

Community Access Points or Telecentre Movement in Bangladesh

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Mapping Telecentre Initiatives

ICTs are not luxury anymore for many remote villages in Bangladesh, thanks to a handful of initiatives, which are getting ground through different models of telecentre. As the individual telecentre practitioners are working in isolation and many mainstream NGOs are going to launch telecentres following the existing models it was an imperative to coordinate these initiatives. Telecentre movement in Bangladesh has been initiated by Development Research Network (D.Net) in August 2006 with a successful International Workshop on Building Telecentre Family in Bangladesh: A workshop for Social Entrepreneurs and Practitioners, held in Rangpur. D.Net joined hands with two other organizations, namely Bangladesh National Network for Radio Communication (BNNRC) and Yong Power for Social Action (YPSA) to organize this workshop, which was supported by telecentre.org and UNDP Bangladesh. It was also a collaborative initiative of Global Knowledge Partnership (GKP). Fifty-seven organizations participated in the workshop to get hands-on idea about why and how to build telecentres and share experiences. All telecentre practitioners came under a single roof for the first time to talk about Mission 2011, which is about building telecentre in every village by the 40th anniversary of Bangladesh's independence.

As many organizations and individuals are ready to launch telecentre in their own locations, it is important to map current telecentre initiatives and offer the new comers a wide choice of alternatives in terms of ownership, technology, focus, services and sustainability models. In this paper an attempt has been made to make a brief presentation of those initiatives. It is to be noted that information presented here may be incomplete and it is perceived that this would be a living document, where everybody will have scope to improve the description through on-line editing.

Gonokendra: Centre for Community Development

Dhaka Ahsania Mission launched first community learning centre, locally known as Gonokendra, in 1987. The centre is meant for lifelong learning and community development. There are more than 100 Gonokendras across the country, of which five are ICT-based. As the objectives of the centres were sharing knowledge and information, they started with traditional tools. Each of the centres is functioning as a community-based information centre of local GO-NGO extension departments. People can come to the centres to read newspapers and exchange experience, learn from success stories, get information about innovations, which can improve their livelihoods. A few centres started using computer for interactive information communication. However, these centres do not have any Internet connection.

Dhaka Ahsania Mission (DAM) supports these centres by supplying books, newspapers, newsletters, magazines, booklets, posters, wall magazines, etc. depending on level of

literacy skills of the users. Basic and advanced educational programmes are being organized to cater the learning needs of local people. Linkages are being established by DAM to various other agencies to ensure access to other elements of better lives such as, health, sanitation, education, environment, credit and recreational services etc.. Ganokendra members participate in various social activities.

DAM is seriously considering graduation of these centres through integration of ICTs following D.Net's "Pallitathya Model". DAM is also starting collaboration with D.Net for developing digital content, which is needed by the rural community for improvement of their livelihood.

Amader Gram Learning Centre (AGLC): Community Database for Development

Amader gram project has established village communication, information and learning center in April 2001 in Bagerhat, (in South-west part of the country) on pilot basis. This Rural Information Center was designed to develop participatory monitoring and learning system at the village level. Accordingly, 10 Group leaders (women) have been trained to act as Information Service Providers ISP/Focal points. Those trained persons are women group members and held responsible for data preservation, analysis and dissemination.

Under the project five village information, monitoring and learning centers have equipment like computer, printer, telephone etc. There is one center for overall coordination and monitoring and 4 other sub-centers have been established by taking 5 villages in each group/cluster. The coordination center is based at Khulna City and the 4 sub-centers in selected spots; those are centrally placed within the villages.

The centers are primarily used as data reservoir containing all household data of the beneficiaries, basic information of their socio-economic status, the conditions of the society, and basic data on geography, culture, heritage, local resources and local governance issues. Not only be preserved, but also those data are updated, analyzed, discussed, shared and used by the trained group members. Group members share the data in their daily, weekly and monthly meetings, which give them scope of reflection on their improvement of livelihood status. Those data are accessible to the community people. It is helping the entrepreneurs (at micro-level) by providing market information and promoting their products in the markets outside of their locality. Not only serving as a resource database, the project is creating opportunity for a large number of unemployed youth groups in computer application, training and services. This is released their time for productive purposes. The database also created a non-profit market opportunity by the user group like university professionals, researchers, and by the international/local institutes.

