A Case Study of the Grameen Gyan Abhiyan Rural Knowledge Centre Movement

MSSRF

Grameen Gyan Abhiyan (Rural Knowledge Network) is a multi-stakeholder alliance advocating the use of ICTs to empower rural communities through the establishment of rural knowledge centres. This case study illustrates planning, implementation and development of a mass movement-oriented advocacy campaign to bring ICT access to rural India. Building on an initiative of the M S Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF) in South India in 1998 that tested the concept of Village Knowledge Centres, the project evolved into the campaign "Mission 2007: Every Village a Knowledge Centre" with the goal of extending the benefits of ICT access to 600,000 villages in India. The case study describes the evolution of the campaign from small beginnings into a mass movement that has influenced similar initiatives in Asia and Africa and has mobilised high-level support from public, private and civil society organisations.

Stage 1: Village Knowledge Centres

The M S Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF) is a non-profit research organisation. MSSRF adopts a pro-nature, pro-poor, pro-women and pro-sustainable livelihood model of development using appropriate rural technology development and dissemination strategies. As part of its efforts, MSSRF held the Interdisciplinary Dialogue on Information Technology: Reaching the Unreached in January 1992. As an outcome of this dialogue, the first Village Knowledge Centre (VKC) programme was started in January 1998 in the Union Territory of Puducherry (formerly Pondicherry) on the east coast of South India. The VKC programme aims to use information and communication technologies (ICTs) to provide information which empowers rural communities through livelihood opportunities.

MSSRF believes that any development project has to go through a process of social mobilisation, organisation, capacity building, technology incubation, systems management and withdrawal. Emphasis is laid on social mobilisation, a process by which mutual learning and understanding between development agencies and the rural community are reinforced. MSSRF's decade-long experience has shown that the following key processes are important:

- *Mobilising local communities*: Before setting up the knowledge centres, the Foundation required participating villages to agree to certain criteria. This included guaranteed access to members of all communities including the Dalits (formerly known as "untouchables") and ensuring that at least half of the trained volunteer operators are women.

- *Gender mainstreaming*: The key to success has been the integration of gender analysis and awareness at the earliest stages of project design, and making them a part of ongoing training, evaluation and monitoring. The knowledge centres track the number of men and women visitors to the centres on an ongoing basis, providing a changing picture of how rural women are using

ICTs. MSSRF is also always keen to ensure that at least half of the volunteers must be women. The experience of handling and maintaining computer equipment and answering men's questions gives women new confidence and status in the community and helps ensure that technology is not thought of as a "man's domain".

- *Value-added local content*: A key component of the project is "value addition" through collecting, creating and disseminating locally relevant information. This activity mainly takes place in the network hub. This expensive and labour-intensive process is based on the recognition of the need for "intelligent intermediaries" based in the communities to interpret and package information for local use. It is seen to be one of the major success factors of the project. Information compiled by community volunteers and provided in the Village Knowledge Centres is locale specific (e.g., relating to agriculture, markets, health care, etc.). The information provided has always been demand driven and is relevant to the day-to-day life and work of rural women and men. There is growing evidence that farmers are using the information.

- *Innovation and openness to using a combination of various technologies*: ICTs are not always the appropriate vehicle for content delivery. Rural knowledge centres are concerned with creating and updating relevant content as well as disseminating it appropriately to suit local needs. Packaging of appropriate content (e.g., in local languages) for specific community needs is an important activity of all centres. Content is delivered through both conventional and electronic means: the centres use not only websites, but also community newspapers, radio and announcements over public address systems to disseminate information on a wide range of subjects, from wave heights to public health. The convergence between radio and the internet provides useful examples of how to create local content, relevant to local needs and culture, and provide this content in local languages. The Veerampattinam knowledge centres provide detailed weather forecasts downloaded from the US Navy website which are then formatted in audio format and broadcast over a speaker system outside the knowledge centres. The fisher families consider this information life saving.

Stage 2: National Virtual Academy

Based on the VKC experience, MSSRF initiated another programme called the Jamsetji Tata National Virtual Academy (NVA) during 2003. The main aim of this programme is to empower vulnerable people to make better choices and achieve better control of their own development as well as to build skills and capacities of the rural poor with a view to enhancing livelihood opportunities. The NVA programme aims to bring together the experts and grassroots-level communities in two-way communication with the objective that knowledge should reach every home and hut.

