E-governance in India: Existing context and possible scope for UNDP programing over 2013-18

First Draft

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Overall trends and developments in the area of e-governance in India

In all its sections, from assessing overall trends to providing recommendations for project development by UNDP, and suggesting specific project ideas, this document has avoided an approach focused on specific ICTs, or even on 'best practices'[1]. Throughout, it treats the area of e-governance at a systemic level, as a field integrated with other governance and development activities, and oriented to common goals.

Brief history

Among developing countries, India has been an early adopter of e-governance. The first wave can be considered to have evolved bottom-up. Some social entrepreneurs convinced district level officials of the wonders of new ICTs, especially in providing convergent services to remote areas, and improving transparency and oversight in this regard. The *Gyandoot* project in Dhar district, which begun in 2000, is considered the forerunner of what was to be a rash of projects that built a front-end in many village communities which was supposed to be serviced by a back-end mostly in the district collectorate. The idea and the effort was to create pressure from the community front-end for digitisation of back-end departmental processes. The latter was largely a localised effort, mostly dependent on the initiative and energy of the concerned district collector, often with some very spirited support of the district National Informatic Centre (NIC) staff. Perhaps the most organised and successful effort in this first phase of e-governance in India, roughly between 2000-05, was Rural *e-Seva* in West Godavari district of Andhra Pradesh. As for community level front end development two initiatives, N-logue and *Drishti* stand out, each of which at one time claimed to be running thousands of community telecentres across the country that could deliver e-governance services.

There is a generally tendency to classify these early efforts as failures. Indeed, around 2005-06, N-logue closed down and *Drishti* moved out of e-governance services. Rural e-Seva also was never scaled up. However, what is noteworthy is that in a relatively short time, these early projects created a lasting impression of new ICTs as a possible means to bring governance close to the people, and perhaps, also make it more transparent and accountable. To that extent, they had a very significant impact, even if these initiatives themselves could not survive, due to a variety of reasons which we cannot discuss in greater detail, here. (However, if we compare this situation with the burst of the dotcom bubble in the early part of the last decade, one can see some common factors.) They created the context for the very ambitious National E-Governance Plan (NeGP), especially its flagship project, the Common Service Centres, which was inaugurated by the Government of India in 2006.

Meanwhile, many independent department level digitisation and automation projects were taking shape. Digitisation of records of land ownership and transactions has been one of the key areas with considerable impact, since it a very important and vexatious area for rural India. In many cases, end to end digitisation was facilitated by significant changes in government rules, which provide some early instances of full-scale e-governance process re-engineering[2]. Some other automation activities like computerisation of government treasuries and financial transactions also have had considerable impact on the efficiency of governmental functioning, and represent largely successful and sustaining e-governance efforts. From very early days, efforts were also make to computerise work

1 'Best practices' are indeed something to learn from, and thus, normally, there is nothing wrong in listing them. However, the current e-governance discourse overly relies on a 'best practices' approach often considering such 'practices' in isolation from their situated context, which can lean towards techno-centricism. We attempt to correct this imbalance by proving disproportionate emphasis on the contextual as well as social-systemic and integrative aspects of e-governance.

2 The *Bhoomi* project of land records digtisation stands out in this regard.

flow in government offices, like e-Secretariat initiatives in a few states. However, such initiatives failed to sustain because they seemed to conflict with formal and informal ways of functioning of the Indian bureaucracy. Any progress on such basic areas of governmental activity requiring significant behavioral changes, and also having very significant implications for greater transparency and accountability, would require strong legislative push.

National E- Governance Plan – achievements, and challenges ahead

The second phase of e-governance in India can be said to have begun with inauguration of the National E-Governance Plan (NeGP) in 2006. NeGP's flagship project sought to set up about 100,000 Common Service Centres (CSCs) across India, one for every six villages. Recently, the Department of IT declared that they have achieved this target. NEGP also consists of 27 Mission Mode projects, largely for back-end computerisation of different areas of governance activity. In addition, it seeks creation of a national e-governance infrastructure of State Wide Area Networks, State Data Centres, and National Service Delivery Gateways.

The infrastructural and technical support projects have mostly been working well. NeGP has been able to provide a common sense of urgency, mechanism and some funding support for large-scale adoption of e-governance by various departments of the central and state governments. Such a catalytic action, and perhaps creating a environment for competitive performance, was very much needed in the initial phase. It has been especially useful for states that are otherwise slow on the take, *vis a vis* e-governance, and they may also be the ones that most need governance reform. Department of IT gives technical support to e-governance initiatives of various departments at the central and state levels, including through listed consultants. They also ensure some degree of common architecture which is very important for interoperability, especially required when, at a later stage, across-the-government integration of operations and services may be sought.

One however notes that projects that focus on targeting the better-off sections, e.g. those related to passports and income tax, have produced the best results to date. On the other hand, Mission Mode Projects in areas like agriculture and *panchayat* computerisation, that most directly concern relatively marginalised sections, have been the slowest to take off. This may requires an re-assessment of NeGP with regard to considerations of inclusion, equity and social justice.

Although there have been a few hiccups, the Unique ID project, listed as a Mission Mode Project under NeGP, is also well underway. Recently, Department of IT has come up with a 'Framework for Mobile Governance' which lays out the vision and strategy for mobile governance. It envisions setting up a Mobile Service Delivery Gateway, Mobile AppStore for governance applications, mobile authentication and payment gateway, and APIs[3] for different service providers. Department of IT has also notified a 'Policy on Open Standards for E-governance', and the work of notifications of open standards in various areas is underway. Last year, guidelines for use of social media by government agencies were issued by the Department of IT. Internal and stakeholder consultations on the opportunity and challenges for e-governance in a cloud computing environment are also underway.

NeGP has done very well in providing infrastructural and technical support for widespread adoption of e-governance in India. However, there seems to be a significant gap on the non-technical side, *vis a vis* governance process re-engineering[4] architectures and the broad socio-political principles that need to be addressed though and in e-governance. It is to a good extent due to the NeGP that large-scale digitisation is taking place in most departments in the central and state governments. As

3 Application Protocol Interfaces

4 Taking from the e-business term 'business process re-engineering' that was very prevalent till aroiund 2006.

the process of digitisation and automation (the early stage of e-governance) has proceeded at a steady pace across government agencies, it has produced substantial efficiency gains and some improvements on the transparency front. If greater gains in the area of transparency, accountability and community participation have not been attained, it is largely because e-governance in India has still mostly been conceived and implemented in a techno-managerial mode and without sufficient socio-political vision.

It may come as a surprise to many that for an area that not only involves funds to the extent of thousands of crores of rupees and also is so crucial to the future of governance in India, there has never been any dedicated e-governance policy in India. One would expect to have some kind of a detailed policy document based on due consultations with all stakeholders, which provides the vision for e-governance in India, integrating governance reform priorities like decentralisation, right to information, and improved community participation and monitoring. However, an examination of e-governance activities and trends in India bears testimony to the fact that e-governance in India seems to have proceeded largely on its own logic, or the absence of one. The dominant understanding seems to be that IT merely makes whatever is being done much more efficient, and therefore it may not be necessary to get into basic issues of examining *ab initio* 'what indeed is being done', 'what was supposed to be done', and 'how things can perhaps now be done very differently'. It is to be left to those running the respective systems to decide what they may want to do with various IT tools and opportunities. The NeGP seems merely to be there to provide technical support; this stance being often articulated by the concerned officials.

This had led to a situation whereby departments have mostly used an internal logic and considerations of internal 'interests' and objectives rather than primarily employ an external logic, of (1) the point of view of basic objectives of governance, and the specific role of their department in it, (2) need and possibility of government-wide responses to governance needs, and, mostly importantly, (3) needs and perspectives of the citizens. Mature models of e-governance worldwide proceeds from such higher level strategic considerations, before the nuts and bolts of actual departmental and offices level changes are worked out.

Such a techno-managerial approach has meant that e-governance in India has made no clear linkages with other areas of governance reform like decentralisation, right to information and community monitoring, while the fact is that process re-engineering through e-governance should primarily have been serving these substantive objectives of governance reform in India. This anomaly needs to be corrected through a national e-governance policy that casts e-governance within larger socio-political objectives and then proceeds to establishing such principles that should guide systemic process re-engineering through e-governance. These principles arise out of the generic techno-social possibilities made available by the digital or information society. Such principles should be able to account for and admit rapid technology changes, and further new opportunities opened by ICTs.

Decentralisation, right to information and community monitoring, as other three key areas of governance reform in India apart from e-governance, all aim at greater bottom-up participation, and accountability. They all did, however, require, and continue to require, strong central legislation and policy support. In fact, they could not have been attained without such push and support from the top, with a clearly articulated political vision and the directions. E-governance has to become more than merely applying technology to existing processes, and should be seen in its transformatory potential. For this, it must also be visioned and articulated in terms of the highest socio-political objectives of governance reform in India. These objectives then have to be translated into higher-level principles for process architecture of e-governance, which are sufficiently generic and flexible to be applicable to a range of governance activities and systems.

However, it is true that e-governance in India was established in an environment where new ICTs were taking the world by storm, and no one could easily prejudge what could be attained by employing ICTs in governance, and how. It was therefore required to go through a period of intense experimentation. It is a tribute to the early leaders of e-governance in India that they did not shy away from this imperative of investing into what were mostly time and resource-intensive experiments. However, it may be time now to consolidate our learning and begin to take a more strategic and systemic view of governance reforms in India. A clear vision and policy for this purpose may be a prerequisite. Such a policy should also assign relevant role to government agencies and departments who shall provide technical lead and support, those that will provide governance reform vision, and generic process principles and guidelines (like the Departments of Administrative Reforms whose role in e-governance efforts should be central, but has been rather muted till date) and the departments that actually undertake e-governance activities in their respective areas of competence and work. It will also align e-governance with overall thrusts of governance reform in India – chiefly, decentralisation, right to information, and community monitoring and social audits, whose objectives e-governance should primarily be serving. We need to move from procedural e-governance – which merely automates and digitises existing processes providing efficient gains, something that is almost a natural process in all organisations worldwide, to transform e-governance, that has its point of departure in specifically seeking to address the various governance challenges and reform processes in India.

A promising recent policy initiative is the Electronic Services Delivery (EDS) Bill which is with the Parliament at present. This proposed legislation makes it compulsory for all government agencies to begin delivering their services in an electronic mode. All services that can be provided electronically must be so provided. There is a provision for independent EDS Commissions at the central and state level that will monitor provision of electronic delivery of services.

This legislation is expected to put great pressure on various government agencies to quickly take on e-governance, and therefore is quite a positive move. However, the proposed Bill just further pushes agencies towards e-governance without telling them how to do it, and with what core objectives in mind. Will the need to comply with legislative requirements, for example, make departments inclined to quickly go for cash transfers that are much easier to do over ICT based outreach infrastructure, even when run by outside agencies on a commercial basis, even when a particular service may not be most suited to a cash transfer mode? Such a welcome push for quicker e-governance uptake, as the EDS legislation is expected to provide, makes it even more important to articulate an overall e-governance policy in India, which makes a detailed socio-political examination of new possibilities in light of the specific needs and current thrusts of governance reform in India.

Community level e-governance infrastructure – the fulcrum of possible transformation

In many ways, the CSCs constitute the central component of NeGP and it is also often officially described as such. It was evident to India's e-governance planners that government departments will only begin to take the e-governance opportunity seriously if there indeed was an outreach infrastructure available that can service all parts of India, however remote. This is especially true with regard to governance services that are most pertinent to rural areas, certainly a priority for the Indian governments. It was further expected that once such an infrastructure was in place, and the opportunity demonstrated, a demand-side pressure from the community will accelerate, as well as help design, the most appropriate e-governance changes upstream, at the level of the internal

functioning of the line departments(or at the backend). Both the logics are sound.

The CSC scheme seems to have taken its cue from the N-logue and *Drishti* kind of initiatives where village based entrepreneurs ran telecentres which could deliver a variety of governance and commercial, services. The convergent service delivery platform was facilitated by a service agency that connected to various government and non-government service providers. It was perhaps felt by our e-governance planners that the model adopted by these two initiatives was basically sound. If they failed, it may have been only because there were not enough e-governance services yet available for them to earn enough revenue. With the launch of NeGP, it was expected that in a relatively short time enough such services would be made available. However, since development of such services could still take a few years, and in any case it will perhaps depend on availability of delivery front-end (making it a 'chicken and egg' problem), it was decided to offer viability-gap funding for operational expenses for up to five years to those who set up CSCs. Private companies, termed as Service Centre Agencies, were allowed to bid (in form of negative bids for least subsidy) for setting up CSCs in a few districts each, and were responsible for complete implementation of the project at the community end.

While it not possible here to go into an extensive review of how CSCs have fared on the ground, this much can be acknowledged that it has been a very mixed experience. Great enthusiasm has been seen among potential village level entrepreneurs to set up CSCs, both in the hope of a viable business opportunity and for the lure of being a kind of 'government agent' in the community. However, most companies who took up the role of Service Centre Agencies have since withdrawn from the field. A good number of them were large corporates who sought to leverage the CSC scheme for opening up access to rural markets for a host of commercial products and services. Many village entrepreneurs today find themselves left in the lurch, not being able to either leave (having invested considerable resources and time) nor continue in a sustainable manner in their CSC business. Others have managed to figure out adequate business models. However, availability of governance services remain uniformly low. A good part of Department of IT's effort lately has focused on providing CSCs better avenues for delivering commercial services, for instance, in financial areas, like selling insurance and becoming banking correspondents.

