

# NPRS-PRF

Helping Accelerate Poverty Reduction in Asia and the Pacific

## INFORMATION AT THE HANDS OF THE PEOPLE

The world has seen great strides in science and technology, particularly information and communication technology (ICT<sup>1</sup>). The movement of goods, services, factors of production, and technology has greatly accelerated across national boundaries.

The combination of information technology and telecommunications is impacting on all dimensions of life: education, health, culture, leisure, and arts. Information has become a powerful resource that is helping economies expand at an unprecedented rate.

But despite the interconnectedness that characterizes globalization, half of the world<sup>2</sup> is unable to participate in these virtual global communities. The poor remain excluded from much of the world's information—information that the poor could use to improve their living conditions.

### ICT as a Development Intervention

Across the world, pilot projects have been tried to use ICT as a tool for development. These pilots aim to bring the benefits of ICT to the poor through delivery of improved basic services like education and health care, and through equipping the poor with the necessary information and skills to bring them into the mainstream of society. The challenge is to maximize the use of ICT in addressing rural development and poverty reduction issues.

For instance, Sri Lanka has made substantial gains in reducing poverty, as reflected in its impressive human development indicator (HDI). In 2006,<sup>3</sup> its HDI<sup>4</sup> was 0.755, giving it a rank of 93rd out of 177 countries, being by far the highest in South Asia. However, despite good gross domestic product (GDP) growth in recent years (6% in 2003 and 5.4% in 2004 – Central Bank of Sri Lanka Annual Report, 2004: 8), consumption and expenditure poverty levels remain high. The recent data from the Department for Census and Statistics put 23% of households below the poverty line (DCS 2002). The figure translates into more than 4 million people living below the official poverty line.<sup>5</sup>

In an attempt to address this issue, the Sri Lankan government is employing a number of innovative approaches to reduce

poverty. One of this is the use of ICT, which is being brought to the doorsteps of the poor, 87% of whom are in rural areas.

To support the government in this approach, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) approved in May 2003 the funding of technical assistance (TA) 4110: Community Information Services for the Poor<sup>6</sup> from the Poverty Reduction Cooperation Fund, one of the trust funds available at ADB. This TA piloted two community information networks that will bring vital information to the poor in two districts of Sri Lanka—Gampaha and Ratnapura. The aim was to create opportunities for the poor to participate in economic growth by providing vital information for income generation and well-being.

Users would be able to access important information through the Internet, and fax machines to help them, for instance, monitor crop prices, order goods and services, consult doctors, enroll in distance learning classes, and pay taxes. They would also be able to swap and access information on job opportunities, health and medical information, weather and disaster warning, and public announcements.

The TA involved three major components:

- 1) Community information centers (CICs) and village information centers (VICs) in Gampaha<sup>7</sup> and Ratnapura<sup>8</sup> districts;
- 2) Capacity and skills development for managing the CICs and VICs and for the use of the ICT; and,
- 3) Provision of information services.

### *Establishment of Community Information Networks<sup>9</sup>*

As part of the community information networks, three district-wide CICs were established in the Gampaha, Ratnapura, and Kalutara<sup>10</sup> districts.

The Gampaha district community information network is based on an e-governance model, linking mostly public entities such as the divisional officers, public rural extension centers,

government training centers, public health centers, and state-owned enterprises.

The Ratnapura district information network is based on an e-commerce model, linking private entities such as private clinics, private schools, training centers, commercial banks, and private companies.

The Kalutara district information network in contrast is based on a mixed e-governance and e-commerce model linking both public and private entities.

Ten VICs in each district have also been set up and connected to the district CICs through the information networks.

Information needs assessment provided inputs on the type of information the community required. Among the top five key information types cited were: education (including education programs, tuition fees, and vocational training); employment (job vacancies, job training facilities, foreign employment opportunities); agriculture (including cultivation methods, seed varieties, agricultural subsidies, fertilizers, irrigation); business (credit and loan facilities, how to start new businesses, business contacts, marketing strategies); and banking (bank accounts, loan and credit facilities, bank interest rates).

Once information priorities have been established through a community needs assessment, information is disseminated to the community through daily news flashes, monthly newsletters, and the project websites.

The information needs assessment indicated that about 3–5% of the residents of the districts covered by the TA had access to computers, although a large percentage had access to radio, television, and newspaper as modes of information and communication.

After a year of operation, the three district-level CICs have served a significant number of people, of whom 32–41% are the poorest: 31,000 in Gampaha (41% were in receipt of government subsidies known as Samurdhi recipients);<sup>11</sup> 17,000 in Ratnapura (35% were Samurdhi recipients); and 18,500 in Kalutara (about 31% were Samurdhi recipients).

Over 75% of the users of the community information network are classified as poor. The most sought-after information type was job/employment opportunities, education, and those relating to industries.

### **Capacity and Skills Development**

While this project is about providing information to the poor to help improve livelihood strategies, provision of basic ICT skills has become a major component and an important first step to further information access. Trainings were conducted for the CIC and VIC operators and the community users on basic computer literacy, computer orientation, data handling, Internet use, and use of other ICT equipment. In addition, English learning classes had to be introduced to support computer literacy programs since basic English knowledge is required for maximum use of ICT.

Through this TA, around 22,375 individuals have been trained, including members of business communities, officials of local government, local journalists, unemployed graduates and youth, housewives, disabled persons, and soldiers.

