The digital opportunity for deepening democracy:

Inputs to the High Power Committee examining amendments to the Karnataka *Panchayat Raj* Act ,1993

Submitted by
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A) Introduction

1. IT for Change would like to begin this note on the strategic use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in *Panchayat Raj* Institutions for deepening local democracy, with the recognition that in Karnataka, as in many other states, *"the shell of Panchayat Raj is in place today"*[1] even though the process of filling that shell, through the gradual devolution of powers and authority to *Gram Panchayats* has been *"ad-hoc, fitful and sometimes reversed"*[2]. Needless to say, any project for making *Panchayat Raj* Institutions vibrant, must first and foremost be rooted in a legislative and administrative framework that furthers the political decentralisation mandate, not merely in letter, but in terms of its spirit – that of gender and social justice.
2. The Statement of Intent and Objectives of the High Power Committee[3] examining amendments to the Karnataka *Panchayat Raj* Act certainly reflects an intent to carve out such a supporting legislative framework, and outlines clear pathways for evolving an inclusive and gender-just approach to local government, as envisioned by the architects of the 73rd amendment to the Constitution of India. In this note, we limit ourselves to outlining some specific strategies through which ICTs can be used to scaffold this new approach.
3. The underlying principle guiding all the strategies recommended here, is that the transformatory possibilities opened up by digital technologies can be harnessed only through an institutional approach. This requires a holistic analysis of the existing local government system in order to identify specific areas wherein digital technologies can be introduced to restructure existing processes for improving efficiency and accountability. Most importantly, it requires a commitment to move away from the piece-meal, 'apps-centred' problem-fixing, which is an unfortunate hall-mark of many mainstream 'ICTs in governance' experiments.

B) An empowered citizenry for a vibrant *Gram Sabha*

1. As acknowledged in Page 3 of the Statement of Intent and Objectives drafted by the Committee, an '*effective grassroots administration*' is not enough, to realise the political decentralisation ideal – this requires a '*group of enlightened citizens with functioning structures ...(for their participation, such as) ...Gram Sabha, and Ward Sabha'*.

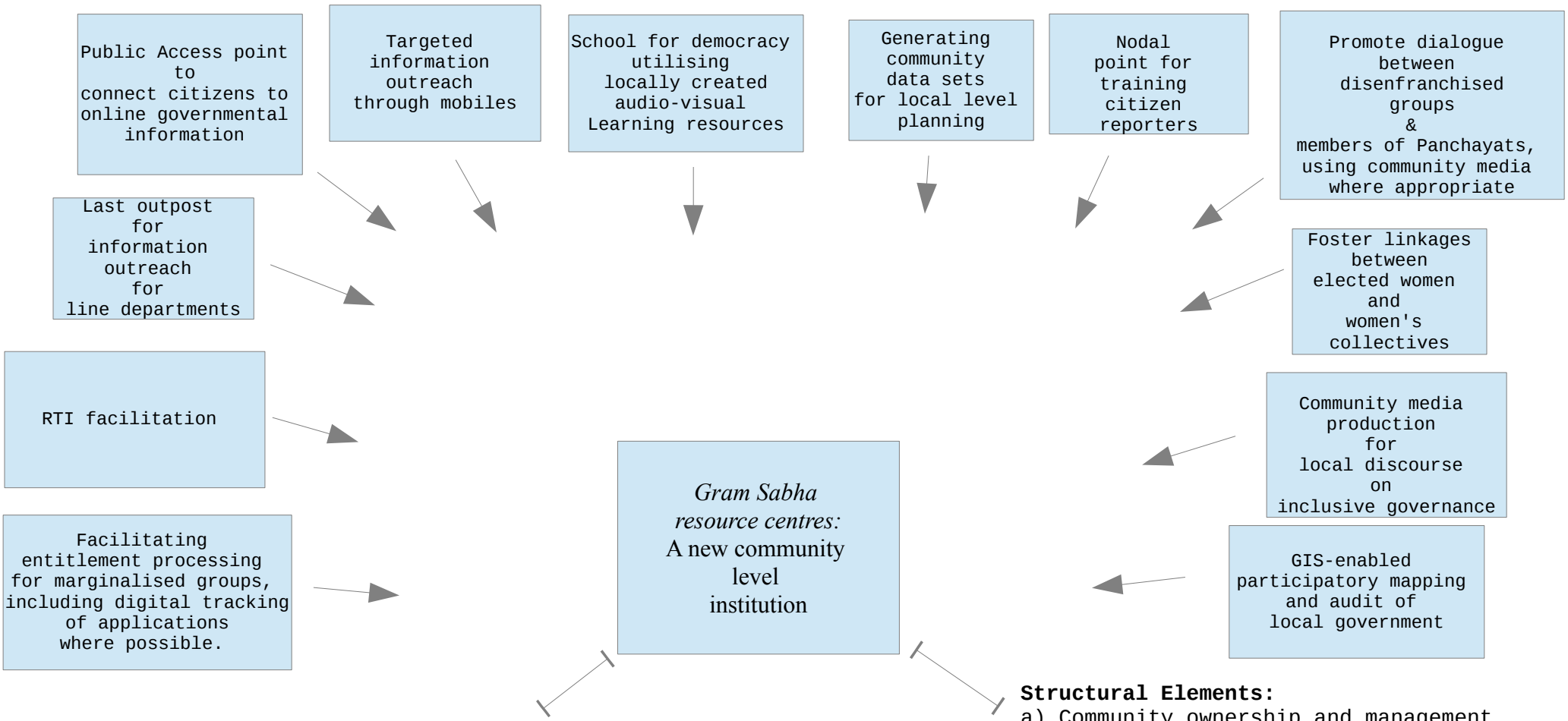
1 Report of the Expert Committee on Leveraging *Panchayats* for the Efficient Delivery of Public Goods and Services 2013.
2 Ibid.
3 Hereafter, the Committee.