While the CSC model is still expected to emerge as a useful vehicle for delivering governance services of a simple transactional nature like bill payments and getting various kind of certificates, its role in more complex governance services, especially those targeted at the weaker sections, is not clear. Even less clear is how CSCs can help citizens realise their rights and entitlements. A purely revenue-based model may find it difficult to fit into a rights-based approach to governance, which is otherwise increasingly the mainstream approach in India. CSCs can however address parts of the process requirements for these complex governance challenges – for instance, at some places, CSCs have been used to make applications for entitlements, and to receive documents and records, like ration cards. They are also being used to deliver entitlements in cash through 'banking correspondents' service. The problems arises when it is attempted to fit everything in governance into the CSC model – from development communication to citizen participation.

It may therefore be necessary to separate the kind of governance services that can be made available through CSCs and those that cannot be; for instance, ICT-based local community knowledge and media processes, and improving citizen/community participation in governance. For these kinds of governance activities, a different community-level ICT infrastructure may have to be conceived. Department for Rural Development (GoI) is setting up ICT-enabled *Rajiv Gandhi Seva Kendras* which will act as Knowledge Resource Centres, facilitate social audits, provide ICT support for various community activities etc. Karnataka Knowledge Commission has also recommended the setting up of Community Knowledge Centers with a similar range of functions.

In reaching governance services to the people, the CSC structure also seems to be bypassing the vision and processes of decentralisation. The CSC structure is anchored at the state level with very little connection if any, to the district administration, the key node of the Indian governance system, and even lesser at the *panchayat* level. Often line departments who have services to deliver to rural areas have felt that the CSC model is too commercial in its outlook and functioning for it to become 'the' ICT based channel of government service delivery and engagement with citizens. It is worth noting that the two states that have the longest history of community level e-governance activity, Kerala and Gujarat, have both opted out of the basic CSC model and follow their own models, respectively, *Akshaya* and *eGram*. In both these models, while there still is a village level entrepreneur, (1) the mediating corporate entity, the Service Centre Agency, has been dispensed with in favour of a dedicated new government agency, and (2) close relationships have been established between the ICT-based service delivery mechanism and the *panchayati raj* system. As an ICT based delivery model begins to be taken more seriously by line departments, such tensions *vis a vis* the overtly commerical nature of the CSC model are likely to arise in other states as well.

There is an effort, alluded to in an earlier section, of the technicalisation of government service delivery in the CSC model,thus suppressing its socio-political content. It must be understood that reforming governance is a keenly political process, something which, for instance, is quite evident in the areas of decentralisation, right to information and community monitoring.

If an exercise is undertaken to understand and list out areas of governance activity which are mostly to be undertaken through the CSC model, and those which are not so well suited, it will both strengthen the CSC initiative, by removing its many schizophrenic confusions, and also serve to help focus attention and effort on how an complementary community level ICT infrastructure needs to be built to address the full range of governance objectives.

CSCs should be further strengthened by focusing them on providing the following kinds of services (1) governance services of a simple transactional nature, like bill payments, providing various certificates, cash transfers etc, (2) crucial support services like banking, and (3) a host of other sundry commercial services that rural India can be now be better provided through ICT enabled aggregation and remote delivery techniques (ranging from mobile recharges, to agriculture-related services and goods, and even, white goods). This is apart from the role of CSCs as a public ICT services provider on the lines of the very popular public telephone booths in India.

For obtaining the full potential of egovernance to bring about 'governance systems (that) are more inclusive, accountable, decentralised, and [make] programme implementation more effective for the realisation of rights of marginalised groups'[5] it may be required to formulate a new community-owned/oriented ICT based infrastructure at the community level which is different from, and complements, the CSC infrastructure. CSCs should focus on providing such governance services that can easily and adequately be provided on a fee-per-transanction basis and also making various commercial products and services available to rural India through aggregation and online facilitation. Another programme, probably rooted in the departments of rural development, is needed to develop *community-owned, non-commercial* ICT based infrastructural systems that will attend to the needs of wider governance activity, as for instance, pertaining to (1) citizen's rights and entitlements (2) citizen's participation, including through community monitoring and social audits, and (3) community's knowledge and media processes.

This document has mostly dealt with the NeGP for presenting and analysing e-governance in India. This is owing to the fact that NeGP is an umbrella programme for e- governance in India, and sets

5 The overall objective set up by UNDP for its 'democratic governance' line of work, for the program period 2103-17

the general directions. However, there indeed have been very noteworthy efforts independently taken at the line department levels which have had transformational impact and/or have provided very important insights and best practices for e-governance projects. A good example of transformational impact comes from the digitisation and process re-engineering in the MNREGA project in Andhra Pradesh which enabled a very different, more transparent and efficient, approach to implementing this important programme in the state. Significantly, it also enabled a path-breaking process of effective large-scale social auditing. Two other indicative examples are; computerisation of border check posts in Gujarat, which had an immediately strong impact on corruption levels, and the Child Record Information System in Madhya Pradesh, which provided a strong means for ensuring child rights. Together with many lesser known but yet quite impactful projects all over the country, such initiatives do paint a promising picture of the future of e-governance in India. If this document has taken a somewhat critical perspective, it is just to enable various involved actors to revisit the lessons from the current efforts in order to chart a more effective and tranformative strategy for the future, which can provides us with more inclusive and socially just governance.

NGOs and donor agencies

In the section on brief history, it was described how some NGOs and social enterprises were key in the initial phase of e-governance in India, especially at the community end. In fact, these agencies also tried to drive back-end computerisation, at least at the district level. Many NGOS like DHAN Foundation in Tamil Nadu, *Abhiyan* in Gujurat and Alternatives for Development (AID) in Jharkhand have been doing pioneering and very impactful work. These NGOs have worked on generic community level ICT infrastructure and systems (AID in partnership with the CSC scheme, the only NGO directly involved in the same). There are other NGOs that have done very significant work in specific sectors like health, development communication, women's empowerment etc.

However, in the absence of a larger systemic vision and e-governance policy framework these efforts have often not been successfully upscaled and/or integrated with mainstream governance systems. It is important to note that one of the most significant generic impacts of ICT-based systems is through larger networking and upscaling of different efforts. However, such integration, networking and upscaling of governmental and non- governmental efforts requires a very new kind of policy approach with the right mix of standardisation and flexibility, and with appropriate co-ownership of different government agencies.

The role of donor agencies in terms of e-governance in India has been quite interesting to examine and learn from. In the first part of the last decade, ICTs for Development was a kind a rage and funds were easy to come up in this area. Suddenly, as the hype seemed to be disproved by what was seen as stark failures on the ground, the whole sector seemed to suddenly evaporate from donor's minds and funding portfolios. The new approach was called mainstreaming, and it was left to different substantive sectors within the agencies to do what they may, in relation to ICTs and development in their respective areas. Since, these sectoral personnel, as expected, often did not substantially know much about the expanding real opportunities in this area, and were in any case overcautious because of the perceived failures of ICTD, they seemed to have done precious little. Even if the concerned programme officers were really knowledgeable and even ready to take the required risks, there was this real problem that ICTs often provide an adequate and sustainable cost-benefit ratio in cross-sectoral applications, which is really not something within their respective purviews.

The sudden withdrawal of many donors from the field of ICTs for development was perhaps with good reason. This area had begun to emerge as something of quite an autonomous field of

development, with a sharp disconnect from other, traditional, fields, whose objectives it should have been serving. It was evident to the discerning that the field of development needed to preserve its historical continuity while looking at all possible avenues of innovation, which largely caused the donor step-back from ICTs for Development.

While attention got rightly re-focused on substantive areas and objectives of development, on the downside, the generic and integrative (meaning, cross-sectoral systemic) opportunities may be getting lost in the new scheme of things. The earlier section on NeGP discusses two of these generic and convergent areas – broad common principles and approaches pertaining to core objectives of governance reform that should uniformly inform e-governance process re-engineering, and some kind of convergent community level socio-technical infrastructure that can leverage the best opportunities provided by ICTs for 'empowering communities'.

It is useful to clarify here, what is meant by a systemic and integrative approach to e-governance, especially in relation to a mainstreaming approach. ICTs have been called 'constitutive technologies'; they get into and rebuild social systems. In this process, they also breach boundaries between existing systems (and sub-systems) that constitute the social architecture, recreating new patterns. It is in this sense that the impact of ICTs on governance has to be seen in a systemic and integrative (across erstwhile system/ sub-system boundaries) way. The integrative aspect is also sometimes called convergence, which term only partially covers the meaning and implications of 'integration'. The term 'mainstreaming ICTs' accordingly, does not capture the understanding and practical requirements for making the best use of ICTs opportunities in governance and development, in its entirety.

In some ways, the paradox here is similar to that with gender-mainstreaming. In e-governance or ICTD area too, mainstreaming strategies should be informed adequately by specialised policy and convergent programmatic approaches. This can be the defining quality of what may be seen as the third phase of e-governance and ICTD. The first phase was pre-NeGP, and the period when ICTD was one key standalone area of donor support. The second phase can be described as the period of NeGP till now, and on the ICTD side, the period of mainstreaming ICTD. A third phase can be envisaged now whereby, on the e-governance side, what is needed is (1) a broad e-governance policy based on convergence of e-governance with other areas of governance reform in India, and (2) a ICT based community infrastructure that compliments the commercial platform of CSCs. On on the ICTD side, in this third phase, a mainstreaming ICTD approach is supported and complimented by overall convergent/ specialised ICTD strategies of developing (1) 'broad common principles' of how ICTs enable new empowering development processes, and (2) community level common socio-technical infrastructures.

	Phase 1 2000-2005	**Phase 2** 2006-2012	**Phase 3 (proposed)** 2013 -
E-governance	Pre-NeGP (National eGovernance Plan)	National eGovernance Plan	Improved NeGP with an national e-governance policy that (1) converges e-governance objectives with those of other areas of governance reform, chiefly, decentralisation, RTI and community monitoring, and, (2) at a programmatic level, aims to develop a complementary community-owned ICT

			infrastructure to the CSC's commercial one
ICTD	ICTD as standalone area in donor frameworks	ICTD mainstreamed by donors	Convergent ICTD and e-governance policy and programmatic support and action to compliment mainstreaming strategies; with focused policy level advocacy, and a Resource Support Unit/ Group for projects employing ICTs in innovative ways.

Recommendations for UNDP for project development over 2013-17

For the programme period 2013-17, UNDP set its overall objective in its 'democratic governance' line of work as follows;

"Governance systems are more inclusive, accountable, decentralised and programme implementation more effective for realisation of rights of marginalised groups, especially women and children."

It has chosen to focus on three broad areas of (1) decentralised governance, (2) accountability and transparency, and (3) implementing rights based programmes and access to entitlements.

Over the next five years, UNDP also specifically plans to give great importance to innovative uses of ICTs in its various programmatic activities, as a cross-cutting thematic focus.

UNDP sees its comparative advantage, *inter alia*, in supporting "innovations that promote inclusion of marginalised communities, especially those that have been persistently excluded from development processes". It sees itself as "an impartial convener to ensure participation of all stakeholders, particularly those belonging to SCs, STs, Muslims and other disadvantaged groups".

E-governance in India has, in general, grown at a steady pace. However as discussed earlier, it is still struggling to form clear connections with overall governance reform objectives of the kind listed as UNDP priority areas in 2013-17. It also has, for the most part, not done much headway to directly impact social inclusion and articulate a rights-based approach. There is a need to focus on use of ICTs specifically to improve accountability to, and participation of, marginalised groups. At present, e-governance efforts in India seem to take a trickle down approach, hoping that finally, the marginalised sections too will be benefited substantially. UNDP's engagement with the area of engagement can orchestrate a reverse pressure, focusing primarily and centrally on the interests and priorities of the marginalised sections, in a systemic manner. To some extent, this may require bringing a different perspective to the very thinking and architecture of e-governance in India today, from a higher political/ policy level.

It is a hallmark of a techno-managerial approach that socio-political objectives and concerns like inclusion, participation, decentralisation, rights, marginalisation, community monitoring etc., which otherwise dominate the discourse of governance in India, are not clearly and strongly articulated in the e-governance arena. UNDP's involvement and efforts should seek to correct this imbalance, seeking to make these objectives and concerns express, and central to e-governance.

In keeping with the above, the overall thematic focus and scope of UNDP's engagements in the area of e-governance should consider the following as its two points of departure;

1. Aligning e-governance policies and programmes with the objectives and activities of other thrust areas of governance reform in India, like decentralisation, right to information and community monitoring, and, in general, promoting rights based approaches, which more or less correspond to the three key areas of thematic focus under the 'democratic governance' theme.
2. Putting a primary focus on the rights of the marginalised sections; specifically how they can, participate in, and benefit from, e- governance, and also influence the designing of e-governance initiatives/projects .

Such an approach should suitably inform the e-governance activity currently underway in India. It can thus positively influence the emerging architecture of e-governance, which in fact should be considered as the emerging architecture of governance at large. In this formative period of a new ICT-enabled architecture of governance, it is important to intervene in a manner that clearly articulates the key objectives of governance reform in India, and specifically, how the interests of the marginalised sections can be best served. Such an approach will also help shape and focus UNDP's direct efforts in various programmatic areas which may involve innovative uses of ICTs.

Such an approach has to be implemented at two levels;

1. Strengthening and better focusing UNDP's effort at mainstreaming ICTs in its programmatic work.
2. Articulating convergent approaches regarding e-governance/ICTD both at the policy level, and at programmatic level, that can suitably inform and support mainstreaming activities in different sectors of UNDP's work.