Such a center has got immense potential to be used in upgrading community education. It will be handed over to the selected teachers and learners who will facilitate the community people to greater use of information, knowledge and educational inputs. AG has planned to replicate this center in other areas of the country, after its pilot phase. Such an effort may provide some effective input to the coordinated poverty alleviation efforts of Govt and NGOs in the country.

AGLC has been showcasing in DFID (Knowledge Bank) as a successful ICT initiatives at the grassroots level. This was presented as a successful case of Grassroots ICT model in the Multistakeholder Gathering workshop Bridging the Digital Divide, held in October 2002 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia which was organized by World Economic Forum (WEF), ICT4D Platform during WSIS2003 in Geneva (sponsored by SDC) and in 2005 in Tunis (sponsored by UNDP).

Internet Learning Centre: School Based Telecentre

Relief International-School Online initiated this programme with research in 2003. The centres have been launched in 2005. Currently 27 Internet learning Centres (ILCs) are in operation across Bangladesh, majority of which (16) are located in Chittagong. Dhaka hosts 4, Comilla hosts 3, Jessore hosts 2, Khulna and Rajshahi each hosts one such 'telecentres'.

Each ILC is equipped with 5- 10 computers with UPS for each, one long-backup IPS, one scanner and one digital camera. Connectivity varies from location to location. In some places ILCs are equipped with broad-band Internet connections and others have dial-up connectivity. The ILCs are located in Upazilla headquarters.

ILC facilities are available to student throughout the school-day. ILCs offer education and training programme for school children. The teachers also receive required skill training. The curriculum followed in the education and training programme is developed by global programme. The curriculum emphasizes on project and collaboration-based learning. The Internet facilitates communication, collaboration and sharing with other students. Students can communicate with fellow student in ILCs located in other places and also countries. The Internet is also used as a source of information.

A small amount is generally charged for membership of the ILC. The money collected from the membership fees are spent for recurring expenditure. It is not although clear how community access is ensured in these ILCs.

The data is not available on how any students, teachers and community people have benefited from the ILCs.

The ILCs are jointly owned by the RI-ISO and school teachers. Again the teachers' involvement in terms of ownership needs clarification. The information about the time of completion of project phase is also not available at this point of time and how the ILCs will continue functioning after the project period.

Youth Community Multimedia Centre (YCMC)

YCMC is located in Sitakund Upazilla of Chittagong district. Young Power in Social Action (YPSA) launched the centre in 2005.

The centre is well equipped with computers with CD-ROM, pocket PC, digital video camera, audio recorder, cassette playback, cable TV, cable radio and DVD-players. The centre also uses loudspeakers to disseminate useful information to the community. Bulletin boards are also used for information dissemination. The centre is connected with dial-up Internet connectivity.

The target group of the YCMC is local youth. The local community participates in the management and administration of the CMC through an autonomous body and helps decision making of the centre.

Outreach of the YCMC is ensured through traditional media, like street theatre and group meeting. These traditional communication tools are used for information dissemination and raising community awareness on various important issues. Weekly movie show and cultural events attract community youth to the centre.

In-built ethnographic action research helps documenting project learning and linking it back to the project's plan and activities.

The project is sponsored by UNESCO. The YCMC generates income through commercial computer training, photocopy, printing, and videography for financial sustainability. It is although not clear how the centre will continue after the project period.

RTC (Rural Technology Centre)

As an innovative intervention in rural appropriate technology transfer Practical Action Bangladesh established two Rural Technology Center (RTC) one in Rajoir, Madaripur and the other in Sarishabari, Jamalpur in 2006. RTC fulfills its institutional mandate to make available affordable and appropriate technologies for accessing information and communication technology services. RTC took initiatives to engage and promote appropriate rural technologies effective in meeting the basic scientific needs of the rural population and improving their livelihoods. The centre upgrades traditional technologies and adapt new technologies to make it more diversified and versatile to meet rural needs. The RTC manages and maintains library with two bookshelves to preserve printed technology materials for beneficiaries and extension workers. They also maintain a computer and land phone with internet connection which provides information and technology services for farmers, traders, entrepreneurs and other clients. A photocopier in RTC helps clients to make copies of his/her selected technology papers on payment. Height weight measurement tools and charts are available in RTC. Essential agro-processing equipments such as grain moisture meter, refract meter, pH meter, salinometer, acid titration set, spice grinder, micro-wave oven, milk cream separator, digital thermometer, blender, mixing tank, sealing machine, heat gum etc. are available in RTC for demonstration and use to prepare pickle, chutney, jam, jelly, chanachur, spices powder etc. on rental/payment. RTC also provides employment information for local unemployed youths, including educated youth from poor families, displaced workers, and the underemployed. RTC is mainly a self sustained private facility which helps to increase the growth of village economy.