2. This concept of enlightened citizenry needs to be unpacked further. Simply put, enlightened citizens are those will full awareness of their rights and duties, with their finger on the pulse of local governance processes, and invested in promoting the accountable governance agenda.
3. We are of the opinion that such a cadre of enlightened citizens can be built only through a long-standing investment in 'citizenship education' processes. Here, the strategy of creating 'ICT-enabled *gram sabha* resource centres' at the community level to invest in such processes may be very useful. Diagram 1 details one possible model for creating such resource centres at the local level, building upon the insights of a 2011 research study undertaken by IT for Change for the Karnataka Knowledge Commission[4].
4. We recommend that the Karnataka State Department of Rural Development and *Panchayat Raj* evolve a concerted strategy – a "Common Minimum Programme" for taking advantage of the numerous schemes announced by the Union Government for setting up ICT-enabled citizen facilitation centres in rural areas such as the *Bharat Nirman Rajiv Gandhi Sewa Kendras* initiative and the *Poorna Shakti Kendras* pilot project, to evolve such ICT-enabled *gram sabha* resource centres.
5. We also highlight the need to separate resource-support functions from service delivery at the last mile – as bringing together informational and resource support functions with service delivery, under one umbrella, as in the case of the Common Service Centres scheme[5], has not led to effective outcomes at the community level.

4 Adapted from Singh, P.; Gurumurthy, A. and Nandini, C. (2011), 'Exploring an institutional model for community knowledge centres: A research study for the Karnataka Knowledge Commission', Retrieved http://www.itforchange.net/node/969 , 24 June 2014

5 Singh, P.; Gurumurthy, A. and Nandini, C. (2011), 'Exploring an institutional model for community knowledge centres: A research study for the Karnataka Knowledge Commission', Retrieved http://www.itforchange.net/node/969 , 24 June 2014

Diagram 1 : A model for setting up ICT-enabled *Gram Sabha* resource centres



Core Principles of *Gram Sabha* Resource cenres

a) Deepening democracy at the village level
b) Firm commitment to inclusion of marginalised groups
c) Impartial public information outreach

Structural Elements:

a) Community ownership and management
b) Facilitated by a young woman infomediary from the community
b)Accountability to *gram sabha*
c) Autonomy in local level functioning with resource support and guidance from a dedicated State agency set up for this purpose.
d) Co-funded by different departments from their budget for public information outreach
e) Involvement of NGOs in resource support and capacity building of facilitators