In providing inputs and suggestions for project development by UNDP, this document takes a classificatory or 'category of projects' approach rather than just provide a list of alluring ideas and innovations. The outcomes of ICT application are often very immediately attractive, when can lead to an instinctive method of innovation/project selection. However, the specific 'attractive' outcomes of ICTs can as quickly lose shine, if they are not adequately rooted in local development processes and do not become co-terminus with them. E-governance and ICTD has often been a story of such extreme swings, rather than a considered analytical approach. It also requires a well-thought out implementation strategy situated in the 'where and how' an ICT innovation is applied or tested, and what process and/or substantive benefits can really be expected in short-, medium- and long-term.

Mainstreaming ICTs and e-governance

Since 2005, UNDP has shifted from a thematic approach to ICTD, to a mainstreaming approach. This was part of general trends around that time which has been discussed earlier. UNDP has identified three focus areas under the 'governance' theme, and is working on framing outcomes and outputs under each. With a commitment to prioritise innovative use of ICTs, it is expected that effort will made to encourage projects under each focus area that explore innovative use of ICTs. Such encouragement can be made at different levels of use of ICTs, and with different project objectives. The following four-way framework is suggested in this regard, which can help develop a common understanding among all the involved actors *vis-a-vis* the manner and objectives of mainstreaming ICTs in different projects. Such mutual understanding enables configuring of appropriate hopes and expectations from projects with ICT mainstreaming components, and, thereupon, most effectively employ the outcomes of these projects for large-scale systemic change. These two – mutual expectation management and upscaling – are often the greatest challenges in projects that seek to employ ICTs in innovative manners.

Choosing ICTs for clear outcomes and outputs: In many projects there is a relatively clear understanding of why and how an ICT element will be used to achieve specific project outputs and outcomes, together with other elements of the project. In such cases, generally, the ICT element that is being employed is relatively mature with regard to the demonstrated social/ developmental outcomes, for instance, use of sms-es to send automatic messages at defined process points, or use of locally-made instructional videos. The challenge is to integrate it with other (social) processes being employed or developed by the project. It involves shifts in personal and social habits around technology use, and appropriate initiatives have to be taken in this regard. However, the cost of

such changes should not be disproportionate to the direct benefits from employing ICTs.

Prior to taking up such possible innovations, it may be required to enhance the capacity of project leaders through exposure, training and developing best practice kits. New projects that are funded can be asked to choose at least some such uses of ICTs, in a manner that fits contextually with their overall plans. However, the final choice and commitment must come from within, by project proponents themselves, with a high enough level of confidence of applicability and plausibility of the concerned ICT element or ICT based process to their project. Very often, such is the currency of the involved ICT elements that project proponents would themselves be looking to employ them, and may only be looking for some ideational and/or technical support. Such projects are ideal candidates for gentle prodding into. It is important to assert that use of ICTs is not at all the central objective of the projects under this category, and they remain rather incidental to the complex of general objectives and activities.

An exercise to list relatively mature ICT uses in development sector, that projects should be encouraged to employ innovatively

Sms alerts
Websites publishing extensive information, especially such that is contextual and locally relevant
Local participatory videos, for highlighting community issues, collaborative pedagogy etc
e-lists, that develop local issues based networks
Geographic Information Systems, to map local realities and enable participatory local action
Information centres, as hubs of locally relevant information and knowledge
Digital knowledge management practises
Online applications, providing acknowledgement, grievance redressal, ...
.....
.....
(The list can be developed through an initial group consultation)

Experimenting with ICT possibilities: Even within mainstreaming strategies, such is the newness and the fast-changing nature of ICTs, that a certain degree of experimentation remains necessary, especially to understand the implications of new ICTs in specific conditions of development projects or governance activity. At least some of the projects that will be supported by UNDP must be allowed such experimentation, as an express feature of the project. In conditions of experimenting, costs of using ICTs may significantly out-weigh any immediate or even short-term benefits. The real benefit is in the terms of overall learning for that specific kind of developmental activity, or generally for the field of development. Even failures may contribute valuable learning, and are therefore accounted for in any experiment. However, experimentation should be done *vis-a-vis* a set of techno-social processes[6], i.e. ICT-mediated new development processes, that bear a seamless continuity with non-ICT processes, and not just about new ICTs by themselves. (The ICTs that would be piloted will only be those which have been amply demonstrated their utility and relevance; development may not be the space for cutting edge technology innovations.) These techno-social processes should be completely embedded in a larger 'development situation', and be conducted with regard to broader development/ governance objectives, whose successful achievement concomitantly would certainly require other, non-ICT, process innovations. Therefore, it is not that the whole project is an experiment; some experimental ICT elements would be embedded in a larger project, which alone will ensure the validity of learning.

6 The term 'techno-social' refers to new social processes that are mediated through technologies; for instance, email is a technical process, however, a group regularly using emails as e-lists to effectively organise and coordinate some kind of civil society action would be considered an employing a techno-social process.

There may not be always be a clear-cut distinction between this kind of 'experimental approach' to mainstreaming ICTs and the one previously discussed involving use of mature ICT applications for relatively clear outcomes. There is always some degree of experimentation in e-governance and ICTD projects, and, at the same time, some level of clear governance or development outcome/outputs need to be associated with any experiment. However, it is useful to appreciate the difference of primary focus between the two approaches in developing a project portfolio, and in laying out expectations from different projects.

Such experimental projects need not focus only on a specific ICT, or a set of ICTs. They could as well be focused on some generic governance/ development process and look at how different kind and mixes of ICTs can produce different outcomes. For instances, how a set of ICTs can transform possibilities of community monitoring and/ or social audits, say, in the area of health; how, a set of ICTs can produce such an information-rich environment in the local community that its capacity to engage with governance is significantly enhanced, for example, with regard to effectiveness of *gram sabhas*.

An exercise to identify possibly useful ICT innovations that still need significant experimentation in development situations

GIS for micro-planning
sms for p2p networking
sms for information networks
mobiles for data collection
inexpensive tablets as personal devices for video based learning and capacity building
voice based e-lists accessed through mobile phones
social media for networking, capacity building and information exchange
participatory videos for p2p learning and networking
Community Knowledge centres for community knowledge management
Community ICT hubs for community empowerment
….....
….....
(The list can be developed through an initial group consultation)

Integration and convergence: Even when any e-governance or development project has shown successful outcomes using ICTs, the challenge remains to integrate such new techno-social processes with the activities of partners locally, within a particular development/ governance sector. Development processes do show considerable inertia even in face of demonstrated benefits of innovations, and with regard to use of ICT based processes there can be significant discontinuity beyond project and/or organisational boundaries. Some UNDP supported projects may need to be specifically designed/ supported that seek to take a demonstrated e-governance/ ICTD process outside a project or organisation to be adopted by a whole set of local partners in a supporting or complementary relationship with regard to particular development/ governance sector. To give an example, sms based information networks immediately add up in value if a larger set of partners, say, all of them working locally in the area of education, join in, both for receiving smses and contributing them. Similar network effects can be seen, for instance, with locally made videos on women's empowerment issues.

ICTs also enable convergence across sectors, and most ICT based innovative processes can fruitfully be employed by different sectors of governance/ development sectors, giving huge network or convergence gains. This can make the ICT based innovations quite cost effective with respect to the huge multiplier effect across different sectors, since ICT based processes typically

have relatively high initial costs but very low marginal costs. To cite an example; ICT enabled community monitoring capacities developed in the area of health, can easily also be employed for education, agriculture support, NREGA etc. Similarly, ICT facilitated information centres catering to social protection related information may also serve community information needs in areas of health, youth mobilisation etc. Projects may be planned that extend proven and working ICT-based processes developed in one sector for convergence across sectors, especially at the community level. However, such convergence is also possible upstream (e.g. common smart cards, payment gateways, mobile applications, etc).

An exercise to be undertaken for classifying different kinds of existing ICTD/ e-governance project *(which helps to develop understanding on how to make a roadmap going ahead)*

Projects with ICT innovation	**Generic ICT mediated processes that has been developed/proved**	**Avenues of integration/ convergence**

(This exercise can be done by groups in a workshop setting)

Upscaling of ICT-based innovations: For an e-governance or ICTD innovation to be upscaled across a large area of application, geographically and/or population-wise, it requires considerable standardisation, economies of financial and other resources, and integration across a very broad set or processes and activities. It also often requires processes of quick capacity building and considerable initial hand-holding. Very often the upscaling process requires stripping down of some features of the innovation, in order to accomplish the necessary integration with existing processes, which may seem to considerably change the original innovation, and along with it, the expected outcomes. A call has to be taken on the comparative costs and benefits of possible alternative upscaling avenues. Very often innovations may need to ride on large-scale government programmes, which may have a different focus than that of the innovation(s) in question, even if there are certain areas of alignment. One illustrative hypothetical example is, an ICT based monitoring innovation developed in a community-based health project that is sought to be upscaled through the National Rural Health Mission, which is likely to have required making significant changes to the original innovation, both at the level of ICTs and the corresponding social processes. UNDP may want to support such upscaling possibilities after making a careful assessment of alternative ICT based innovations, and of appropriate government programmes that may be able absorb and benefit from them.

An exercise to be undertaken (Pick up a proven innovation and look for good candidates among large-scale programmes for upscaling, or take a programme in a specific sector, and scout for a set of proven ICT innovations that it can consider)

Proven ICT innovations **Likely programmes that can benefit from them**

(This exercise can be done by groups in a workshop setting)

Specialised and convergent approaches to e-governance

As has been suggested at the end of the last section, an exclusive mainstreaming approach can result in us losing sight of the big picture. ICT based changes often impact at a systemic level. Over time, they can significantly transform the whole architecture of governance. Such a systemic change can work for what may be the highest, politically articulated, objectives of governance reform – like decentralisation, a rights based approach, right to information, community monitoring etc. – or can work in the opposite direction. What may look like greatly improving efficiency may centralise power rather than decentralise it. New modes of service delivery that reduce costs may in fact be causing significant exclusion. Community may find services available at their doorstep, but, at the same time, processes of participation and monitoring may vanish or become even more remote.

E-governance is as political a process as any other area of governance reform, its techno-managerial 'neutral' projections not withstanding. At every step, it may involve political trade-offs and therefore e-governance decisions should be guided by clear principles and policies, and subject to wide stakeholder consultations, and community monitoring and social audits at every stage. Decisions that have a very far-reaching impact on our governance systems are currently being taken, which can largely get hardwired in the near future. This will greatly constrain subsequent maneuverability with regard to our governance architecture and systems. Avoiding such an eventuality requires articulation of a clear e-governance policy, which is lacking at present.

ICTs enable convergence and can serve as a networking platform. Mainstreaming projects, that work from within narrow objectives and possibilities, are normally not able to leverage the highest levels of transformative potential of innovative use of ICTs. Also, any such networking and convergence possibility has often to be first experimented with, in a cross-sectoral manner. However, a mainstreaming approach leaves such cross-sectoral experiments as 'no one's baby', whereby some most important e-governance opportunities can get missed. This is another area of very significant gap with regard to e-governance in India which may be attempted to be addressed by UNDP's efforts.

With regard to its e-governance efforts for the 2013-17 program period, UNDP should consider developing an appropriate convergent approach to support and compliment its mainstreaming efforts, in the following two areas:

1. Broad principles and policy level coherence for e-governance in India, and
2. Programmatic level networking and convergence opportunities.

Principles and policy level coherence for e-governance

In the Approach Paper for the XIIth Five Year Plan, the Planning Commission avers that “government programmes need a new architecture: greater localisation, break-down of silos, feedback from citizens, and mechanisms for learning and sharing of best practices” It also highlights the need for “greater devolution and empowerment” in face of “a strong demand from all sectors of society to improve implementation, accountability and service delivery”.

E-governance is a potent means to provide a new architecture for government programmes, and in general, for governance, in India. However, any change of architecture requires an articulation of foundational principles for a such a changeover. Piece-meal changes here and there, which is the current pattern of e-governance in India, does not make for a good 'new architecture' that is in conformance with the objectives that made such a change necessary. The above quotation lays out

some of these objectives, which are also the goals of major thrust areas of governance reform in India like, decentralisation, right to information, community monitoring, a rights-based approach, etc. Process objectives like 'greater localisation', 'breakdown of silos' and 'mechanisms of learning and sharing' can also not be met without convergent and broad principles-based approaches to governance reform, which include e-governance. This section deals with coherence and convergence at level of policies and principles, and the next section with convergence at programmatic and implementation levels.

The first requirement is to develop an overall e-governance policy, at central government and state government levels. Such a policy should primarily cast the objectives of e-governance in India in terms of general objectives and directions of overall governance reform. These objectives should then further be seen from the prism of generic new process re-engineering possibilities that ICTs can enable. The overall governance reform objectives will have to be defined in terms of general principles that, as appropriate, may be applied to all e-governance activities in India. Since, the e-governance policy framework is not meant to be technology-centric, and will focus on objectives and areas of reform and architectural change, it would not constrain experimenting with new ICTs as they evolve around us. At appropriate time, however, the policy may need necessary amendments as rapid technology progress continues.

It is accepted that in the very early period of e-governance, ICTs were only beginning to show their paradigmatic promise, and the possibilities they offered in the area of governance were not well understood, even at a generic level. At this time, it may have been considered as counter-productive to apply a policy framework, which can become constraining rather than enabling. It may be for this reason that India is yet to develop an e-governance policy. However, that early phase is past now, and generic possibilities of ICTs for governance reform are largely known and understood. Also, widespread architectural change in Indian governance system is already well underway, even in the absence of a clear set of objectives and road map. It is time therefore that India comes up with an e-governance policy, through wide public consultations. The process should, however, not be led by technologists but by actors involved with the broader governance reform agenda.