GHAT: Rural ICT centre (RIC)

The RIC is run by DEN (Digital equity Network) with its own investment and support from KATALYST, a multi-donor consortium working in Bangladesh. Three RICs, located in Kahalu, Panchbibi and Shibganj of Bogra district, were launched in 2006. A Rural ICT Centre is a physical infrastructure with basic ICT facilities (phone, computers, printer, scanner, internet connectivity, digital camera etc.). All three centres are located in Upazilla headquarters.

The motto of this model is developing and promoting ICT services to meet information and advisory needs of micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in Rural Bangladesh. The market research for this model was conducted by D.Net and MART, India. As a result, content based information service received attention. RICs disseminate business information for the local businesses in selected sectors (e.g., poultry, fisheries, potato etc) that are dominant in the localities. The centre is also a source of various social, health-related, education development, and government information.

Each RIC is equipped with 4 computers, 1 colour printer, 1 scanner and 3 digital cameras.

The data on users particularly number of entrepreneurs who received business information is not yet available in public domain. Similarly, data on number of users of various ancillary services like photography, photocopy, e-mail, composing, Internet browsing are also not available.

Financial part of RICs, particularly income of the RICs per month and operating costs as well as one time investment is not published yet.

Community Information Centre (CIC): A Profit-oriented Model

The CIC model is initiated by Grameen Phone, the largest telecom operator in Bangladesh. The first 16 CICs were launched in February 2006 as a pilot project in different parts of the country. Of them, four each were set up in Sylhet, Rajshahi and Khulna divisions and two each in Dhaka and Chittagong divisions. In May 2006, another 10 CICs were established, of which 7 in Chittagong, 2 in Dhaka and one in Rajshahi divisions.

The Community Information Centres (CICs) are equipped with at least one computer, a printer, a scanner, a web cam and an EDGE-enabled modem to access the Internet using the EDGE connectivity.

The CICs are fully owned by local entrepreneurs with a minimum investment of BDT 80000. The CICs are run as a franchise of Grameen Phone.

The CICs help rural people to stay in touch with their friends and relatives living abroad using email, fax and instant messaging.

Presently, access to passport forms, birth and death certificate forms and other related information are available through the Government websites. Market prices of agricultural produce are also available through the website of the Agricultural Extension Department. The CICs also help students and professionals for gathering reports and news suiting their requirements. Information relating to local and foreign job search sites is available at the centres. Grameen Phone has a plan to launch 60000 CIC across the country. It is also planning to use 'Jeeon-IKB', the CD-ROM based livelihood digital content, developed by D.Net.

'Pallitathya Kendra': Focusing Access to Information for Poverty Alleviation

D.Net conceived the idea of 'Pallitathya' in 2001 with a research on relationship of ICTs and poverty alleviation started in 2001. The research established that access to livelihood information could improve livelihood of the poor. In the second phase of the research, the D.Net conducted a detailed research on identification of information needs of the rural poor and their current information-seeking pattern. Based on the needs assessment, D.Net found that while traditional channels are important and un-replaceable by ICTs, it still can play a critical role in allowing access to many livelihood information and knowledge. As there was no tailor-made digital content for the rural people, D.Net started developing content in nine areas of livelihood. This content is now more than 30000 pages and packaged in "Jeeon-IKB" - information and knowledge base for the rural community.

