

Policymakers Workshop

Village Information Centres:
Harnessing Local Knowledge Via Interactive Media

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Rural Knowledge Centres: Harnessing Local Knowledge via Interactive Media

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M S Swaminathan Research Foundation, Chennai 600 113, India

Recommendations for policy makers in India

1. Regional priorities: The North East region was identified as a priority area for launching a science and technology based poverty eradication programme using ICT in a significant way.
2. Information, knowledge and skill empowerment of self-help groups (SHGs): The microcredit supported microenterprise revolution triggered by SHGs has provided hope that a new deal can be extended to the self-employed. For SHGs to become sustainable SHGs, it is essential that forward linkages with markets and backward linkages with research institutions and data management centres are established. ICT has a major role in sustaining and extending this self-help revolution.
3. Every village a knowledge centre: There is a need for developing a master plan coupled with a business plan for extending the benefits of ICT to all the 600,000 villages in India by 2007, which marks the 60th anniversary of our independence. The master plan should help to link technology-knowledge-rural women and men in a symbiotic manner. The investment needs will have to be estimated and business plans prepared. A National Alliance for ICT for Poverty Eradication may be established for launching the Every Village a Knowledge Centre movement. Such an alliance should include the private sector, cooperatives, NGOs, R&D institutions, women's associations, mass media and appropriate government agencies.
4. Domestic software development and application: Learning from past experience in rural areas, there is a need for increasing India's competitiveness in domestic software applications. Government projects mainly provide static information. What is needed by rural families is dynamic information relating to weather, markets, health and other day-to-day information needs.
5. Community radio: Along with the internet, cable TV, local vernacular press and the All India Radio, community radio stations and ham radio will be of immense help in communicating up-to-date information to those who will benefit from it, as for example, fishermen in catamarans in the ocean. Government of India should liberalise policies for the operation of community and ham radio stations. This will help to confer the benefits of the knowledge

age to every woman and man in a village. Reaching the unreached and including the excluded will be possible only through an integrated ICT system.

6. Technology upgradation in villages: NABARD has been operating a programme in Himachal Pradesh with support from the Rural Infrastructure Development Fund (RIDF). This programme has helped to promote both e-governance and e-commerce. There is a similar initiative in Uttaranchal with the help of IIT, Roorkee. Scope for using RIDF in other States should be explored. This will help to convert the concept of every village a knowledge centre into reality.
7. Content creation: The usefulness of a computer-aided knowledge centre in villages will be directly proportional to the social, ecological and economic significance of the static and dynamic information being provided. Hence, a consortium of content providers will have to be developed for each agro-ecological zone. Leading industries could participate actively in such a knowledge and skill empowerment revolution by adopting specific villages where they could provide, in addition to monetary support, marketing and management information. There is need for a regionally differentiated approach to content creation. Both environmental audit and gender audit should be integrated in the procedures for monitoring and evaluation.
8. Women and ICT: The available experience indicates that rural women, whether literate or semi-literate, are able to take to new technologies like fish to water. It is therefore important that women managers and operators are trained in large numbers. There is also a gender dimension to the information needed. For example, quite often women require specific health information. Therefore, the participation of women both as managers and users of ICT should receive specific attention. Also, a gender audit procedure should be built into the final ICT programmes.
9. Participatory knowledge system: E-governance is invariably a passive system of information empowerment. There is need for promoting participatory methodologies of content creation and knowledge management. The approach to rural women and men should be one of partnership and not patronage. In the field of agriculture, a Farmer Participatory Knowledge System (FPKS) could replace the existing beneficiary and patronage approach to knowledge dissemination. The information should be demand driven and should be relevant in terms of time and space.
10. Sustainability and replicability – Role of Panchayati Raj institutions: Unless the local communities have a sense of ownership of the knowledge management centres, it will be difficult to sustain them. It is only a user driven and managed system that will be replicable and capable of developing a self-propelling momentum. Women's groups should be fully

involved in the management and also enabled to operate distance education courses. The programme should be people oriented and not just project-centred. Affordable methods of cost sharing should be introduced in consultation with local communities. Sustainability and replicability should be the bottomline in the development of the National Action Plan for the “every village a knowledge centre” movement. In this context Panchayati Raj institutions, in which one-third of the members are women, could provide the needed space for the location of the rural knowledge centre. The Gram Sabha and the Gram Panchayats could both play a key role in ensuring that the knowledge centres become instruments for triggering a prosperity revolution based on gender and social equity.

11. Promoting job-led economic growth: Increasing rural unemployment is resulting in the unplanned expansion of urban slums. There is need for more on-farm and non-farm employment opportunities in villages. This will be possible only if there is diversification of farming systems and value addition to primary products through improved post-harvest technology. Training should be with reference to market-driven skills. Small scale industries and Khadi and village industries should receive particular attention from the point of view of the upgradation of both technology and marketing skills. There is also need for synergy between the private sector and public and cooperative sectors in promoting more avenues for skilled jobs in villages.
12. Servicing and maintenance: Servicing facilities at the local level should be improved through appropriate training and capacity building measures. This will also provide additional employment opportunities for rural youth in villages.
13. Wake up call: In a country of over 1 billion, there are hardly about 5 million computers. 75-80% of these computers are used in offices. Hardly 20% is available for use in development. Therefore, there is no time to relax on the ICT front. We will be left far behind China and other South and Southeast Asian countries if we do not launch a National ICT for Economic Prosperity and Employment Programme. The penetration level will then increase. There is also need to review the customs duty procedures, which are mostly obsolete and obstructive. Needless inelastic rules should be dispensed with. Donations of new computers to NGOs working in rural and backward areas should be encouraged. Branding of projects should also be facilitated.
14. Virtual Academy for Food Security and Rural Prosperity: The Virtual Academy approach coupled with a hub and spokes model of the kind spearheaded by MSSRF is ideal for rural India. The Virtual Academy can help to mobilise the power of partnership and establish beneficial linkages with national challenge programmes like drought management. MSSRF Virtual Academy could develop linkages with other organisations devoted to the knowledge and skill empowerment of the rural poor in different parts of the country so that it becomes

a National Academy supporting the “every village a knowledge centre” programme. There is need for standardisation of local language websites and also names in Indian languages. Dissemination of information should be in the local language.