C) ICT strategies for pro-active public information outreach by *Gram Panchayats*

1. The National Optic Fibre Network (NOFN) project of the Government of India has ensured that broadband connectivity for *Gram Panchayats* is no longer a pipe dream. This interval, when we await the implementation of the NOFN project, is the right time to plan a comprehensive web-based strategy for public information outreach, for *Gram Panchayats.* States like Kerala lead the way, with their efforts at creating decentralised local data portals, managed by Panchayats and local communities along with infomediaries of citizen facilitation centres – such as the '*Ente Gramam*' initiative. Such projects need to be studied and replicated in context-appropriate ways.
2. The rapid diffusion of mobiles at the village level presents an unprecedented opportunity for targeted public information outreach by capitalising on the potential of IVR technology (for sending bulk voice messages). The Government of India is already engaged in setting up pilot projects that use text SMS and voice messages for awareness generation in communities, through the *Sanchar Shakti* programme that aims at subsidising mobile value added services to rural communities, utilising Universal Service Obligation Funds. It may be useful for the State Department of Rural Development and *Panchayat* Raj to explore tie-ups and collaborations with the Department of Telecom, to use IVR services in *Panchayats,* under this programme.
3. In general, we would like to add a cautionary note here. While developing ICT strategies for public information outreach, it may be appropriate to rely on public software rather than rely on proprietary software solutions which may create vendor lock-ins and unhealthy dependencies (as testified to, by the experience of the Department of Education, Karnataka in deploying public-private partnerships for running 'ICTs in education' programmes in public schools[6]).

D) Capacity Building of Elected Women Representatives

1. The Statement of Intent and Objectives drafted by the Committee rightly points out that there are three disadvantages that elected women representatives suffer from, when they step into office: their lack of textual and financial literacy, household-level constraints to their effective public participation, and their discomfort with the new ICTs that have become increasingly widespread in governance systems (Page 11). There is also an implicit allusion to the need to revamp mainstream training and capacity-building programmes, in order to enable elected women to successfully overcome these disadvantages.
2. We think that the increasing deployment of digital technologies in governance systems, is an opportunity rather than a challenge for elected women members' effective participation. This is because these new technologies open up unprecedented possibilities for breaking away from the 'tyranny of text' over the everyday business of government – a major contributing factor in the alienation of women members, many of whom have low levels of textual and financial literacy. Also, they open up new pedagogic possibilities for introducing elected women representatives to gender and governance concerns in an immediate and grounded manner. For example: video and audio content produced with the participation of elected women in one *Panchayat* focusing on their experiences in office, can be screened before elected women from other *Panchayats,* to trigger peer learning processes. A mobile-

6 Detailed analysis at Kasinathan, G. (2009), ICTs in School Education – Integrated vs. Outsourced Approach, Retrieved https://www.itschool.gov.in/pdf/Study_by_IT4Change_Bangalore1307.10.pdf, 26 June 2014

based closed user group of elected women can be formed as a network for peer support. Elected women can be trained to use photography and videography as tools for documenting the events in their *Panchayat*, and also creating evidence around local government functioning. Needless to say, such capacity-building strategies can help overcome the long-standing critique of mainstream training programmes – their tendency to rely on top-down lecture-based models of learning, and their overt focus on the rule-book and minutiae of local governance with scant attention to the question of building women's capacities to negotiate everyday power politics.

E) Inclusive Data frameworks for developmental planning

1. As the Committee has pointed out in its Statement of Intent and Objectives, it is vital for *Panchayats* to build their knowledge management capabilities so that they are able to create and maintain community data bases for "spatial planning, deciding beneficiaries and planning all development" (Page 14).
2. In this regard, the advantages of participatory GIS-enabled mapping must be capitalised upon, as it opens up possibilities of data representation for analytics, that goes beyond traditional tabular and textual forms.
3. We would like to add that developing a comprehensive framework for collecting and maintaining gender related data at the community level is essential for furthering the inclusive local governance agenda. As ICT-enabled data-bases open up unprecedented possibilities for centrally recombining multiple local-level data bases, such a data framework also needs to adequately handle privacy and confidentiality concerns.