Meanwhile, agencies like UNDP can begin to develop broader principles that cast the general governance reform objectives in the clay of new ICT based possibilities that have emerged. These principles should be developed through wide public consultations, and a thorough survey of most transformative impacts that e-governance may have shown worldwide. However, to be really useful, these principles should be very much rooted in the distinct flavor of the current governance reform movements in India. These principles will respond to questions like; does e-governance process re-engineering centralise or decentralise power and decision making, and does it further the objectives of decentralisation? Is ICT based process re-engineering devoted to making attempts at a new bottom-up architecture of governance? Does such process re-engineering employ 'citizen's right to information' as a core design principle in all new governance processes Are the possibilities of community monitoring and feedback systemically included as new ICT based processes are designed? Does the new architecture use ICT possibilities for empowering the front-line worker? Are horizontal and peer-to-peer learning possibilities configured in new system designs?Are duplicate processes being weeded out to improve efficiency? Have the best opportunities for convergence and networking been explored?. And so on.

Just relying on departments to do e-governance in incremental ways means that the best transformational possibilities are not harnessed, as departments work from within their narrow internal logic, and probably, from narrow internal 'interests'. E- governance re-engineering has to proceed from citizen's interests and point of view, and the need for governments to give a coordinated response to citizen's needs and demands. This imperative requires articulation of an e-

governance policy and implementation principles and guidelines under it.

In this regard, in the next programming cycle, UNDP may want to undertake two clear sets of activities.

1. Advocate with governments, both at the central and state levels, to develop an e-governance policy, and align the objectives and activities of e-governance with those of general governance reform movements in India.
2. Set up an E-governance Resource Support Unit/Group within UNDP to develop appropriate overall principles for e-governance activity in India, and guide its own (UNDP's) work of mainstreaming e-governance.

The advocacy for an e-governance policy, and key principles based coherence in nationwide e-governance activities, should be aimed at both the Departments of IT and the Department of Administrative Reform, in addition to involving all other key government departments, especially those dealing with service delivery and self governance (as being focus areas for UNDP).

The proposed Resource Support Unit/ Group should not be filled with technology specialists but consist of experts in innovative approaches to governance reform. The effort is to guide e-governance effort away from a technology-focus to a wider focus on systemic governance reform.

This E-governance Resource Support Unit/Group should (1) help evolve larger principles for e-governance based process re-engineering, (2) regularly assess innovations possibilities and upscaling opportunities as per the four-way mainstreaming approach suggested in the an earlier section, and (3) provide on-ground advice and support to projects willing to take-up ICT innovations, or scaling up.

Programmatic level networking and convergence opportunities

Some of the most transformational possibilities offered by ICTs are in the area of networking and convergence. A simple mainstreaming approach, where ICTs or e-governance are used from within the logic of a sectoral programme can obviously not appropriately harness these transformational possibilities. It was suggested earlier in this document how, even within a mainstreaming approach, it is useful for UNDP to keep the issue of larger convergences and networking in mind. However, it will also need a different specialised approach that focuses first and foremost on the elements of convergence and networking using ICT and e- governance opportunities. This again is a conscious new direction that UNDP may want to take in terms of development of its new programme, with respect to the area of e-governance.

Convergence opportunities are available both at the community level and upstream in the governance architecture. Governments have lately been quite active in exploring the upstream convergence opportunities, like UID, smart cards, common payment gateways, and, at times, though less frequently, even sharing of data and applications. These upstream convergence processes too will need to be informed by overall e-governance policies and principles, ensuring congruence with larger governance reform objectives, as discussed in the last section. However, apparently, as sufficient activities are already being undertaken by governments, especially by their technology agencies/departments, UNDP may not need to directly undertake or support projects in these areas. (It can however continue to work in terms of specific applications of some such technical convergence activities to key areas of governance in its 'mainstreaming work', like the project supported by UNDP regarding smart cards for MNREGA).

The greatest gap in terms of convergence and networking is at the community level. We have

discussed earlier, how the Common Service Centres scheme addresses only one part of the need for community level convergent e-governance infrastructure. There is a great need to undertake projects for community-level convergent e-governance infrastructures that can support decentralisation, community monitoring, rights based approaches, people's right to information, social audits, empowerment projects etc. These can initially be in the form of pilot projects linked to large-scale government programmes. There is already a growing awareness among, and activity by, governments in this area; like the MNERGA *Seva Kendras*, the proposed Information Centres under PMO's Public Information Infrastructure initiative, state level initiatives like *Akshaya* in Kerala and Mission Convergence in New Delhi, information and service centres proposed under various legislations like the Unorganised Workers Social Security Act.

The current UNDAF document lays great stress on 'empowering communities' with the aim that "vulnerable and excluded women, children, adolescents and men are empowered as active agents of change". The document proposes that "strategies for empowering local communities, especially the marginalised and vulnerable, both in rural and urban areas of India, need to be continuously designed, applied and evaluated for their effectiveness". UNDP specifically seeks to "work with organisations of marginalised groups and equip them with capacities to claim their rights and entitlements".

In the background of such lofty ideals and objectives, the direct question that must be addressed while designing a new program by UNDP is; what ICTs, which are said to have great potential for empowerment and for transformational systemic change, can do to empower communities, and enable them to engage with the governance systems. The generic answer is; explore ways to develop a community-based and community-owned ICT infrastructure that can empower communities, enable them to assert their rights and claim entitlements, ensure their right to information, support micro-planning, provide support for community monitoring and social audits, and enliven the processes of *gram sabha*, the most important yet the most neglected tier of decentralisation and self-governance.

What is promising is that ICT-based local social processes can provide a cost-effective convergent support for most, if not all, of the above desired community based activities. What is needed is to build an ICT-based infrastructure of local information centres, community ICT hubs, community radio, participatory video, GIS capabilities, sms and social-media-based local p2p networks, and so on. Providing some of these capacities within 'mainstream projects' and sectoral verticals does offer important learning, but is mostly not effective and sustainable vis-a-vis various resource requirements. However, while initial costs (of funds, human resources, skills, habit change, system resistance, etc) are very high, the marginal costs of running community ICT infrastructures are rather low. Therefore, such community-level ICT possibilities are best applied in a convergent manner, whereby if initial costs are suitably shared among different schemes, everyone benefits greatly in the mid- to long-term. At the same time, suitable community use of such a range of ICTs will allow real empowerment of communities, who can then begin to take governance into their hands.

UNDP should support pilots that are independent, as well those working with with some of the government programmes mentioned above, to build convergent ICT infrastructures that are community owned and seek to empower communities. Through well designed projects, by focusing energies in a few project areas, considerable impact can be shown across many areas of governance work, and in domains of development like health, livelihood support, women's empowerment etc. these can then be offered for upscaling especially to government agencies that focus on convergence like departments of rural development, directorates of social audit and agencies dealing with women's empowerment, youth mobilisation etc.

All of our 'innovative projects' recommendations for project development by UNDP for the period 2013-17 consist of approaching the community-owned ICT infrastructure imperative from different angles; providing resource support to elected representatives (for the 'decentralisation' theme), village level complete process transparency and accountability in MNERGA and other programmes (for the 'accountability and transparency' theme) and mobilising youth to employ ICTs for 'community empowerment' (for the 'rights and entitlements' theme). While as pilot projects they will primarily be addressing their respective project objectives, any community owned infrastructure that will be set up can finally be used for all these objectives, and many more. This is the power of convergence and 'network effect', and the huge economies of cross-sector implementation, that a convergent community-owned ICT infrastructure brings about. For this, however, effort has to be put into building viable models from the scratch, something that UNDP may want to address in the forthcoming programming cycle.

Summary of recommendations for project development by UNDP over 2013-17

1. Strengthen mainstreaming of ICTs in UNDP's work across different sectors

Focusing on the three areas of (1) decentralisation, (2) transparency and accountability, and (3) rights and entitlements, take a strategic approach, distinguishing between projects that;

(1) use mature ICTs for direct project related outcomes
(2) largely, experiment with ICT possibilities for possible innovative practices,
(3) are devoted to exploring post-innovation integration and convergence, and
(4) aim specifically at upscaling successful innovations.

Undertake an exercise to select projects and innovations in each category. Include all the above kinds of projects in its portfolio with careful classification, aimed at due discrimination between relevant kinds of project objectives and outcomes.

2. Develop a complementary convergence strategy for e-governance

1. *Advocate with governments to develop e-governance policies that place objectives of e-governance within the larger governance reform agenda.*

2. *UNDP should undertake an exercise of developing broad principles that should guide the new 'e-enabled architecture' of various large-scale programmes of governments;*

3. *Set up a E-governance Resource Support Unit/ Group to develop principles for e-governance process re-engineering, and to guide mainstreaming activity, including support to interested project level actors;*

4. *Undertake pilot projects, both independently, and within large-scale government programmes, for developing community-owned convergent ICT infrastructures that empower communities, and enable them to closely engage with governance activities;*

5. *Advocate with agencies involved with large-scale government programmes that are aimed at developing community level ICT infrastructure, for purposeful use of ICT opportunities; for instance with;*

1. *Department of Rural Development, and other departments/ agencies like those dealing with women's empowerment, youth issues etc, which have cross-sectoral mandates across areas of development;*
1. *Department of IT (for its Common Service Centre (CSC) scheme, and other community oriented ICT activities/ programmes);*
2. *State government initiatives of a similar kind; for instance, eGram in Gujurat, Akshaya in Kerala, and various state adoption of the CSC scheme;*
3. *PMO's Public Information Infrastructure initiative;*
4. *Department of Telecommunications's Universal Service Fund's program to provide fibre connectivity to all villages in two years;*
5. *Directorates of Social Audit, for supporting ICT-based infrastructure at community level for ongoing community monitoring and social audit.*

Innovative Project Proposals – 1: Decentralised governance

Moving beyond capacity building mode to ICT-based resource support system for elected representatives

Context: Decentralisation has been seen as the cure of many an ills of governance systems in India. Considerable devolution of power has taken place, and PRIs are out of the early experimental phase in most places. However, the capacities of elected representatives (ERs) still remains an area of great concern. Decentralisation has rightly aimed at extensive inclusion of ERs from the weaker sections, like SCs, STs and women. Due to reservation quotas there is also a high turnover of ERs. These contexts have further accentuated the 'capacity' problem. The government has spent a lot of energy and resources for capacity building efforts, and these have had an impact. However, traditional modes of capacity building have their limitations. For instance, they are supply side driven, and mostly one-off, trainings; information is not made available when required and in a locally contextual form; learning is not sustained and strengthened, because there are no avenues of continued learning available between capacity-building sessions, and much of it gets lost; learning is one-way, top-down, and ERs do not have good opportunities to contribute their 'knowledge' and experience, and engage in peer-learning processes, and so on. It is important to explore how ICTs can help devise new capacity building and resource systems for ERs.

The proposed project: The proposed pilot project seeks to make a clear shift from a capacity-building approach to a demand-driven resource support approach, whereby a set of simple ICTs will be used to provide a 360 degree all- and any-time learning environment.

The key premises of the project are that adult learning, especially concerning complex and contextual issues like fulfilling governance responsibility, in a very dynamic and unpredictable environment, is best done through a demand-based approach. Further, such learning is most useful if it employs a constructive approach, whereby learners contribute as much as they take. Quoting a definition of constructivism is very relevant here, and shows how well it captures the needs and context of learning by ERs .

Constructivism is basically a theory -- based on observation and scientific study -- about how people learn. It says that people construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world, through experiencing things and reflecting on those experiences. When we encounter something new, we have to reconcile it with our previous ideas and experience, maybe changing what we believe, or maybe discarding the new information as irrelevant. In any case, we are active creators of our own knowledge. To do this, we must ask questions, explore, and assess what we know.[7]

Further, ERs are relatively empowered persons, or are receiving training to be empowered in order to be able to fulfill very demanding political roles. They can learn best through peer-to-peer, horizontal networks. They also have a great hunger for information and knowledge because they know how much it can immediately add to their 'power', given that they already nominally are in an important community leadership role. Also, there is an important need for learning resources to be locally relevant, and, if possible, locally produced.

ICTs enable easy on-demand information support. ICTs can also be used to set up peer-to-peer networks where learners use locally developed resources to learn as well as contribute. Such

7 http://www.thirteen.org/edonline/concept2class/constructivism/index.html

networks can become mutual support systems. Inexpensive personal devices are available now a days through which ERs can learn on their own time, and at their own pace, using locally made contextual videos. Finally, as ERs develop their capacities, they should have the necessary resource support to be able to fulfill their governance roles. ICTs are again immensely useful here, as they provide access to both governance related information and local community information, that can help in micro-planning.

The proposed ***ICT based resource support system for ERs*** will have the following components;

1. On-demand contextual resource support through ICT means (like a helpline, and assisted email interaction, through the assistance of a community information centre worker),
2. Peer-to-peer learning platforms through ICT-based networking among ERs in a local region (possibly, a district), using sms based networks, participatory videos, voice-based online community messages accessed through mobile phones (on *CGnet Swara* model[8]) etc.
3. Personal learning using locally made contextual videos, shared through USB drives, and accessed on inexpensive personal devices (cheap tablets, like *Akash*, which can be shared on a library system basis)
4. Decision support systems; complete online (assisted or direct) access to governance information and local information, including locally generated information, household surveys, local GIS mapping etc, which enables ERs to do micro-planning.

The pilot project can either leverage the ICT resources of MNREGA *Rajiv Sewa Kendras* that are being set up, or, for the sake of extensive experimentation required during the project, set up ICT and information centres specifically for the project, Later, the learning from the pilot project can be upscaled along with Seva Kendra project, and/or other community ICT/ information centre projects.

***Project Outputs*:**

1. ICT-enabled resource support system is available to ERs in the project area with components as mentioned in the project description.
2. ERs are able to access information and resource support when required, including through helplines, peer-to-peer networks and personal devices, creating a continued learning environment;
3. ERs networks help form vibrant communities focusing on local governance issues, which can connect at local, regional as well higher levels depending on factors like language, shared cultures etc;
4. ERs are enabled to carry on their governance responsibilities aided by decision support systems, and access to required information (including local community information, which helps micro-planning).

