

Chapter 5

A New Breed of Socio–Cultural Leaders and How They Use CSR in ICT for Development as a Tool of Sustainability: A Case Study of Telecentres in a South Asian Developing Country

G. Sampath S. Windsor
University of New South Wales, Australia

Carol Royal
University of New South Wales, Australia

ABSTRACT

Academic research has been scant with regard to examining the impact of leadership on telecentre sustainability. This chapter evolved from the e-Sri Lanka program funded by the World Bank as a unique South Asian project, which has seen the establishment of a network of 765 Nenasala telecentres, both grass-root non-profit and for-profit enterprises as its main interface with the community. This context provided an interesting avenue in which to examine different leadership models in the digital age. Through comprehensive analysis of archival material, focus group data from Nenasala operators, and interview data from stakeholders in Sri Lanka, the findings reveal that leadership was key to Nenasala telecentre sustainability and success at the telecentre organisation level. The researchers find that one of the models, the special community-based leadership model adopted by Sri Lankan Nenasalas as a Socio-Cultural Leadership (SCL) approach prevalent in Sri Lankan not-for-profit Nenasala telecentres, successfully enhanced sustainability through community focus and demonstrated competitive advantage over their for-profit telecentre counterparts. These findings suggest that a replication of the study in other developing countries could prove to be invaluable.

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INTRODUCTION

Information, Communication, and Technology for Development (ICT4D) can be considered not only as a developing technology diffusion system, but also a sector facing the threat of decline unless innovative approaches are taken. This will be explored in the context of South Asian regional telecentre movement and findings of a case study of unique community based Nenasala (which means Knowledge Hubs) telecentres, a portal to reach remote disadvantaged communities in Sri Lanka's ICT4D journey. Overall, Nenasala is a grass-root non-profit and for-profit demand-based Private & Public Partnership (PPP) initiative. Information and Communication Technology Agency (ICTA), oversees the implementation of Nenasala program and has the sponsorship of the Sri Lankan government, international donors, and the World Bank. In this book chapter, it will be revealed how a new hybrid breed of Socio-Cultural Leaders (SCL) in Sri Lankan Nenasala telecentres successfully utilized their hybrid SCL approach and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) to gain not only sustainability but also competitive advantage against their non-Nenasala, for-profit telecentre counterparts.

Sri Lanka has a unique multi-ethnic cultural base and hence the researchers were interested to investigate how this diversity influences Sri Lanka's effort in bridging the digital divide. Moreover, e-Sri Lanka was the first World Bank funded project in South Asia, which sets the best practice for the other countries in the region to follow. Another reason for the special interest in Nenasala case study is, its unique and unparalleled innovation as a holistic, long-term, development driven approach. Additionally, Sri Lanka as a recuperating country after 30 years of civil war, has established a network of Nenasalas covering all under-privileged areas in the island including the war-torn North and the Eastern provinces in order to upgrade the e-economic development and the quality of life of the disadvantaged. Au-

thors of this chapter also found that there is an empirical research gap in this area especially the absence of academic research. Most importantly, Nenasalas have been in existence for the last 10 years showing a great promise towards building a knowledge society by its unique SCL model, and CSR collaboration.

This chapter borrows a theorem from the education field, which is SCL and applies it to the community based leadership style adopted in Sri Lankan Nenasalas. Fundamentally, SCL in the context of community based CSR oriented leadership is defined in this chapter 'as a leadership style that actively seeks to ensure that despite lack of affordability, disadvantaged groups gain the advantages normally limited to mid-high class societies'. In this context, SCL is supportive of the argument that bridging digital divide should play a bigger role in social reform efforts, which aims to alleviate poverty. SCL leadership has taken four paths in Nenasalas. Firstly, majority of community model based Nenasalas have been run by religious institutions (such as Buddhist temples, Hindu kovils and churches) and are led under the patronage of local religious clergy. Secondly, community groups operated Nenasalas have been directed by community leaders. Thirdly, local entrepreneurs have taken the leadership within a business model that incorporate a high sense of CSR as an integral part of their local community. Fourthly, locally based NGO leaders have led Nenasalas under the NGO patronage within the models prescribed by ICTA. However, all leaders and individuals who champion Nenasalas have been driven by and are in tuned with socio-cultural aspects intertwined with development that benefits the disadvantaged. As such, unique hybrid models of SCL have emerged amidst Nenasalas in Sri Lanka.

CSR is promoted as a form of corporate self-regulation integrated into the organisations business model that enhances corporate sustainability by accommodating socio-cultural concerns that organisations encounter. However, different countries have distinct social structures, dominat-

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