15. Political commitment, public action and investment priorities: A Sub-Committee for E-Governance has been set up by the National Development Council under the leadership of the Deputy Prime Minister. The recommendations of this workshop could be forwarded to both the Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister for Information and Technology for appropriate action.

Recommendations for policy makers at WSIS

Policymakers should pay special attention to leveraging the full benefits of ICTs for rural communities in conjunction with existing development imperatives. At a crucial juncture in human history, when the benefits of revolutionary new technologies seem within the grasp of urban and rural communities, care must be taken by policymakers to accommodate the needs and aspirations of the neediest and marginalised communities within the unfolding of the knowledge age. The following recommendations constitute a modest step in this regard.

1. Infrastructure

Developing nations should pursue near-universal and affordable access strategies via low cost devices, open source or shareware software platforms, reasonable tariff levels, and level playing fields between telecom and datacom operators. Associated infrastructure —like reliable sources of electricity — should also be ensured. Where necessary, access discounts and tax breaks should be given on a priority basis to needy sectors like education and healthcare. Shared access models should be actively pursued for rural communities, via cybercafes, kiosks and rural telecentres. New access methods like VoIP and wireless (WLL, WLAN) have tremendous potential especially for remote areas or dense urban clusters and should be actively explored.

2. Content and Online Services

Access should be promoted to global content via the Net as well as generation and promotion of locally relevant content in local languages. This includes local language tools, digital libraries, e-learning, archives of local cultural resources, and needs assessment of rural communities. Government agencies need to play a bigger role as online content providers by publishing citizen information for rural communities on the Web and promoting online services for applications like downloading and submitting tax forms, land records, import/export documents and pension claims. Standardisation of fonts and keyboards by private sector and government agencies is an urgent priority.

3. Grounding in Community

ICT4D policy initiatives should have a strong grounding in local communities of villages. Online and offline forums should be promoted for communities of interest and communities of practice to exchange knowledge on harnessing and creating ICTs in the rural context. Exposure to similar ICT4D initiatives in other rural communities can enable benchmarking and sharing of expertise. Many developing countries have extensive diaspora communities, which should be tapped as a source of ideas, development partnerships and capital for rural ICT4D.

4. Commerce

Legal infrastructure to nurture and promote e-commerce and m-commerce must be spelled out, taking into considerations the special constraints and circumstances of rural communities. Online services (eg. e-government) should be designed with a mix of free and fee-based services so as to ensure commercial sustainability of rural ICT4D initiatives in the long run. As major consumers of ICT products and services, governments in developing countries can also lead by way of example in the use of ICT, implementing best organisational practices and spurring local markets in rural areas.

5. Progressive Attitudes towards Change

A culture of change, knowledge and lifelong learning should be encouraged by rural communities and the government agencies serving them, along with an openness to a wide spectrum of ideas in the knowledge age. Policymakers should have the wisdom, conviction and commitment to change when and where necessary. Efficiency and innovation should become the hallmarks of national culture. Cultures of merit, analysis, professionalism and evidence-based decision-making should be embraced in rural ICT4D initiatives. Commitment to mainstreaming of gender parity issues should be incorporated at all levels.

6. Human Resources

Measures should be implemented to increase ICT literacy in rural areas; private sector training institutes will play a major role here. Technical, managerial and design capacity should be built up in the adoption of ICT for rural communities, creation and maintenance of secure ICT infrastructure, and scaling up of rural ICT initiatives across dimensions of depth and breadth. Capacities should be built up not just in adoption of ICTs in rural areas, but in creativity with regard to devising new applications, R&D focus areas, and harvesting of local knowledge. Self-help groups and volunteer initiatives should be actively harnessed in this regard.

7. Alliancing

Stakeholders in private, educational, government, donor and multilateral sectors must pro-actively form partnerships to ensure ethical and economic use of ICTs in rural communities. Multi-actor alliances targeting rural ICT4D initiatives should be encouraged and nurtured.

8. Investment

Creating funding options for rural ICT4D initiatives should be explored, including venture capital, corporate foundations, donor grants, and revenue-sharing based on projected use. Special financing should be set aside for ICT initiatives involving marginalised communities, the disabled, refugees, migrant populations and youth. Financial sustainability of such rural infocentres should be a key focus, but not at the cost of social sustainability.

9. Regulatory Environment

The optimum regulatory environment for the proliferation of successful rural ICT4D initiatives includes removal of restrictive import duties on ICTs, promotion of wireless communication channels, opening up of community media like radio, free flow of content, and funds for near-universal access to infrastructure and services in rural areas.

10. Alignment with Millenium Development Goals

The desired targets enshrined in the Millenium Development Goals should be correspondingly incorporated in the form of relevant and appropriate metrics in the design of rural ICT4D initiatives. A clear focus on quantitative and qualitative metrics at the macro and micro level, for urban and rural communities should be incorporated at the level of traditional and new media initiatives.