Project Outcomes:

1. ERs, including from weaker sections, are able to carry out their governance responsibilities in a more effective manner.
2. A model for ongoing resource support to ERs is developed that will be proposed for scaling up as a state and/or national-level models, to complement existing efforts at capacity building of ERs.

Partner organisations: The project should use partner organisations that are already working with ERs, preferable ERs federations. It is not necessary that these organisations should have worked with ICTs, but, they must be rather eager to do so, and the overall project idea should appeal to them.

Estimated cost of proposed project activity: This really depends on how large a coverage is

8 See the story at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/8617943.stm .

proposed for the pilot project. Too small a coverage does not provide the significant 'network effect' involved in almost all elements of the project; too large an area will mean difficulty in focused project activity, in which a lot of initial intensive work, including experimentation, will be involved.

However, as a rough estimate, if the project covers about 10 contiguous panchayats, and does not depend on MNERGA *Sewa Kendras'* infrastructure, about 1.5 crore rupees over a 3 year period may be required.

Innovative Project Proposals - 2 : Accountability and transparency

Rajiv Gandhi *Sewa Kendras* as village information and knowledge centres enhancing transparency and accountability in governance (as part of NREGA scheme)

Context: Rajiv Gandhi *Sewa Kendras* are being set up in all *gram panchayats*, as a part of the MNREGA scheme, with the twin objectives, to;

1. provide space and ICT support to facilitate the functioning of the NREGA office at g*ram panchayat* and block levels;
2. function as a resource centre for citizen's access to information on NREGA and other rural development programmes, and access to online transactions related to development processes[9].

While the two can be considered as complementary sets of functions, there may arise some degree of tension between the proposed inward focus (servicing the needs of NREGA officials) and an outward, citizen-oriented, focus of these centres. The nomenclature '*Sewa Kendras'* makes it clear that a citizen orientation is primary for these centres. These *Kendras* have been developed in order to address the "need to provide greater and more transparent interactions with the citizens", providing "space for citizens to exercise their rights under NREGA" including submitting application for job cards and for work, scrutinising job cards and submitting complaints. Social audit is listed as one of the activities that these centres will facilitate. Citizens may use "ICT facilities to scrutinies their rights and entitlements under NREGA".

However, it is important to consciously develop an appropriate model for these centres for them to focus on this primary role of providing resource support for the community. Otherwise, they run the risk of just becoming the local NREGA office, provided with some ICT facilities. If a viable working working model can be demonstrated for these *Kendras*, they can greatly help enhance accountability and transparency of NREGA at the *panchayat* level itself, and also that of other development programs.

The proposed project: Once the context and opportunity is understood, the proposed pilot project is relatively straight-forward. It will seek to work with the Department of Rural Development to develop a citizen-focused model for on-the-ground working of *Rajiv Seva Kendras*. A very ambitious range of citizen focused functions are listed for these *Kendras*. It is important to work out the implementation details through a pilot project. Chiefly, the project objective is to make sure that these *Kendras* actually become providers of (information and knowledge) resource support to the citizens, and do not become just another office. Relevant community level processes will have to innovated for this purpose, through on-the-ground experimentation. It will require addressing the many expected tensions about whether ICTs are there primarily to help the *panchayat* officials in their work, or to provide resource support to the citizens. These officials have to be helped to understand the real context and role of these *Kendras.*

In fact, the intended role and design of these *Kendras* represent a very new approach to governance, whereby citizens are actually being enabled to directly connect to governance activity on a regular

9 Selectively paraphrased from the concerned government circular.

and sustained manner, both to avail benefits and to exercise democratic control. The pilot project will help operationalise this new approach. While, *de jure*, the community is the most empowered tier of the PRI system, it has few resources and avenues to exercise its 'power'. The proposed vehicle of Sewa Kendras can help provide the informational and technology resources that are needed by the community to exercise this role in the *gram sabha*, and also through development process innovations like community monitoring and social audits. This is apart from the informational and technical resources being put in hand of the individual citizen, for instance, to enable her to access her rights and entitlement.

It should be obvious that the Sewa Kendra approach is quite ambitious and even path breaking. However, it yet has only some central government guidelines, in form of a circular, to speak for this significant innovation. It becomes very urgent and important in this early formative period, as Seva Kendras are being built, to come up with a working model that operationalises the visionary intent of setting them up.

The pilot project will, i*nter alia*, work towards;

1. Setting up a fully ICT-enabled, complete process loop for all MNERGA activities, at the *gram panchayat* level itself; it will enable citizens/ community to apply for job cards, seek work and get payments, and also to examine muster roles and the submitted work budgets as a part of community monitoring or social audit activity;
2. Making the whole ICT-enabled process loop visible 'online' in the public domain;
3. Ensuring that citizens are able to access all the online information from the *Kendras* through a process that cannot be physically or otherwise interfered with (the allocation of roles for the *Kendra Sevak* - taking from the '*Sewa Kendra'* terminology - and the physical design of the *Kendra* has to be appropriately designed for this purpose);
4. Exploring how an online and offline space can be created at the *Kendras* that is easily accessible by citizens as their own, and not a constrained 'official' space;
5. Making all information and other resources from the *Kendra* available to help community monitoring and social audit processes;
6. Making ICTs at the *Kendras* available to the community for various community empowerment processes, like community knowledge management, GIS based micro-planning, etc.

The pilot project will put in place the necessary project staff that can help enough community level informational and ICT processes, that can animate the community to sufficiently own up the project. Apart from putting in a lot of effort to get over the initial system inertia, and investing considerable resources to prime-up basic informational and ICT based processes, the outputs and outcomes must be of sufficient value for making the new model an attractive proposition to all. It will require a good amount of software development aimed at automating processes with an online 'lock-in' (so that all physical processes and simultaneously mirrored on the online system). All relevant local information will need to be collected and organised on online platforms. Appropriate innovations in social processes that can enable citizens/ community to easily access information, including active outreach by the *Seva Kendra* staff, will be required. However, all this effort and its output is highly scalable, making the relatively high resource intensity experiment very much worth the effort, and quite cost-effective in its upscaled form.

Project Outputs:

1. Citizens are able to access all the relevant information about NREGA and other development programmes, and also have online and automated access to its key processes, for accountability and transparency;
2. All the needed information to ensure community monitoring and social audit of NREGA and

other development schemes is made available;
3. ICT-based community knowledge management systems are developed, and ICTs are used for micro-planning.

Project outcome*:* A working model of Rajiv Gandhi *Sewa Kendras* is developed, that (1) fulfills the vision of these Kendras as facilitators of a new kind and level of interaction between panchayat raj institutions and the community, ensuring 360 degree transparency and accountability, and (2) is implementable and cost effective enough to be scaled up across the country.

Partner organisations:The pilot project should be carried in partnership with the department of rural development at the national and state levels, The project can be led by some NGOs most active with community based governance reform processes. It is not necessary that these organisations should have worked with ICTs, but, indeed, they must be very eager to do so, if the overall project idea appeals to them.

Estimated cost of proposed project activity: It depends on the number of *Kendras* that are covered. Working in 10 contiguous *panchayats*, in an intensive manner, a budget of around 1.5 crore rupees over three years may be required.

Scaling up: Once a workable model is developed and demonstrated, it will be scaled up as a part of NREGA and other rural development activities. Of course, the cost per *Kendra* will be a fraction of what is proposed in the pilot project that requires a great degree of intensive experimentation, employing expensive human and other resources. NREGA allows 6 percent of its budget to be spent on administrative aspects, which can easily take care of scaling up costs of the model that will be developed and demonstrated through the proposed pilot project.

Innovative Project Proposals – 3: Implementing rights based programmes and access to entitlements

ICTs for Community Empowerment and Action by Youth

Context: Since independence it has been the hope and expectation that the country's youth shall show a spirit of community-orientation and volunteerism towards the difficult task of building the nation and strengthening democracy. Many youth-based programmes and movements took shape in the early decades of independence. Many of these programmes have lost much of their steam today. Indeed, 'youth' is a very variable category with respect to passing time in terms of their behavioral, cultural, ideological, political and social orientations. Today, while the need for their engagement in saving and promoting our democracy is as acute as ever, the youth do not have any powerful new ideologies and platforms to organise around. This has often led to their energies being frittered on sectarian, or even criminal. purposes. Incidentally, there is today a high degree of political awareness among the youth, which, in absence of any viable means of purposeful expression, gets dissipated towards cynicism, which itself is corroding the social fabric of our democracy.

While new ICTs have caught our world by storm, their impact is doubtlessly the highest among the youth. This is even true for youth from among relatively marginalised sections, who may not have the same kind of access to a comprehensive range of ICTs as the better-off groups. Nonetheless, these youths, from relatively marginalised sections, still do considerable innovation with the ICT possibilities that are available to them, like the inexpensive mobiles. Importantly, so huge is this bottom-of-the-pyramid demand that the market has been responding rather aggressively, offering low cost Internet enabled mobiles and fast falling mobile Internet access rates, including through pre-paid packages. However, ICT use among youth is still mostly individualistic, and not oriented to community building and action. This is unfortunate because ICTs, by definition being tools of connection and collaboration, can indeed play a very important role in community building and action for democratic reform. For this, it is both important to reposition ICT use in a collaborative, community-oriented manner, and to explore the possibilities of developing new ICT-enabled platforms and incentives for organising youth and motivating them towards community volunteerism and action. ICTs here become both the tools of a new community action oriented pedagogy as well as means of networking and collaboration. Once so organised and motivated, youth groups can employ the same ICT tools for creating an awareness of rights and entitlements, engaging with institutions of governance, demanding transparency and accountability, and organising the needed action by the community.

Project idea in brief: A pilot project to develop a model *Youth ICT Hub* for leveraging the intense interest that new ICTs have evoked among the youth in order to energise youth movements in rural (and perhaps also urban) India for engaging with community building and action, especially in the areas of (1) ensuring access to rights and entitlements, (2) transparency and accountability, and (3) engagement with governance systems (especially, *panchayati raj* institutions).

The project will work with youth in a few village clusters, each of about 5-10 villages. Each village cluster will develop a *Youth ICT Hub* with a range of ICTs - ranging from sms based networks, to computer based learning systems, and radio and video based community media possibilities - that

will be available for community use. Community animators will encourage and organise community oriented ICT use, and gradually transfer most project activity to be conducted by youth volunteers.

Before going for direct activities in the chosen objective areas, the project will have to work on organising and incentivising the youth/ youth groups, and developing a community-based and community-oriented pedagogy covering community building, democracy and rights. ICTs will be used centrally for all these purposes. The ICT facilities will also be available to the youth for self-learning purposes.

Once the youth groups are motivated, organised and capacitated for the intended tasks, they will be involved with organising community level work and action. The nature of activity can broadly be described as follows;

(1) Sms based news and information networks, including issues-based networks catering to different groups of people;

(2) Community information centres where all the public information pertaining to a particular village (or set of villages) is sourced from all the relevant places, including from different government departments, and made available at one place to the community

(3) The community information centre will also develop as the local information hub for all information about the village's demographics, history, culture, and of its contemporary social, cultural, economic and political life. The local youth will be expected to be as innovative as possible in this regard (for example, holding best 'local history story from your grandparents' contest in the school). Youth groups will do demographic surveys etc to build the needed information base, apart from relying on information available from different sources.

(4) Local community media will be developed through sms/ telephone, audio and video technologies, developing local content, in a rather inexpensive and reiterative manner. (Youth are already quite adept at recording stuff on mobiles etc.; this inclination and skill can be systematically developed for community purposes. However, it requires a significantly different attitude to these new ICT-based 'media' technologies and processes than what is currently practiced, developing which will be an objective of the project.) Such local media will be used to develop a context and public discourse for proactive citizenship focusing on rights and entitlements.

(5) ICT based informational and collaborative tools will be used for community monitoring and social audits, including, when possible, by plugging into official social audit and community monitoring processes. However, *suo moto* community monitoring and social audits will also be tried out. What will be attempted is to built the community's capability for continuous (as against currently practiced, one-off) monitoring and social audits, across different sectors (livelihood, health education, child rights etc). ***This should take initiatives like PAHELI further down from district level to the village community level, and make generation of development and governance information an ongoing process, rather than one off. Such a paradigm shift has to be explored to make communities themselves at the core of use of 'informational power' for gaining rights and entitlements.***

(6) ICTs will be used to create awareness of rights and entitlements,, especially among the marginalised sections. ***The Youth ICT hub may also act as a 'My Rights Centre'[10] to create a point***

10 The name of such a rights-oriented centre can be even more evocative in some Indian languages, lile *Namma Haqqa Kendra*, in Kannada.

in the community that institutionally looks at governance purely from the citizen's end.

(7) While decentralisation has taken place in terms of legal allocation of roles and responsibilities, there is an acute lack of capacity at the community level to exercise all the allocated governance roles. One of the most significant gaps is in the area of capacity for micro-planning, which hinders effective decentralisation. Youth groups will be trained to use local information databases (developed locally as well as sourced from outside) and GIS technologies to enable local people's planning. Data, figures and facts projected through audio/video technologies (using digital projectors) will be employed to make *gram sabhas* more effective.