In Ratnapura, training of disabled students and teachers from the local schools for the deaf and blind were undertaken as a springboard for schools to set up their own computer centers..

### **Community awareness and promotion of community involvement**

To broaden community participation in information networks, several initiatives were undertaken to promote awareness. These included conducting community awareness workshops involving local leaders and prominent members of the community, publication of news features on the information centers in national and local newspapers and magazines, distribution of project handouts and brochures, and production and dissemination of daily news flashes and monthly newsletters.

In addition, four websites have been developed and are being maintained in English, Sinhalese, and Tamil. These are the National Information website, Gampaha District Information website, Ratnapura District Information website, and Kalutara District Information website.

Community involvement and the generation of community support play a critical role in the sustainability of the information centers after the TA has been completed.

## **Making Information Accessible to the Poor**

Bringing information to the doorstep of poor people has not been easy. Apart from the language (basic English is needed in computer use) and the cultural barriers (fear of modern technology), the TA had to contend with the scarcity of technology in the rural areas. There were setbacks when VICs were established in remote rural areas where services such as telephone and Internet connections were weak, scarce, or nonexistent.

In addition, a reasonable volume of information desired by the rural poor was not available in electronic form; the CICs had to provide the users with both electronic and hard forms.

Design changes were made during TA implementation. The three district CICs were established following specific models (e-governance, e-commerce, combination of both). However, the expressed need by users in all district CICs covered both public and private sector information. To respond to this demand, all CICs adapted to offer both types of information.

The number of CIC visitors and users continue to swell. Almost 75% of them are poor wanting adequate information to enable them to make informed decisions in all areas of life.

Before this TA was completed in July 2005, it made information available to the public and had opened a corridor of opportunity to Sri Lanka's rural poor. Among the significant impacts were:<sup>12</sup>

- Diversification of market gardens through the information disseminated from the centers and increase in the amount of vegetables sold because of improvement in quality and quantity;
- New opportunities have been optimized through the introduction of new ideas and designs (e.g., manufacture of antennae, grill gates, diversify designs in the production of murals, landscaping, patchwork, etc.) which increased marketability of products;
- Information on job opportunities have become accessible; and
- Income generation activities have been initiated through the exchange of ideas that have taken place in the centers.

The introduction of ICT in the lives of the rural poor in Sri Lanka has broadened the opportunities for people to adopt creative approaches to reduce their own poverty in ways that are tailored to their individual needs.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> ICT is a generic term covering computers, broadcasting, telecommunications, data networks, and “smart” components. It can be defined as the totality of the electronic means to collect, store, process, and present information to end users in support of their activities. It consists of computer systems, data communication systems, knowledge systems, office systems, and consumer electronics, as well as networked information infrastructure, the components of which include the telephone system, the Internet, fax machines, and computers. [www.unescap.org/55/theme/chap4.htm](http://www.unescap.org/55/theme/chap4.htm)
- <sup>2</sup> [www.globalissues.org/TradeRelated/Poverty.asp](http://www.globalissues.org/TradeRelated/Poverty.asp)
- <sup>3</sup> [http://hdr.undp.org/hdr2006/statistics/countries/country\\_fact\\_sheets/cty\\_fs\\_LKA.html](http://hdr.undp.org/hdr2006/statistics/countries/country_fact_sheets/cty_fs_LKA.html)
- <sup>4</sup> The Human Development Index (HDI) is a comparative measure of life expectancy, literacy, education, and standard of living for countries worldwide. It is a standard means of measuring well-being, especially child welfare. It is used to determine and indicate whether a country is a developed, developing, or underdeveloped country, and to measure the impact of economic policies on quality of life.
- <sup>5</sup> [www.cepa.lk/issues/lk-dynam.htm](http://www.cepa.lk/issues/lk-dynam.htm)
- <sup>6</sup> TA 4110 SRI Community Information Services for the Poor. The TA Executing Agency is the Ministry of Education. TA amount is \$800,000. TA approval date: May 2003. TA completion date: July 2005.
- <sup>7</sup> Gampaha District in the Western Province, north of Colombo. Gampaha is separated from Colombo by mainly the Kelani River. Population in 2001 is 2,066,096.
- <sup>8</sup> Ratnapura is a district of Sri Lanka in the province of Sabaragamuwa. The gem-mining center of Sri Lanka is also a major crossroad between the southern plains and the hill country to the east. Ratnapura population in 2001 is 1,008,164.
- <sup>9</sup> TEAMS Consultants in Development. 2005. *Final Report* (TA 4110 SRI). April.
- <sup>10</sup> The original scope of the TA was to cover two districts (Gampaha and Ratnapura). It was agreed later that a 3rd district (Kalutara) be covered to incorporate aspects both form e-governance and the e-commerce model.
- <sup>11</sup> Samurdhi recipients are poor people with a monthly income below the poverty threshold and are given special government assistance for poverty alleviation.
- <sup>12</sup> Results of Benefit Monitoring and Evaluation conducted from September 2004 – January 2005. (footnote 9)

This case study was written by Social Development Direct (RETA Consultant) under the Regional TA 6270: Facilitating Knowledge Management for Pro-Poor Policies and Projects with inputs from Ayako Inagaki, Project Officer of TA 4110, and Sonomi Tanaka, Senior Social Development Specialist, ADB. The views and assessments contained herein do not necessarily reflect the views of ADB or its Board of Directors or the governments they represent. ADB does not guarantee the accuracy of the data and accepts no responsibility for any consequences of their use.

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