementation level. He states, "MSSRF is a community-based model with a strong accent on inclusion and participation".

Implementation model and actors

This telecentre initiative follows a 'hub and spoke' approach with VKCs connected to a central hub – the Village Resource Centre (VRC), for coordination and management support. The VRC is located in MSSRF owned buildings, while each VKC is

established in public buildings and serves a cluster of villages. The location is finalised following an extensive consultation process with community members and established only after the drafting of a formal agreement that emphasises the use of the centre by women and *dalits*³. VKCs have a few computers, printers and connectivity is provided through the integrated application of the Internet and cell phone or community radio. Knowledge workers (KWs) are selected from the village residents to run the VKCs, and are usually young people, often women, educated till the secondary level. KWs are provided with initial training in operating a computer and managing a centre, and also receive a monthly honorarium from MSSRF. Technical staff provide free ongoing support to the KWs, while the VRC staff support the KWs in their community work. The VKC is managed by a Managing Committee (MC) comprising prominent figures in the village, MSSRF staff and KWs. The MC meets every quarter to assess the performance of the centre and KWs, while also setting targets and identifying needs that the VKC should address. MSSRF's head office and VRCs are equipped with advanced monitoring systems, including web cameras, email and telephone, to maintain daily contact with every VKC. MSSRF manages a total of 17 VRCs across the states of Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Orissa and Kerala, which service 88 VKCs.

The VKC acts as a node for the dissemination of community-centric content developed in a bottom-up manner using digital platforms. Offline databases and applications that are available include government schemes for women and children, milk procurement systems, Self-Help Group (SHG) accounting systems and animal husbandry databases.

Information and data is collected by VRC staff in collaboration with VKCs and community members, with additional data sourced through linkages with government line departments. KWs are not engaged in data collection, but network directly with panchayats and line departments in the verification of data and dissemination at the VKCs. KWs provide information about governmental schemes to the community and help in preparing applications and other communication with government departments. Information seekers who visit the centre are not charged any fee, other than a nominal sum for Internet browsing. VKCs also have regular loudspeaker broadcasts of relevant information that impact the lives of the villagers, like an upcoming distribution of essential commodities through the fair price system and information regarding government immunisation drives. Visitors to the centre are also not seen as consumers. Instead, centres are seen as providing 'content', which has collaborative connotations, and not 'services', which points to one-way provision. All activities at the

VKCs are hosted in a public location with infrastructure provided by MSSRF. Information and training is open to all and several documented instances are available of collective action having arisen as an outcome of information provided through VKCs.

MSSRF has also launched a Fellowship programme in collaboration with the Jamsetji Tata Foundation to build a network of committed community leaders, many of whom have been KWS.

Communitising ICTs for Development

The MSSRF ICT programme is motivated by and built upon principles of participatory development and social justice. Centres are set up in a participatory manner, emphasising on partnerships with local CBOs and all sections of communities. No VKC is established unless there is consensus amongst the community, and the centres are always located in spaces accessible to *dalits* and women, which are often not in the centre of the village. ICTs are thus regarded as part of the community infrastructure.

Financial viability underpins the dominant conceptualisation of ICTD projects that adhere to the market paradigm. MSSRF, on the other hand, understands sustainability in the vocabulary of community acceptance, integration and ownership.

Dr. V. Arunachalam, a member of MSSRF, debunks the notion of financial sustainability of

telecentres, "There are 2 kinds of viability. If you want to talk about financial viability, you can talk to *E-Choupal*, *Drishtee* and so on. I am talking about viability in terms of poverty reduction. There are 800 million people who do not have the basics of what city people take for granted. Why should these people suffer? There is no argument at all that social sustainability should not get precedence over financial sustainability". Economic gains, though important, are positioned as only one aspect of the larger ICT ecology in the VKCs. However, when financial viability is prioritised in the pursuit of 'success', developmental goals that are empowering for marginalised groups may get obfuscated.

The developmental vision articulated at the level of the top management resonates amongst the implementors as well, "[...] we want to have a big impact on the community, and for this we have set up [ICT] systems. Business models are necessary but not for the things we do. Similarly, individual earnings are important, but through the VKC we want to focus on collective issues", elaborates the head of the Pondicherry VRC, Mr. Thiagarajan.

When defined in terms of community appropriation, sustainability is informed by principles of social justice and equity. "[...] we have to be careful about the money we spend. The subsidies reach only rich farmers. This happens because they are the first to know about them. Not having

a VKC impacts small farmers negatively in this respect. The goal should be to shift the focus towards *dalit* communities so that they can benefit. Financial viability can wait for some time", says Dr. Arunachalam. The impact of focusing on the sustainability of the normative development intervention is evident at all levels in MSSRF's ICT programme. For instance, in the village of Embalam, KWS began to serve as the front-end of the public distribution system (PDS). The VKC is attached to the *panchayat*⁴ building, enabling easier access for lower caste groups and better maintenance. Although there are no financial implications of this informal arrangement, the significance from a welfare standpoint is high. These inclusive developmental outcomes are obtained because of MSSRF's community oriented sustainability focus, and its willingness to progress cautiously on the revenue generation front. Simultaneously, however, MSSRF does recognise the importance of a long-term financial plan in centres that have matured over a period of time. Staff of such VRCs are gradually beginning to explore modes of revenue generation through commercial services made available through the VKCs. The goal is to shift complete ownership of VKCs to the MCs, where they would be responsible for all financial transactions, payment of the operator, and implementation of major activities.

Dr. Arunachalam points to some important policy lessons from this telecentre project, "In

large scale projects like the central government's Common Service Centre scheme or CSCs (which relies on corporate intermediaries), sensitivity is poor and monitoring is difficult since the scale of the project is vast. As a response, the government is trying to work with local *panchayats*, but this has not shown positive results. Therefore, CSCs should depend on CBOs for partnerships, since the company running the project

cannot bring in sensitivity to social development issues."

While the MSSRF VKC project provides justification for the community ownership of telecentre projects that are aimed at holistic development objectives, it may be necessary to integrate VKCs in other community-based development activities. This includes government programmes on livelihoods, health, education, etc (one example of such integration was mentioned earlier

with PDS). If this is achieved, ICTs can go a long way to enable the communitisation of development programmes, which has been an ongoing effort in many areas, but has seen mixed success. ICTs enable more effective community based approaches to development through local capacity building as well as effective monitoring from higher levels for policy implementation. It is important that such a perspective informs large-scale telecentre for development programmes.

Endnotes

- 1 Gurstein M. (2008), 'Towards a Critical Theory of Telecentres: In the Context of Community Informatics', IT for Change: Bengaluru
- 2 This case study is part of a broader research undertaking funded by the Social Science Research Council (SSRC), an independent non-profit organisation based in New York. The study was commissioned under the Collaborative Grants in Media and Communications: Necessary Knowledge for Democratic Public Sphere programme of SSRC
- 3 *Dalit* is a self-designation for a group of people traditionally regarded as of a lower class
- 4 *Panchayat* is an administrative unit of the government at the village level

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