Project Outputs:

1. Youth groups become active in systematically employing ICTs for community purposes
2. Extensive public information becomes available to the community, which includes properly organised community-based and community-generated information and knowledge;
3. Community media builds a local discourse on governance, rights and other issues;
4. Ongoing community monitoring and social audit of governance activities is made possible, which greatly improves governance outcomes, especially in the area of rights and entitlements;
5. Community youth improves its engagement with PRIs, through participation in micro-planning, *gram sabhas*, etc

Project outcome: A model for the application of ICTs in 'community empowerment' is developed in a manner that enhances the processes of local democracy, and socially and culturally enriches community life. Such a model is documented, and consolidated for upscaling with the support of convergent funding from different community level government programmes, all of which would benefit immensely. The benefits to these programmes will be in terms of community monitoring, social audit, local availability of public information and community linkages with institutions of governance.

Estimated cost of proposed project activity; If the pilot project is planned over 5 village clusters (each of 5-10 villages), over three years, we estimate a project budget of around Rs 1.3 crore rupees. We estimate that once the proposed model is up and running such *Youth ICT Hubs* can function at an estimated annual cost for about 1.5 lakh rupees a year. This cost should be considered small for benefits that these centres will provide through making available a host of ICT, informational and local community media services. These facilities can be employed for providing resource support for community monitoring, social audit and micro-planning and thus enabling improved access to rights and entitlements. Apart from strengthening local democracy, such extensive community-oriented use of ICTs can considerably enrich the cultural life of the community, especially of its youth.

Partner organisations; Such organisations that have a record for organising youth and community mobilisation, with an accent on governance reform. It is not necessary that these organisations should have worked with ICTs, but, indeed, they must be very eager to do so, and the overall project idea should appeal to them. Support/ partnership with departments with community-level convergent responsibilities, like the department of rural development, directorate of social audit may be sought. It also possible to leverage ICT based community infrastructure developed under schemes like Rajiv Gandhi *Sewa Kendras.*

Projects that can serve as guideposts for UNDP project development -1: Decentralised governance

ICT-enabled decentralisation: The *Ente Gramam* and *e-krishi* projects of the Kerala State IT Mission

Short Description: *Ente Gramam* is a project of the Kerala State IT Mission under which community web portals, with contextually appropriate, locally generated content, have been developed in over 100 *Gram Panchayat*s and 10 Municipalities, in the state of Kerala[11]. The project was initiated in 2007, with funding from the UNESCO. The community web portals developed under the project act as a 'notice-board' for local self government institutions to communicate local developmental planning decisions, dates of public meetings, administrative matters pertaining to service delivery etc. to the local community, in the local language. Additionally, the portals also function as online spaces for sharing local news and announcements of community events, job postings for skilled labourers and interactions between citizens and local self-government functionaries. Finally, the portals also have sections where community generated content on local histories, heritage sites and/or bio-diversity and local ecology can be uploaded (of course, after a process of editing and moderation).

In the initial period, the content generation for the portals was done by selecting and training content facilitators from the local communities, who were paid for this work. This content was uploaded on the portals after it was edited and finalised by *Ente Gramam* project staff of the Kerala State IT Mission. When the project matured and the UNESCO funding came to an end in 2008, the Government of Kerala issued an order permitting local self-government institutions to earmark funding for the web portals set up under the project. When local governments started funding the web portals developed for their community, they passed on the content generation responsibilities to the entrepreneurs running the local *Akshaya*[12] centres in these communities. Today, the *Akshaya* entrepreneurs are engaged in content generation and are financially remunerated by the local government institutions for this service. The *Ente Gramam* project staff continue to provide support services for content editing and uploading. Thus, *Ente Gramam* has evolved into an entirely decentralised informational initiative – funded by local government institutions, developed and maintained by members of the local community and responsive to local information needs.

E-krishi[13] is another project of the Kerala State IT Mission, under which a web platform has been set up, to address the existing gaps in agricultural information flows from State agencies to farmers, and also assist farmers in agri-marketing. *E-krishi*'s primary aim is to use ICTs to improve the bargaining capacity of farmers and provide inputs that can enable better decision-making and improved yields for farmers. Therefore, the *E-Krishi* web space has been created out of the combination of three integrated modules: a platform for e-commerce, an informational platform for providing expert advice on cropping and agri-market highlights; and a platform for communication, allowing farmer-to-farmer interactions and direct communication between farmers and agricultural institutions. In this case also, the *Akshaya* centres in the villages serve as the coordinating centres –

11 Statistics are based on a presentation made by a project staff member of *Ente Gramam* to IT for Change, in May 2012. The local language web portals themselves, can be accessed at http://kannur.entegramam.gov.in/index.php and http://kannur.entegramam.gov.in/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=3460&Itemid=94 Retrieved 29 July 2012.

12 *Akshaya* centres are single window service delivery centres set up the Kerala State Government, in 2002 – the state has set up one Akshaya centre for every 1000 households. For more details, see http://www.akshaya.kerala.gov.in/index.php/history Retrieved 28 July 2012

13 See http://e-krishi.org/ Retrieved 29 July 2012.

as they are closely involved in generating data on the local agricultural profile to ensure the relevance of agricultural information on the portal, and in familiarising local farmers with the benefits of registering on the *E-krishi* platform (a free service). To motivate farmers to avail of the services provided under *E-krishi*, *Bhoomi*[14] clubs have been set up in each *panchayat* with the close involvement of *panchayat* members, farmers' groups and members of women's self help groups. Of course, there are some operational challenges[15] ,such as providing quality assurance to buyers who are trading on the e-commerce platform,enhancing women's participation in a context where most farmers are male, etc. which are yet to be fully resolved. In spite of these challenges, *E-krishi* has certainly succeeded in demonstrating the potential offered by web platforms for enabling contextually relevant, decentralised information flows from state agencies to citizens, especially with respect to the mandatory development communication obligations of line departments.

Reasons for selection: *Ente Gramam* demonstrates the possibilities offered by ICTs, in facilitating strong communication linkages between local government institutions and communities. A web portal allows for asynchronous communication, easy archiving and innovative possibilities of posting interlinked announcements, agendas and discussions pertaining to local developmental planning processes and public consultations. In a context where internet penetration is low, the involvement of the State's single window service delivery centres (the *Akshaya* centres) in the web portal operations is a good strategy as this helps in generating more publicity for the community web portal, and encourages more community members to access the portal (either directly, or through the operators of the telecentres). Additionally, *Ente Gramam* offers a striking example of how an interactive online space, with contextual content, can deeply enrich the local public sphere. *Ente Gramam*'s community-centred design (with emphasis on a locally-owned, locally-managed web portal oriented to local informational needs) has not only opened up a new channel for informational flows between local government agencies and citizens, but also enabled the expression of a shared sense of community – by providing an avenue for community members to share nuggets of local history, achievements of community members and matters of 'local' interest. Enabling the expression of this shared sense of community is crucial for communities to imbibe the spirit of decentralisation.

The other web platform centred project of the Kerala State IT Mission, *E-krishi*, demonstrates the possibilities of using web portals for the effective decentralisation of informational outreach and support services of line departments. Specifically, *E-krishi* addresses a long-standing problem in the agricultural department's extension activities - the inability to offer an effective decentralised service that addresses the entire range of information needs and support needs of farmers – right from cropping and weather forecast information, to information about market linkages, and agri-marketing. As there are a plethora of agricultural agencies devoted to specialised areas of agricultural research and support services, web based platforms are useful, as a farmer may need the services/support is then able to access any of them, at various points of time in the crop cycle. *E-krishi* addresses this need through its communication platforms that enables farmers to interact with agricultural experts from various State agencies.

As in the case of *Ente Gramam*, the involvement of *Akshaya* centres in the implementation of *E-krishi* is an effective strategy for motivating and facilitating communities to access a web-based information and support service in a context where internet penetration is low. Moreover, the creation of off-line support groups (such as the *Bhoomi* clubs in the case of *E-krishi*) for motivating

14 *Bhoomi* clubs are envisioned as farmers' associations at the *gram panchayat* level that can support the implementation of the *E-krishi* initiative. Their membership is drawn from local farmers, *gram panchayat* members and women's Self Help Groups. *Bhoomi* clubs meet periodically to brainstorm on various aspects pertaining to the *E-krishi* platform as well as assess the training and capacity-building requirements of local farmers.

15 See IT for Change (2008), *Akshaya and e-krishi*, http://www.itforchange.net/Akshaya_e-krishi, for a discussion on E-*krishi* including some operational changes. Retrieved 29 July 2012.

communities to access a digitised service, is also a move worth emulating, in the design of web based information and support service portals.

Contact information: *See* http://www.itmission.kerala.gov.in/contact-us.html

Digital systems for streamlining decentralised plan formulation and monitoring: The case of *Sulekha*

Short Description: *Sulekha*(http://plan.lsgkerala.gov.in/) is a digital system for streamlining the plan formulation, appraisal and approval, and monitoring the plans of local governance bodies. This system was designed in 2002, by the Information Kerala Mission – a State agency that aims at employing the potential offered by ICTs, for strengthening governance. The *Sulekha* system was developed in response to the need for designing new planning, budgeting and reporting processes of local bodies across Kerala, when the State Government decided to directly transfer 40 percent of State funds to the local bodies (*gram panchayats*, *taluk panchayats, zilla panchayats* and urban local bodies) at the start of the ninth Five Year Plan, as part of its financial decentralisation measures. The *Sulekha* digital system allows each local body to enter the details of each plan formulated by it, including details of: the sector, sub-sector and micro-sector to which the plan corresponds; the scope of the planned project including time-line and financials, beneficiary details, resource flows, physical target measurements, asset details and approvals by the *panchayat* community. *Sulekha* uses an open source software platform that supports local language content.

Before uploading the plans on *Sulekha*, each local body has to get them approved by the Technical Advisory Committee and the District Planning Committee, as required by local body plan processing regulations in the state. Prior to digitisation, this was a time-consuming process especially for the *Gram Panchayats*, as the plans were manually transferred to the Technical Advisory Committee and the District Planning Committee for approval. After *Sulekha* has been set up, this process has been sped up as the plans are prepared digitally, and then transferred using a combination of a CD-courier method, and data transfer over a dial-up, through a virtual private network (VPN). The *Sulekha* software also classifies the uploaded plans by an unique ID based on sector, sub-sector and micro-sector. This enables comprehensive tracking of local plans across the state. Under *Sulekha,* a database of legacy plan data has also been created that enables the State Government to plan its budgetary allocations to *panchayats*. The data uploaded on the *Sulekha* software is located on a central server,and is published annually on the website of the Department of Local Self Governance for public scrutiny.

Reason for selection: S*ulekha* has reduced bottlenecks in decentralised planning, especially those that arise due to the long processing time for approvals of the plans formulated by local bodies. *Sulekha* also offers the potential for becoming a system that can be tied to social audit processes of local bodies – already, steps are being taken to make local body plans public on a monthly basis and ensure that local bodies comply with the requirement of entering on the *Sulekha* platform, details of physical progress towards set targets for monitoring purposes.

The *Sulekha* experience also demonstrates the importance of paying attention to the social context while designing e-governance solutions. In Kerala, the State has historically strengthened the financial and decision-making autonomy of local bodies. In another context where decentralisation of governance has not been effectively implemented, such an initiative may not be as successful.

***Contact information*:** http://www.infokerala.org/contact-us

Comprehensive IT based solutions for panchayats: The case of Decentralised Rural Information Services & Technology Initiatives (DRISTI)

Short Description: The Decentralised Rural Information Services & Technology Initiatives[16] (DRISTI) was a pilot project initiated by the Department of *Panchayat* and Rural Development, Government of West Bengal, in 2005, with the support of the National Institute of Smart Government and the United Nations Development Programme. The project primarily aimed at carving out an IT based solution for all the major functions of *panchayats* including micro-planning at village level, strengthening information linkages between *panchayats* and line departments, and promoting transparency and accountability in local governance. The project was piloted in 20 *taluk panchayat samitis* and 50 *Gram Panchayats* of Burdwan district. The project had four distinct components: 1) *Gram Panchayat Management System* (GPMS) to provide a complete IT solution for transacting all the businesses of a *Gram Panchayat* 2) Decentralised Information Management Initiative (DIMI) to create a GIS based information network for enhanced information flow between *Gram Panchayats*, *Panchayat Samitis*, block administration, line departments at block level, *Zilla Parishad*, and selective line departments at the district level and the state level 3) Integrated Fund Monitoring and Accounting System (IFMS) for creating a complete IT solution for the financial management for the upper two tiers of the PRI system, i.e. for the *Panchayat Samitis* and *Zilla Parishads* ; and 4) Creation of a government-citizen web interface where citizens could access all information pertaining to local governance, local developmental planning and also register grievances online. The GPMS and IFMS components of the project have since been extended to other *panchayats* in the state.

Reasons for selection: The project, as its mid-term evaluation[17] revealed, has helped in improving the efficiency of service delivery and transparency of financial accounting by local government agencies. It has also managed to demonstrate the potential of ICTs for improving efficiency in managing various programmes and delivery systems, designing and using planning tools (including GIS based technology) for village level planning, helped in creating a better monitoring and compliance machinery, and promoted social audit. Of course, this potential may not have been fully realised on the ground, but the core idea of the project enables us to expand our imagination of what e-governance projects can look like, in the area of decentralisation.

Contact information: http://www.nisg.org/contact_us.php

16 *See* http://www.nisg.org/docs/Project_DRISTI.pdf *for more details. Retrieved 29 July 2012*

17 *See erc.undp.org/**evaluation**admin/downloaddocument.html?docid=2181 Retrieved 29 July 2012*

Projects that can serve as guideposts for UNDP project development -2 : Accountability and transparency

Digital systems for effective grievance redressal: The case of *Lokvani*

Short description: *Lokvani* (http://sitapur.nic.in/lokvani) is an e-governance initiative that attempts to reduce citizens' travel to government offices for accessing information, entitlement processing and grievance redressal.

