

Chapter 4

Digital Governance in Rural Schools of Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

ICT has been used as a model for education in many parts of the world. At the end of the conflict in 2009, the Government of Sri Lanka embarked on an e-Sri Lanka initiative aimed at introducing ICT across several sectors. The education sector received substantial investment in ICT, but only a section of this sector was targeted. This study explores the barriers of introducing and implementing ICT. The analysis of the case studies together with the variables identified from the literature review provided the basis for developing the conceptual framework for the study. The target population for this study were teachers and principals in the rural schools of Trincomalee representing the rural population in Sri Lanka. A combined sample of 70 teachers and principals were considered for this survey across 20 schools in the district. The results indicate that internet access, resources, personnel, and security are essential for introducing and implementing ICT education in the rural areas.

INTRODUCTION

Background to the Research

Sri Lanka's education sector is catered to by a mixture of nation-wide network of state supported, private and international schools. Primary enrolment of boys and girls is well above 90 per cent and secondary enrolment rate stands at over 80 per cent making the country one of the more successful nations in providing educational opportunities to all segments of its population (World Bank, 2011). However these statistics largely belie the severe vulnerability students' face in some of the more rural areas of the country.

For nearly three decades the country was plagued by a bitter civil war that claimed the lives of thousands and destroyed the livelihoods of many. In 2004, several coastal areas of the country were shattered by the Indian Ocean Tsunami that further worsened the economic conditions of the people.

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In May 2009, the Sri Lankan Government declared the end to the conflict with nearly 300,000 civilians being housed in temporary camps waiting to be resettled back in their homes. The end of the war saw aid pouring into the island, creating a platform for post war development.

Since then the Government has embarked on mega infrastructure development projects; constructing roads, harbours and airports with a view to increasing economic development. In line with his election manifesto; the Mahinda Chinthanaya, (Department of National Planning Ministry of Finance and Planning, 2006) the President declared the year 2009 as the Year of English and IT as part of encouraging the creation of a knowledge society in Sri Lanka (Ministry of Education, 2009).

The Government introduced the e-Sri Lanka Initiative together with the Information and Communication Technology Agency (ICTA) of Sri Lanka to develop the economy of Sri Lanka, reduce poverty and improve the quality of life of the people (ICTA, 2009). Several projects were implemented under this initiative under various sectors.

The 'Nenasala' (Knowledge Centre) Project implemented by the Government together with the ICTA aims to provide Rural Knowledge Centres, e-Libraries, Distance and e-Learning Centres and Tsunami Camp Computer Kiosks. The initial phase of the project was implemented in 13 districts across the island. However this particular project had a selection criterion; where the selected division of the village needed to have a population of between 2000-5000 people, presence of a market with at least 15 wholesale vendors, presence of electricity and a type 2 school with at least 300 students (Nenasala, n.d.).

This meant that nearly 50 per cent of the schools (4,910) were not eligible to participate in the programme as they had less than 300 students (Ministry of Education, 2006).

The Ministry of Education together with the Asian Development Bank (ADB) implemented the Secondary Education Modernization Project (SEMP) aimed at connecting most of the secondary education schools and other related organizations on a wide-area network (WAN). The initial phase of the project was to connect 1000 schools, set up 100 computer resource centres and 8 provincial ICT centres. The services offered included IP-VPN technology, bandwidth connections, web hosting and filtering etc.

However in order for a school to join the project they needed to have the most basic infrastructure such as computers. This meant that most rural schools which did not possess this infrastructure were not part of the project.

Therefore a large number of rural schools lack not only the basic infrastructure for ICT education but basic educational requirements itself, such as teachers. Through the use of ICT these gaps can be fulfilled to a large extent depending on the type and nature of the problem at hand.

ICT has been used as a model for education in many parts of the world. Despite the developed countries exploiting its use exponentially, third world countries have been unable to keep up with the pace. (Valentine & Holloway, 2001) state that the potential of ICT to alleviate rural marginality is also recognized in education funding initiatives. The literature also suggests that ICT has been used in a variety of areas and to suit different purposes and needs of the culture (Vorakulpipat et al., 2010).

However the barriers vary from region to region and sometimes from country to country. Despite this the application and use of ICTs, have tremendous potential for improvements in every sector including education (Mansotraet al., 2009). On a broader perspective, researchers have found a few underlying reasons for the lack of ICT in the rural areas.

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