This programme adopts a three-tier knowledge network to strengthen rural extension.[1] The first tier (MSSRF, Chennai) connects several data generators and data providers (universities, experts, financial institutions, corporate sector, technocrats, grassroots academicians, etc.) focusing primarily on content and capacity building.

[1] Rural extension services comprise a range of agricultural assistance offered by the state. These include transferring knowledge from researchers to farmers, advising farmers in their decision making, and stimulating overall agricultural development.

The second tier is the Village Resource Centre (VRC), which is the local-level hub. MSSRF connects with VRCs through Indian Space Research Organisation uplink/downlink satellites in order to transfer knowledge and information to the VRCs and vice versa. Locale-specific, demand-driven information is disseminated from the VRCs through the VKCs, which make up the third tier.

VKCs are normally located among a cluster of villages or *panchayats*. The space and electricity for these centres are provided by local partners (elected village administrations, traditional village administrations, farmers' and fishers' associations, milk societies, youth clubs, NGOs, religious institutions such as temples and churches, village development councils, etc.). Partners are also involved in selecting the Knowledge Workers who will maintain the VKCs; spelling out the needs of the communities, particularly in the areas of content and training/awareness programmes; supporting the purchase of a small amount of equipment; and buying newspapers for the knowledge centres' libraries.

Important aspects of the NVA programme

Through the collection of secondary data and a well-planned needs assessment, VRCs and VKCs develop locale-specific demand-driven content; organise training and awareness programmes; and make linkages with leading institutions and organisations for transforming the content into action and application. The knowledge is disseminated through several ICT and non-ICT tools. ICT tools include computers, internet, wired and wireless communications and satellite video conferencing. Non-ICT tools include notice boards, exhibitions, focus group meetings, hand bills and local newspapers.

South-South exchange travelling workshops

The NVA enables participants in the project to share their experiences and best practices with organisations around the world involved in ICTs and rural development through regular South-South exchange travelling workshops. The objective is to learn from one another, to be encouraged by good examples, and to be able to distinguish which experiences could be used straightaway and which ones need to be adapted to the local situation. These workshops are typically ten days in length. During the workshop, the participants exchange their views with VRC and VKC village communities and Knowledge Workers. They observe the different dissemination technologies, and raise questions related to content, connectivity, capacity building, management of VRCs and VKCs, etc. Through these workshops participants build their capacity in ICT for rural development and deliver better quality services to their target groups. Similar exchanges involving VRCs and VKCs were designed to sensitise policy makers in order to develop the right kind of ICT policies.

Stage 3: Mission 2007: Every Village a Knowledge Centre

The advocacy strategy behind Mission 2007: Every Village a Knowledge Centre was to sensitise policy makers to critical issues in the use of ICTs to promote human development in rural areas. The goal of this policy advocacy was to extend the benefits of ICT to 600,000 villages in India by 2007 (the 60th anniversary of India's independence). The aim of this programme is to bridge the urban/rural digital divide and to harness ICTs for addressing the major problems of rural India like poverty, illiteracy, poor health and low farm productivity.

With support from MSSRF members, a National Alliance for Mission 2007 was formed in 2003. In 2004, the Foundation began to replicate its Puducherry experience of VKCs in different parts of the country by creating a multi-stakeholder partnership called Mission 2007: Every Village a Knowledge Centre. By 2005, this network had expanded to include 200 partners and received support from both national (including government) and international agencies. This Alliance has grown considerably and now has over 400 members drawn from the public, private, academic, civil society and financial sectors. The Alliance is supported by an international support group of UN and bilateral agencies and private sector corporations.

Effectively, the Alliance provides a space for several small alliances based on regional or thematic issues. It provides a strategic space for members to get together to share lessons. Every year a National Convention of the Alliance is held in order to review the progress made in mobilising the power of partnership for the knowledge empowerment of rural families. Partners support and contribute to these conventions in many ways: some offer financial support; others provide their knowledge and time. Members offer technological solutions and share content with each other. These conventions are major events and spaces for advocacy. They have support from ministers, the private sector and policy makers. Some policy makers are taking steps to address some of the recommendations of Alliance partners.