This initiative was conceptualised and launched in 2004, by the district administration of Sitapur, Uttar Pradesh. A society by the name *Lokvani* was constituted to implement the project autonomously and the services of the National Informatics Centre (NIC) were sought for technical know-how. Then, the district administration proceeded to launch *Lokvani* centres in 13 locations in the district. It was decided that instead of opening new kiosks, existing cyber-cafes/computer training institutes would be granted licenses to become *Lokvani* centres. This decision was taken to ensure the financial viability and the long-term sustainability of the centres. The kiosk operators were given login IDs and passwords to a website hosted on NIC's web server containing all the information pertaining to government-to-citizen interactions that the project wanted to provide through the centres. This included details of various government schemes (including beneficiary lists), government prescribed forms, details of developmental work (undertaken by local bodies), access to the digitised land records and even details of the funds released from the state government to local bodies. *Lokvani* centres were also allowed to also offer services such as Online Registration of deaths/births, caste certificates, domicile certificates etc. The centres were also permitted to charge a pre-fixed fee for each service, to support financial sustainability.

In addition, the district administration set up a grievance redressal service through the *Lokvani* centres. Under this service, citizens could file a written complaint at any *Lokvani* centre for a specified fee (usually ranging from Rs.10-15). *Lokvani* coordinators could then upload the complaints online to the *Lokvani* site (http://sitapur.nic.in/lokvani) by signing in with their centre-specific user name and password. It was ensured that the system did not permit the modification of a complaint, once entered. On upload, the system would generate a unique ID number for the complaint which was to be passed on by the *Lokvani* centre coordinators to the complainant. Using this ID number, the complainant could follow-up on the complaint, even through a telephone call to the centre operator. Research studies on *Lokvani* have revealed that this grievance redressal service has been extremely successful[18].

In 2005, the state government issued an order to extend *Lokvani*[19] to the rest of the State, and efforts for replicating the initiative in other districts are under way. 59 districts in the state have already started implementing *Lokvani* based citizen services[20].

Reason for selection: The main achievement of the project is that, it has helped in removing the major barriers of costs and travel time that prevented many rural citizens from accessing their right to redressal of grievances. Secondly, the project has also facilitated the tracking of complaints by officials and complainants, and has enabled better enforcing of the public accountability of district officials as detailed below.

"[Through *Lokvani's* Integrated Voice Response System and Short Message Service

18 See Pathak,R. (2008), "Enabling Efficient administration at the district level: A study of Lokvani project in Uttar Pradesh", Retrieved from http://sitapur.nic.in/lokvani/allabout/Lokvani_tiss.pdf 29 July 2012. This study provides a detailed analyses of the achievements of the *Lokvani* project.

19 See GO 876/78-2-2005-8 I.T./2005 **at http://infotech.up.nic.in/hindi/anudesh/itgo.htm**

20 *sitapur.nic.in/lokvani/intro_eng.doc* Retrieved 29 October 2012.

components]... Officers and Complainant will be able to check Complaint status on mobile phone..... Citizens will be able to check status of Complaint, name of officer to whom the complaint is assigned, instruction by District Magistrate, deadline date given to the officer for solving the complaint on phone. Similarly officers will be able to check number of complaints pending to him. Officer can drill down any complaint for details. On the other hand, the district offices have become de-congested though the quality and pace of redress all of grievances have improved...[21]"

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Information systems for transparency and public accountability : The case of the Andhra Pradesh Employment Guarantee Scheme

Short Description: The case of the Andhra Pradesh Employment Guarantee Scheme demonstrates how a digitised Management Information System(MIS) when combined with an on-ground system for public-audits, can be extremely successful in ensuring the accountability of state agencies.

The Andhra Pradesh Employment Guarantee Scheme, launched in 2006, seeks to *"provide livelihood security to (rural households in 13 districts of the state) by providing not less than 100 (one hundred) days of guaranteed wage employment in every financial year to every rural household, whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled and manual work*"[22], keeping in line with the provisions of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA).

Under NREGA, any adult member of a rural household has the right to register under this scheme. On registration with the *Gram Panchayat*, s/he will be issued a Job Card and his/her name will be entered in the Job Card Register maintained by the *Panchayat* Secretary. Any Job Card holder has the right to submit an application for work under the scheme, with the *Panchayat*. It is the responsibility of the *Panchayat* to ensure that at least one member of every household who has applied for work, is provided 100 days employment in the developmental works in the village that the *Panchayat* undertakes, using the funds allotted to it under the Scheme. The scheme also prescribes the kind of developmental works that can be undertaken – broadly, it allows those works that will lead to local asset creation. Every *panchayat* also has to prepare a shelf of works that it plans to undertake the next (financial) year, by December of the previous year, and get certain prescribed approvals from district and state level agencies before such works can be taken up. Measurement books and Muster rolls are required to be maintained at the work-sites by a field assistant, and the details of the entries have to be read out to the workers, and entries on the number of work days and payment due need to be entered in the job cards of the workers. A Technical Assistant has been appointed under the scheme to check the works every alternate week, and the books maintained under the scheme are forwarded to the *Mandal*[23] *Parishad* Development Officer, who issues appropriate wage payment orders as well as cheques for suppliers of material. The scheme also has provisions for social audit to ensure accountability at the local level.

On the basis of previous experience in implementing rural employment schemes, the Government of Andhra Pradesh recognised the roadblocks that were likely to sabotage the scheme – bogus registration of persons, inflated muster rolls with fictitious workmen, fraudulent measurement of

21 See Pathak,R. (2008), "Enabling Efficient administration at the district level: A study of Lokvani project in Uttar Pradesh", Retrieved from http://sitapur.nic.in/lokvani/allabout/Lokvani_tiss.pdf 29 October 2012

22 See file:///tmp/apregscheme.htm for more details. Retrieved 29 July 2012.

23 A *Mandal* is an administrative unit that comprises of 21 Gram Panchayats, in the Andhra Pradesh context

works, under-payments, and inflated person day estimates[24].

As the first step towards ensuring effective implementation of the scheme, the Government of Andhra Pradesh developed an end -to-end digitised MIS system (See http://nrega.ap.gov.in/Nregs/Home_eng.jsp) through which job cards,work estimates and payment orders could be issued, with the help of Tata Consultancy Services. Under this digitised MIS,*"the data is collected and inputed at the Mandal [level] and consolidated at the state level. Information on each job card holder including number of days worked and total wages received is accessible through the MIS system.All the data is public and available for scrutiny. To streamline payment processes,wages are paid directly through post office accounts or bank accounts of the workers"*[25].
Recognising that digitisation cannot stop fraudulent data entry into the MIS, the Andhra Pradesh system has also established an elaborate support structure for regular social audit of village level NREGA works, with the involvement of the workers themselves[26]. This enables the comparison of the information entered into the MIS with ground level realities – thus ensuring complete transparency and accountability.

Reason for selection: The MIS, not only empowers the citizens but also enables self-governance bodies to run the employment guarantee scheme effectively – because of auto-record keeping and system generated reports, in-built checks in the MIS such as auto alert/rejection if some data entry does not adhere to scheme guidelines and so on. Additionally, the MIS also enables real-time monitoring by scheme managers at the higher levels. Finally, the juxtaposition of direct accountability measures in the MIS with on-ground data in the Andhra Pradesh model has helped to continually keep out brokers or middlemen, and prevent corruption in administrative machinery.

Contact Information: http://nrega.ap.gov.in/Nregs/ContactUs_eng.jsp

Web-convergence for transparency: The case of the RTI Central Monitoring Mechanism, Odisha

Short Description: *The Information and Public Relations Department of the State Government of Odisha has created an online 'RTI[27] Central Monitoring Mechanism' (* http://rtiodisha.gov.in/*) in order to provide a "single point access of all RTI related information... in an uniform manner"[28], in collaboration with Luminous Infoways. This is actually a web based centralised database system hosted on web server provided by NIC, Govt. of India. Every Public Authority under the State Government of Odisha has access to the system through a Public Authority account, where there is a predefined Web Content Management System for uploading the suo-moto* disclosure as per Section 4 of the RTI Act, 2005. Similarly the Public Authority account has also options for maintaining and updating the various requests for information received by the Public Information Officers under Section 6 of RTI Act, 2005. The request can be received physically, transferred from other Public authority or can be received online. By using this account, every Public Authority has to adhere to the prescribed time-limit for disposal, failing which he/she is liable to be penalised. At the same time the citizen has the satisfaction in obtaining information in a timely manner. This software also generates all the registers as prescribed under the Odisha Right to Information Rules, 2005. The web portal presently enables 1500 offices to comply with their obligations under the RTI

24 See http://nrega.ap.gov.in/Nregs_Photos/Process%20Flow%20Diagrams_files/frame.htm
25 Aiyar,Y. And Samji,S. (2008) Transparency and Accountability in NREGA : A Case Study ofAndhra Pradesh , AI Working PaperNo.1,February2009 . Retrieved from http://www.accountabilityindia.in/article/working-paper/787-transparency-and-accountability-nrega-case-study-andhra-pradesh 29 July 2012
26 Ibid
27 RTI stands for Right to Information
28 See http://rtiorissa.gov.in/E-India Retrieved 29 July 2012.

Act, 2005. It also has a provision by which citizens can post their feedback /comments on any government data that has been made public.

Reason for selection: *The 'RTI Central Monitoring Mechanism' has facilitated the fulfilment of proactive disclosure obligations by government agencies,better management of information requests by public authorities and maximised the opportunities offered by the internet for fulfilling the State's obligations under the Right to Information Act, enhancing transparency in state-citizen relationships.*

Contact Information: http://rtiodisha.gov.in/ContactUs

Projects that can serve as guideposts for UNDP project development -3: Implementing rights-based programmes and access to entitlements

Ensuring right to food through process computerisation: The case of Chhattisgarh's Public Distribution System

Short description: Since 2004, Chhattisgarh has been investing in measures to revive the Public Distribution System (PDS) in the state, including measures that involve ICTs. Right now,Chhattisgarh has become one of the model states in the implementation of PDS. This is because Chhattisgarh has been able to effectively deal with the widespread challenges that implementers of PDS face – errors of exclusion that result in beneficiaries falling out of the state safety net, corruption by private dealers running the Fair Price Shops under the PDS, corruption and leakages in the paddy procurement process and leakages during the transportation of food grains to the Fair Price Shops.

Firstly, the government of Chhattisgarh passed an order in 2004 shifting the management of the Fair Price Shops from private dealers to self help groups, cooperatives and *panchayats*. Secondly, to overcome errors of exclusion, the state government launched the *Mukhyamantri Khadyann Sahayata Yojana* in 2007, to provide ration cards to all households identified as living below the poverty line (BPL) in the 1991 and 1997 BPL surveys. These households had been excluded from the 2002 BPL survey because of the caps enforced by the Planning Commission on poverty figures. [29] Thirdly, the state government innovatively used ICT platforms to check corruption in the paddy procurement and food transportation process, as well as to enhance citizen awareness of their PDS entitlements. After identifying the recycling of custom milled rice as the biggest source of leakage in paddy procurement, the state government identified the solution in a process computerisation model that would involve online mill registration, online issue of delivery orders, online securitisation of paddy and custom mill receipts, and online reconciliation of stocks. This was achieved through the e-procurement project. Chhattisgarh state also developed a web based application for tracking the transport trucks carrying the food grains to the Fair Price Shops, and also launched a SMS service through which alerts about truck dispatch information can be sent to citizens. The state also runs a widely publicised call centre for receiving citizen complaints about the PDS.
Finally, the state has launched the citizen portal http://cg.nic.in/pdsonline/mainmenuen.aspx for the public disclosure of all information pertaining to the PDS - ranging from procurement of food grains to grain supply at the local ration shops- to enable effective citizen monitoring.

Reason for selection: Chattisgarh has revamped its entire mechanism of managing the PDS, fully tapping into the potential of ICTs, to not only improve administrative efficiency but also strengthen entitlement-seeking by communities. The process computerisation has also focused on eliciting greater citizen-participation in the monitoring of the PDS as well as building awareness among citizens about their rights.

Contact information: http://cg.nic.in/citizen/documents/contacts.html

Networked governance for improving service delivery to marginalised groups: The case of Mission Convergence

Short description: The Mission Convergence (http://www.missionconvergence.org/) programme was conceptualised by the Government of Delhi in February 2008 and formally launched later that

29 Puri, R. (2012), *Reforming the Public Distribution System: Lessons from Chhattisgarh*, Economic and Political Weekly, *Vol. 47, No. 5, 2012*

year, in August 2008. The programme has mainly focussed on providing a single window access to various social security schemes, for marginalised groups, throughout the National Capital Territory (NCT) of Delhi. The main achievements of the programme are :

1. Identifying and recommending welfare schemes which can be provided in a converged manner after consultation and coordination with the appropriate departments.

2. Rationalising and streamlining welfare scheme implementation through a network of community level centres, (Gender Resource Centres-*Suvidha Kendras)*, through a Public-Private-Community-Partnership model with the involvement of civil society organisations.

Mission Convergence has a complex institutional structure. Its daily management is under the Programme Management Unit (PMU) headed by the Managing Director. Above the PMU, to support the convergence of nine departments, is the State Convergence Forum headed by the Chief Secretary. Below the PMU are the nine District Resource Centres (DRCs) located at the office of the Deputy Commissioners of each district , which are managed by sanctioned NGOs. These DRCs undertake the responsibility of monitoring the community level structures.