D.Net established four 'Pallitathya Kendra' in 2005 in four remote villages of Bangladesh, located in Nilphamari, Netrokona, Noakhali and Bagerhat on a pilot basis to capture the process of learning and replication. D.Net devised a number of innovative mechanisms to make livelihood information accessible to the poor rural community people. The carefully crafted mechanisms through established "Pallitathya Kendra" [Rural Information Centre, RIC] allowed D.Net team to reach particularly women and people with various handicaps who seldom go outside their homes. The innovations and critical elements of the project were:

Focus on needs of the poor, rather than focus on the technology, thus D.Net identified information needs and other livelihood needs through participatory research

Focus on 'no exclusion' policy, so that rural community can think of the RICs for all, this policy was possible to implement for two specific design elements: as a vast share of rural community is illiterate, the concept of "infomediary" [information intermediary, a human interface between knowledge-base and rural illiterate people] could allow these group to get the benefit of technology for getting solution to their livelihood problems; as women have limited mobility due to social taboo and people with physical handicap can seldom visit the RICs, the concept of 'mobile lady' [a female information worker with a cell phone connected with a help- desk of experts on various livelihood topics, the service is called help line] could allow D.Net team reach every body in a village.

Focus on 'no refusal policy', so that rural community can rely that whatever problem they have, if they come to the RIC, they will get definitely an advice. It was possible to

implement this policy thanks to the concept of ‘combination of computer based knowledge base and help line. Once a villager calls to the help desk, the reply is guaranteed, either immediately, or after a reasonable time [depends on complexity of problem, experts collect answers and respond through mobile, e-mail, letter, whatever feasible].

Focus on local language demand-driven content, which is capable to respond to the livelihood problems of the villagers. With the support of IDRC and two other institutions D.Net was able to develop significant volume of content, which was used in the RICs. This browser-based IKB (information and knowledge base) is going to be used by a huge number of institutions.

Combination of core information service and ancillary services, which complementary in nature rather conflicting in terms of skills requirement of the infomediary. Such approach allowed the RICs to earn money.

Focus on community relationship and inspiration of local institutions. As a research project, the tasks of D.Net were to test various approaches for the right of survival. Involvement and inspiration of local institutions brought new idea about sustainability: both financial and social. The research proved that if local institution braces the concept and community see benefits, then they take care of both financial and social sustainability.

Each of the ‘Pallitathya Kendras’ have 3 computers, 2-3 mobile phones, UPS and power back up, digital camera, soil test kits, nebuliser for rent by the local doctors, weighing machine, the livelihood content ‘Jeeon-IKB’. The centres are connected to the Internet through Grameen Phone’s network and EDGE technology.

D.Net’s core competence is now in content development, ‘infomediary training’, technical and functional know-how, networking service and foremost, the Help Line, for which D.Net received Global Gender and ICT Award in 2005 in WSIS.

D.Net Pallitathya programme is run with support from IDRC, Manusher Jonno, Research Initiative, Bangladesh (RIB) and its own resources, earned from donations and research income.

Constraints/ Challenges

The major constraints for telecentres in Bangladesh can be classified as technical constraints and sustainability problem. Electricity has become a big issue as power supply situation has been deteriorated alarmingly and there is no hope for recovery at least in next two years. Power-back up systems is available but that makes the operations of the centres very costly, as a result financial viability is becoming vulnerable.

The second challenge is reliable connectivity. It is true that Internet can be accessed from most of the villages thanks to the extensive mobile phone network in the country. However, bandwidth is not adequate for advanced applications and to build up cost-effective solution for the poor groups.

Secured infrastructure is another challenge. If the government infrastructure, such as Union Parishad building, post office etc. could be used then it could ensure secured and cost-effective infrastructure for the end users.

It is important to note that financial viability is possible to achieve, but in that case the access to information services, which is the main attraction of the telecentres, will be restricted for the poorest part of the rural community. Here comes the role of the government and development partners, who can provide infrastructure, connectivity and power supply. The rest can be taken care of by the local community.

Building Telecentre Network

Building Telecentre Network is very essential for a number of fundamental reasons. Firstly, avoiding establishment of more than one telecentre in one village, at least at the initial stage. One should understand that it is not micro credit that many MFIs can survive in parallel. Secondly, supplying and collecting digital livelihood content is a continuous process and a costly proposition. It is quite possible to build partnership for content development and update. Thirdly, capacity building of the telecentre workers is one of the most critical issues for success of the telecentres. It is not possible to train 300,000 telecentre workers in next five years by a single organisation. Finally, resource mobilisation is important for establishment of telecentres, which will come from individual entrepreneurs, local organisations, government, private sector, development partners. Such resource mobilisation is not possible by a single organisation again. Mission 2007 is a very good example to learn how all stakeholders came together for building a new India through establishment of 600,000 telecentres in all villages of India.

Source: <http://bangladeshictpolicy.bytesforall.net/> 02/10/2007