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## Bridging the Digital Divide to Fight Rural Poverty

IN THREE of the poorest districts in Sri Lanka, thousands among the poorest of the poor – seasonal farmers and fisherfolk, unemployed people, and the disabled – are gradually finding their way out of poverty through the use of devices of the modern world.

In Community Information Centers (CIC) in each of the three districts - Gampaha district in the Western Province, north of Colombo; Ratnapura district, in the province of Sabaragamuwa, the gem-mining centre of Sri Lanka; and Kalutara district - these people are able to access to vital information that helps create opportunities for them to participate in economic growth.

Through computers with Internet access, standard and wireless phones, and fax machines, poor people are discovering that they can look for jobs, discover ways to improve the quality of their products, enroll in distance learning classes, and even find activities they can do to earn more money, such as landscaping or constructing a grill gate.

“Access to information plays a crucial role in improving the living conditions of the poor, and information and communications technology provides an efficient manner of improving access to information,” says Ayako Inagaki, an ADB Senior Education Specialist. Ms. Inagaki, the third project officer to oversee the establishment of the three CICs, under an \$800,000 technical assistance project (TA 4110) funded by the Poverty Reduction Cooperation Fund.

The project, carried out from late 2003 to 2005, builds upon the Government’s vision to take information and communications technology (ICT) to every village, citizen, and business, and to transform the way government works by using ICT.

It aimed to serve as a testing ground for electronic learning, commerce, medicine, and government services, and consequently provide case studies on how these services can efficiently and effectively reach the poor and disabled.

“ICT is not only a tool for basic services, like education and health care; it can also be used to equip the poor with necessary information and skills to bring them into the mainstream of society. The TA’s challenge was to maximize the use of ICT in addressing rural development and poverty reduction issues,” adds Ms. Inagaki.

To expand accessibility, in each of the districts, 10 village-level information centers (VICs) were set up and connected to the CICs through the information networks. Information deemed most relevant for the target users, based on a needs assessment, were also made readily available: education and training programs, job opportunities, agricultural methods and related information, business and entrepreneurship, and banking.

After only a year of operations, the three CICs were able to serve over 60,000 people - 31,000 in Gampaha, 17,000 in Ratnapura, and 18,500 in Kalutara – 32 to 41% of whom belonged to the poorest of the poor known as Samurdhi recipients, or those with a monthly income below the poverty threshold (Rp3000) and are given special Government assistance for poverty alleviation. In fact, over 75% of the users were classified as poor who were looking for information related to jobs, education, and those relating to industries.

“The enthusiastic support and involvement of the communities not only bear witness to the relevance of the project, but they play a critical role in ensuring the sustainability of the information centers,” says Ms. Inagaki. “While we have not seen the actual impacts on the income levels of the beneficiaries within the short project period, ICT has enormous potential to improve the livelihoods of the poor, and we hope to see this project replicated in other parts of the country and the Asia Pacific region.” #