Unique to Mission Convergence is its strong information technology backbone that has been created and built upon, right from the conceptualisation of the programme. At the start of the programme , the Gender Resource Centre-*Suvidha Kendras* conducted a vulnerability index based survey in their communities. The survey data was digitised and centrally maintained at the PMU with a strong process of field-based authentication from an early period ,to ensure transparency and accountability. This database has been actively used by the PMU to monitor and plan for the project. The PMU has also been in the process of evolving a systems integration platform to provide an integrated interface at the Gender Resource Centre-*Suvidha Kendra* level through which a common dynamic database of beneficiaries can be maintained, automated tracking systems for the services can be created, redundancies and errors can be recognised and most importantly, field level authentication of data can take place[30]. These ICT-enabled processes, as they develop, will become fundamental to streamlining and transparency within the project.

Reason for selection: Mission Convergence has been very innovative in using ICTs both for convergence and for ensuring that arbitrariness in beneficiary selection is progressively reduced. Secondly, the programme has avoided the temptation of using private sector partners which would bring a profit orientation to core governance activities that involve marginalised people. Lastly, the manner in which the best competencies of NGOs and public bodies are combined and used, provides very good insights on how one can shape new age networked institutions and their governance systems for effective service delivery to marginalised sections.

Contact information: http://www.missionconvergence.org/Contact%20us.html

Ensuring and monitoring rights and entitlements: The case of the Mother and Child Health(MCH) Tracking System

Short description: The MCH tracking system (http://nrhm-mcts.nic.in/) was launched by the Ministry of Health (MoH) as part of the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM), in 2010. The Mother and Child Tracking System (MCTS) is designed "to collate information of all pregnant women and infants so as to ensure delivery of maternal and child health services from conception till 42 days after delivery in the case of pregnant women and up to five years of age in the case of children so as to ensure that all pregnant women and all new born receive full maternal and

30 For more details, see http://www.missionconvergence.org/system-integration.html , Retrieved July 30 2012

immunisation services[31].

Under the MCH Tracking System, an online registration system has been developed in collaboration with the National Informatics Centre, for creating a centralised database of the range of medical services provided to a woman by the health system, from the moment her name is registered for the Antenatal check up up to 42 days after delivery, after which the system will record the medical services provided to the child up to the age of five years. Basic health indicators at the time of pregnancy and childbirth are also recorded. The last mile health extension workers enter these details on the database, and the tracking system allows allows the cross-linking of information availed by a pregnant woman and her identification details, with the details of the concerned Auxiliary Nurse Midwife. The system also records basic health indicators at the time of pregnancy. Additionally, it generates a database for identifying the women who are eligible to receive benefits under the *Janani Suraksha Yojana* (SJY), and also has a provision for recording birth details for issuing birth certificates. A call centre has been established in the Ministry of Health & Family Welfare to directly contact pregnant women and parents of the new born registered under the system to verify the services that they have received[32].

Reason for selection: The information generated through the system is very helpful for planning maternal and child health services at the grass roots level by the female health worker (ANMS) in association with village level volunteers like ASHA and *Aanganwadi* Worker. The database also provides useful information for tracking macro health indicators such as the Infant Mortality Rate (IMR) and the Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR). Such a database also enables health departments to provide context-specific trainings to the grass-roots health workers, after understanding the specific requirements in each area.

Contact information: healthmission@nic.in

Using ICTs to empower women in accessing entitlements : The case of the *Mahiti Manthana* project[33]

Short description: The *Mahiti Manthana* project is an initiative of IT for Change and its Mysore field centre, *Prakriye*- Centre for Community Informatics and Development,which has been taken up in partnership with *Mahila Samakhya* Karnataka. Since its inception in 2005, the project has primarily aimed at exploring the possibilities offered by community informatics, for strengthening the empowerment processes of marginalised women's collectives (locally known as *sanghas*) formed under the *Mahila Samakhya* programme of the Government of India, in three blocks *(taluks)* of Mysore district (Hunsur, H.D. Kote and Nanjangud). *Mahila Samakhya* is a pan Indian governmental programme which works towards the education and empowerment of women from socially and economically disadvantaged sections in rural areas, through a collectivisation strategy of mobilising and organising women into village level collectives *(*locally known as *sanghas*).

The project has primarily employed a three-pronged ICT strategy comprising of community radio, community video and telecentres. The radio component consists of a weekly radio broadcast on the Karnataka State Open University FM, that brings the *sangha* women's own voices into the local public sphere. Under the video component, the project has set up an on-demand as well as push-based[34] video system, that supports collective learning-action processes, on the ground. The third

31 http://pib.nic.in/newsite/erelease.aspx?relid=76895

32 See http://pib.nic.in/newsite/erelease.aspx?relid=76895 Retrieved 30 July 2012

33 Disclosure: This project is spearheaded by IT for Change, the organisation where the author of this document work,in partnership with government of India women's empowerment project, Mahila Samakhaya

34 Under the *Mahiti Manthana* project, the videos produced have been screened at meetings of the women's collectives at the village and block level, and at the information centres established under the project. Videos have also been screened for the entire community in the project villages. The videos have also been pushed through the

component is a village based telecentre model for public information access called the *Namma Mahiti Kendra* (Our information centre). It is run by *sangha* women in select villages through a adolescent girl, trained by the women and the field staff of the project, so that she can address directly, the need for public information, as well as concerns of institutional non-transparency and apathy. These telecentres function in the manner of a community computing initiative through which *sangha* women are able to guide the larger community in accessing government information and availing of entitlements.

Reason for selection: Effectively exercising their rights and transacting with the State for their entitlements, is an important part of the struggles of poor and disadvantaged women. The *Mahiti Manthana* strategy is geared towards this – especially the telecentres set up under the project, which primarily aim at building *sangha* women's linkages with public institutions and increasing their awareness levels about government schemes and services. Though the telecentres also provide a few revenue-based computer services to the community, their primary purpose of enabling women to overcome information gate-keeping at the local level is never lost sight of. Additionally *Mahiti Manthana* project telecentres are engaged in collecting community data, and helping public service providers to use this data for targeted interventions (like health interventions for pregnant women, and infants), and also to demand accountability for due services not provided, and matching data of actual health interventions with those listed in public records obtained through the use of RTI.

Contact Information: **http://www.itforchange.net/contact-Us**

Mahila Samakhya system, by persuading the staff to add the videos to their resources and toolkits for training and capacity-building activities.

Projects that can serve as guideposts for UNDP project development -4: Making a difference to the persistently excluded and marginalised sections

Information and networks for community-based strategies towards empowerment: The case of *Kutch Nav Nirman Abhiyan*

Short Description: *The Kutch Nav Nirman Abhiyan* (**http://www.kutchabhiyan.org/**) has managed a fine balance between the twin imperatives of standardisation and contextualisation that any large scale developmental intervention attempting to address the needs of marginalised groups across a wide geographical area, has to contend with.

Abhiyan is a network of 38 non-profit organisations (as of October 2011) whose stated objective is to *"synergise human knowledge, physical and financial resources and to collaborate towards a Kutch governed by community initiatives, (and which) encourages self help development, especially with marginalised sections; integrates traditional wisdom with new technologies; and innovates and balances issues of human rights with human responsibilities"*[35]. The organisations within the network represent an expanse of development work covering various domains such as education, women's empowerment, natural resource management etc., preserving their own unique identity yet working collectively when required through the platform of *Abhiyan*. For the day to day functioning of the network, the member organisations elect a Governing Board.

The network was established in 1998, as a response to the Kandla cyclone, for ensuring better coordination and collaboration between NGOs, in working with government and donor agencies for the post-cyclone relief and rehabilitation efforts. An important watershed in the evolution of *Abhiyan's* work was the 2001 earthquake in Gujarat – when it was summoned to assist in the post-earthquake relief and rehabilitative measures. The members of *Abhiyan* then realised that one of the fundamental requirements for any intervention, was the need for real time interventions and generation of local data pertaining to the region. To address this need, *Abhiyan* started its *Setu* (bridge) programme . *Abhiyan* set up 22 *Setu* centres reaching out to 404 villages across the Kutch region, to ensure the effective decentralisation of relief and rehabilitation management. During this period, *Setus* were involved in activities such as data collection of individual households, assessment of seismic safety features in the housing and infrastructure constructions. This was followed by their monitoring, policy feedback regarding nature of settlements (*in situ* vs relocation), grievance redressal, undertaking anti-corruption campaigns, co-ordinating with 66 NGOs on various tasks, creating support funds for vulnerable families and 'innovation / bridge' funds, identifying youth from *Setu* villages for non-masonry skill up-gradation training in urban construction practices, etc. When the *Setu* centres began sending in local data to the central office, it became necessary to develop a MIS to process the large number of data-sets quickly, in a meaningful way. When efforts to contract out the development of the MIS to a corporate agency turned out to be unsatisfactory, *Abhiyan* set up the K-Link programme in order to: (1) Provide a live platform to bring the power of ICTs in rural development and integrate ICTs with rural development and empowerment and (2) Bridge the technology gaps between corporate "haves" and non-profit "have- nots ".

After the completion of the relief efforts, *Setu* centres continued their operations in the areas where local communities demonstrated their interest in the continued functioning of these centres. Thus, they slowly evolved into village level information and facilitation centres engaged in community

35 *Abhiyan*, 2007.

mobilisation and facilitation for equitable and socially just development and governance at the local level. Currently, there are 18 *Setu* centres reaching out to 340 villages in Kutch district.

All the *Setu* centres share the mandates of strengthening the *gram panchayats* in the cluster of villages served by them, organising and working for the rights of marginalised groups engaged in traditional occupations, and using information technology to set up a E-self-governance system in the villages in the cluster.

However, the specific strategies the centres undertake are extremely contextualised. Every *Setu* is unique in terms of the specialised nature of work it might undertake- for example, one *Setu* centre works with communities who are traditionally involved in cattle breeding in the north of the district, another with fisher-folk in the south, a third with saltpan workers in the east and some others with dry land farmers and craft artisans. The K-Link programme (that initially supported *Abhiyan's* database management for the post-earthquake relief efforts) has continued to support the *Setu* centres in their efforts.

K-Link's role in the current context is to support *Setus* in their efforts to help communities realise the power of ICTs in rural development – especially in areas such as strengthening local governance and development planning.

Setus conduct village level data surveys to regularly update information pertaining to the village, such as available infrastructure, etc. All S*etus* have a local database in which these data-sets are entered. Secondary government related information pertaining to new schemes is collected manually from government departments, and then entered into this database to which all S*etus* have access. K-Link supports the *Setus* with data entry into a single networked database, and its maintenance. The information on this networked database is thereafter shared with other NGOs and the government pro-actively. K-Link has also supported the efforts of *Setu* centres in setting up a Local Government Support System (LGSS), based on consolidation of village level information generated through GIS mapping of the villages along with data collection at the household and village level, by trained staff from *Abhiyan* and the *Panchayat* members. Under LGSS, this information has been centrally consolidated through K-Link. An user friendly online interface which allows data manipulation and pictorial representation of data, has also been created for the *Panchayat* members. *Panchayat* members have been trained in accessing this system, and in using social networking applications and in accessing websites for information – all this is oriented towards building the capacities of local government elected representatives.

Another critical programme of *Abhiyan* is *Mahiti Mitra* – under which decentralised rural kiosks have been set up, to meet the informational and service needs of communities at the last mile. Even in the case of *Mahiti Mitra*, *Abhiyan* has relied on the technical services of K-Link. It has successfully established a post of the District Liaising Officer, at the district administration office, by mutual agreement. The officer is sent the queries and grievances received by the *Mahiti Mitras* and s/he has the responsibility of following it up with the respective departments. Also, the officer is required to collect information from 30 departments of the government, which are then digitised and made available for distribution through the *Mahiti Mitras*. The *Setus* are in charge of mobilising the community, conducting needs assessment studies and monitoring the impact of the *Mahiti Mitra* initiative. The *Mahiti Mitra* space has been clearly separated from the *Setu* space,as *Abhiyan* makes a clear distinction between the role of the two centres. While *Setu* plays the role of a constant facilitator, the *Mahiti Mitras* are purely for service and information provisioning in the context of grievance redressal. *Mahiti Mitras* have enabled local communities in acquiring timely information about local government schemes and services.

Additionally, *Abhiyan* creates and sponsors institutions, such as the *Hunnarshala*, for documenting

traditional wisdom relating to construction technology and innovations; and *Khamir*, for promoting and revitalising local art, craft and heritage.

In all aspects of its work, *Abhiyan* promotes the spirit of decentralised networking and collaboration. This is very clearly visible in the *Setu* programme. *Setu* centres share a support structure and overall vision, but are extremely context-specific in their strategies and also independently engage in local action, forming their own networks outside *Abhiyan*. For example, the Bhadreshwar *Setu*, which works with fishing communities, has set up the *Machimar Adhikar Sangharsh Sangthan* (MASS) (which is now a registered trade union), by helping the fisher-folk organise themselves with the support of other member organisations such as *Kutch Mahila Vikas Sanghatan* (KMVS) and *Yusuf Maherali* Centre (YMC). MASS' own strategy & functional structure are independently determined and it also networks with other fish-workers' groups across the country. Similarly, the K-Link programme offers its services to a wide variety of clients and like the other autonomous programmes of *Abhiyan.* It is expected to be registered shortly and function independently.

Reason for selection: The *Abhiyan* experience demonstrates how the discretionary use of the centralising tendencies of technology, is crucial for the success of ICT-enabled developmental interventions. This is best exemplified in the case of the *Setu* programme – where the the centralised technical support services and information system complements the context-specific, decentralised strategies of *Setu* centres, without stifling local-level creative collaborations. Secondly, *Abhiyan's* K-Link programme provides a number of insights for designing technical support and technological solutions for development interventions.

Finally, *Abhiyan* has managed to demonstrate one possibility for constructing[36] decentralised, bottom-up collaborative networks breaking away from development work in silos.

Contact information: http://www.kutchabhiyan.org/contact-us/

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