Chapter 18
Role of Open Universities for Community–Based Developmental Interventions:
Experiences and Road Ahead

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ABSTRACT

The mindboggling growth of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) has opened up exciting new possibilities to enhance the reach of developmental interventions in resource starved regions. Indian conditions are most challenging primarily due to diverse socioeconomic and cultural variations which present a major developmental challenge. Of late there has been widespread sensitization in policy making level for use of technological interventions to mitigate the developmental challenges. However the receptivity of such technological interventions depends on the peculiar characteristics of such disadvantaged communities. This chapter describes an important developmental intervention named as Community Information Centers carried out by an open university in India where author has been working at the helm of affairs. The chapter described the overall rationale for involving community, narrates the learning experiences and proposes a model for future such interventions. The experiences can be useful for replication of similar initiatives in other parts of the developing world. It can also evolve a new perspective for implementing India's ambitious University Outreach Programme called "Unnat Bharat Abhiyaan."

INTRODUCTION

Despite its rich natural resource base, North East part of India has been lagging behind the rest of the country primarily due to its geographical remoteness, economic backwardness of the predominantly tribal communities inhabiting this area and poor penetration of technology (Bhattacharjee, 2012).The low population density (average-159 persons/sq km) is another major impediment in implementing

developmental initiatives of the Government (Dikshit and Dikshit,2013). Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) due to its potential to connect with the people can prove to be instrumental to enhance access to governmental services in such a sparsely distributed population (Singh et al, 2006 and Souter,2005)).

The underlying conditions in most of the developing countries are almost similar. The majority of the socio economically disadvantaged communities living in geographically isolated regions don't have basic amenities, the road approach to such pockets is poor and economic conditions are at subsistence level. Though Community Information Centres have been well recognized as the only viable option to mitigate the hardships of rural communities, its outcomes have been varied across the world. The Community Information Centers have given positive results in several countries whereas in some of them they did not deliver expected results (UNESCO). In the context of Bangladesh, (Islam & Mezbah-ul-Islam, 2008) have concluded that CICs in their country have been instrumental to enhance the skills and expertise of the people. The study has further concluded that any such intervention should involve proactive participation by the governmental sector, NGOs and other Community Based Organizations. Sullivan(2006) has highlighted cell phone leading to appreciable improvement in the life of Bangladeshi Villagers. Similarly Village Information Centers in Pondicherry (India) have recorded improvement in the life of people (Cheryll, 2007). Similarly research studies have shown an optimistic picture about the Community Information Centers in Nepal(Sudip Aryal) and Pakistan(Mahmood,2005). However despite wide variations in the outcomes of Community Information Centre's activities across the world, there is a great deal of realization about its usefulness (FAO, 2009).

This was the reason that a special economic package was announced by the Prime Minister of India in 2000, to speed up the development of northeast India which included a special project of Community Information Centre (CIC) (Bhattacharjee, 2012).The project as envisaged by the Government was paradigmatically different (NIC Web Site).It was meant to connect all the 487 administrative blocks of the north east region with ICT availability. Project started on pilot mode for two years though total time period of the project was five years (Chaudhry and Dash, 2008). A cost benefit analysis of all these CICs was conducted by National Council for Applied Economic Research (NCAER) and gradually merged into Community Service Centers (CSCs) under the NeGP (National e-Governance Plan).

Under the project community centers were established which were generally equipped with Internet facility through V-SAT, LAN having five PCs, a server and accompanying equipment like printers, UPS, furniture and power generating set (Bhattacharjee, 2012). Every centre was planned to be managed by two persons to be appointed by the respective state governments. Besides video teleconference facility was also planned for these CICs. The basic idea of the CIC s was to create access points of citizen delivery in a larger e-governance initiative. Project, managed by National Informatics Centre (NIC) of India started in the year 2000, with a pilot allocation of Rs 100 crores to cover 30 blocks of the region. The target date for connecting all 487 centers was set as 15 August 2002. Such CICs was created in all districts as an extension of the Block Resource Centers. Since CICs are a part of an extension of the Block Resource Centers, the Block Development Officers (BDO) had to play a significant role in formulating extension-based activities.

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