As a result, the government of India has included knowledge connectivity as an important component of Bharat Nirman[2] or a New Deal for Rural India. In 2004, the government set up a National Commission on Farmers which was chaired by M S Swaminathan, the chairman of MSSRF. This commission, with inputs from the Alliance and other consultations, recommended the importance of setting up Rural Knowledge Centres to provide all necessary knowledge support including modern technologies to farmers. This was accepted by the government, which became a member of the Alliance. The decision was announced by Finance Minister Shri P Chidambaram in his budget speech on 28 February 2005, as follows:

> The National Commission on Farmers has recommended the establishment of Rural Knowledge Centres all over the country using modern information and communication technology (ICT). Mission 2007 is a national initiative launched by an alliance comprising nearly 80 organisations including civil society organisations. Their goal is to set up a Knowledge Centre in every village by the 60th anniversary of Independence Day. Government supports the goal, and I am glad to announce that Government has decided to join the alliance and route its support through NABARD [the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development]. I propose to allow NABARD to provide Rs.100 crore [USD 20 million] out of RIDF [the Rural Infrastructure Development Fund].

Mission 2007 adopted a strategy of inviting various policy makers on different occasions to hear and speak to rural communities about the transformation that was taking place through pro-poor access to ICTs. Inspired by this, the Indian Space Research Organisation is in the process of setting up 4,000 Village Resource Centres (VRCs). The Department of Information Technology is also in the process of setting up 100,000 Common Service Centres (CSCs), and the government has appointed a national-level service agency for managing CSCs under the National e-Governance Plan. In addition, the Telecommunications

[2] "India Infrastructure" in Hindi.

Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI)'s recommendation for rural telecommunications policy incorporates points from Mission 2007 partners.

Stage 4: Replicating the movement

Mission 2007 has also influenced similar initiatives in other countries, such as the Pan-Africa Network (PAN), ICTA in Sri Lanka, the Telecentre Network in Bangladesh, PhilCeCNet in the Philippines, and Mission Swaabhimaan in Nepal, while a study team from Rwanda visited India in 2007 to develop their own strategy for ICT for development (ICT4D).

Mission 2011 in Bangladesh is a similar movement inspired by Mission 2007. According to Dr Ananya Raihan, executive director of D.Net[3] and secretary general for the Bangladesh Telecentre Network: "The inspiration for Mission 2011 came from Mission 2007. We want to take all those [outcomes] which worked in implementation of Mission 2007 and avoid those which did not work."

Mission Swaabhimaan in Nepal is another movement that replicates Mission 2007's success. According to Minister of Science of Technology Shri Mahant Thakur: "We wanted to have hands-on experience on how the National Alliance for Mission 2007: Every Village a Knowledge Centre, comprising the Indian government, civil society organisations and the private sector, is trying to fill in the knowledge and information gap in rural [areas] through a combination of modern and traditional ICTs."

Stage 5: Beyond Mission 2007

Since early August 2007, this movement has become referred to as Grameen Gyan Abhiyan (GGA), or Rural Knowledge Movement, to continue to implement its goals beyond 2007. The GGA Secretariat is currently hosted by MSSRF. The GGA Secretariat disseminates the necessary information to the partners through its website, discussion forums, newsletters, conventions, thematic-based workshops, etc. The GGA Secretariat is also involved in organising exchange visits for international organisations to study the multi-stakeholder partnership and learn more about the role of this partnership that influenced government and other sectors.

Stage 6: Ongoing support to the movement

A Rural Innovation Fund has been established with the help of telecentre.org, the IDRC, SDC and Microsoft, to promote a spirit of entrepreneurship and inventiveness in the development of technologies for rural areas. The GGA Secretariat monitors the entire programme, and the award winners develop and submit their software applications to the Secretariat, which also periodically monitors their progress.

Stage 7: The way forward

The GGA Secretariat is strengthening GGA alliance building using virtual networks and providing necessary capacity building and training to telecentre managers.

[3] www.dnet-bangladesh.org