

## Projects that can serve as guideposts for UNDP project development -1: Decentralised governance

ICT-enabled decentralisation: The *Ente Gramam* and *e-krishi* projects of the Kerala State IT Mission

**Short Description:** *Ente Gramam* is a project of the Kerala State IT Mission under which community web portals, with contextually appropriate, locally generated content, have been developed in over 100 *Gram Panchayats* and 10 Municipalities, in the state of Kerala<sup>1</sup>. The project was initiated in 2007, with funding from the UNESCO. The community web portals developed under the project act as a 'notice-board' for local self government institutions to communicate local developmental planning decisions, dates of public meetings, administrative matters pertaining to service delivery etc. to the local community, in the local language. Additionally, the portals also function as online spaces for sharing local news and announcements of community events, job postings for skilled labourers and interactions between citizens and local self-government functionaries. Finally, the portals also have sections where community generated content on local histories, heritage sites and/or bio-diversity and local ecology can be uploaded (of course, after a process of editing and moderation).

In the initial period, the content generation for the portals was done by selecting and training content facilitators from the local communities, who were paid for this work. This content was uploaded on the portals after it was edited and finalised by *Ente Gramam* project staff of the Kerala State IT Mission. When the project matured and the UNESCO funding came to an end in 2008, the Government of Kerala issued an order permitting local self-government institutions to earmark funding for the web portals set up under the project. When local governments started funding the web portals developed for their community, they passed on the content generation responsibilities to the entrepreneurs running the local *Akshaya*<sup>2</sup> centres in these communities. Today, the *Akshaya* entrepreneurs are engaged in content generation and are financially remunerated by the local government institutions for this service. The *Ente Gramam* project staff continue to provide support services for content editing and uploading. Thus, *Ente Gramam* has evolved into an entirely decentralised informational initiative – funded by local government institutions, developed and maintained by members of the local community and responsive to local information needs.

*E-krishi*<sup>3</sup> is another project of the Kerala State IT Mission, under which a web platform has been set up, to address the existing gaps in agricultural information flows from State agencies to farmers, and also assist farmers in agri-marketing. *E-krishi*'s primary aim is to use ICTs to improve the bargaining capacity of farmers and provide inputs that can enable better decision-making and improved yields for farmers. Therefore, the *E-Krishi* web space has been created out of the combination of three integrated modules: a platform for e-commerce, an informational platform for providing expert advice on cropping and agri-market highlights; and a platform for communication, allowing farmer-to-farmer interactions and direct communication between farmers and agricultural institutions. In this case also, the *Akshaya* centres in the villages serve as the coordinating centres – as they are closely involved in generating data on the local agricultural profile to ensure the

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- 1 Statistics are based on a presentation made by a project staff member of *Ente Gramam* to IT for Change, in May 2012. The local language web portals themselves, can be accessed at <http://kannur.entegramam.gov.in/index.php> and [http://kannur.entegramam.gov.in/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=3460&Itemid=94](http://kannur.entegramam.gov.in/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=3460&Itemid=94) Retrieved 29 July 2012.
  - 2 *Akshaya* centres are single window service delivery centres set up the Kerala State Government, in 2002 – the state has set up one *Akshaya* centre for every 1000 households. For more details, see <http://www.akshaya.kerala.gov.in/index.php/history> Retrieved 28 July 2012
  - 3 See <http://e-krishi.org/> Retrieved 29 July 2012.

relevance of agricultural information on the portal, and in familiarising local farmers with the benefits of registering on the *E-krishi* platform (a free service). To motivate farmers to avail of the services provided under *E-krishi*, *Bhoomi*<sup>4</sup> clubs have been set up in each *panchayat* with the close involvement of *panchayat* members, farmers' groups and members of women's self help groups. Of course, there are some operational challenges<sup>5</sup>, such as providing quality assurance to buyers who are trading on the e-commerce platform, enhancing women's participation in a context where most farmers are male, etc. which are yet to be fully resolved. In spite of these challenges, *E-krishi* has certainly succeeded in demonstrating the potential offered by web platforms for enabling contextually relevant, decentralised information flows from state agencies to citizens, especially with respect to the mandatory development communication obligations of line departments.

**Reasons for selection:** *Ente Gramam* demonstrates the possibilities offered by ICTs, in facilitating strong communication linkages between local government institutions and communities. A web portal allows for asynchronous communication, easy archiving and innovative possibilities of posting interlinked announcements, agendas and discussions pertaining to local developmental planning processes and public consultations. In a context where internet penetration is low, the involvement of the State's single window service delivery centres (the *Akshaya* centres) in the web portal operations is a good strategy as this helps in generating more publicity for the community web portal, and encourages more community members to access the portal (either directly, or through the operators of the telecentres). Additionally, *Ente Gramam* offers a striking example of how an interactive online space, with contextual content, can deeply enrich the local public sphere. *Ente Gramam's* community-centred design (with emphasis on a locally-owned, locally-managed web portal oriented to local informational needs) has not only opened up a new channel for informational flows between local government agencies and citizens, but also enabled the expression of a shared sense of community – by providing an avenue for community members to share nuggets of local history, achievements of community members and matters of 'local' interest. Enabling the expression of this shared sense of community is crucial for communities to imbibe the spirit of decentralisation.

The other web platform centred project of the Kerala State IT Mission, *E-krishi*, demonstrates the possibilities of using web portals for the effective decentralisation of informational outreach and support services of line departments. Specifically, *E-krishi* addresses a long-standing problem in the agricultural department's extension activities - the inability to offer an effective decentralised service that addresses the entire range of information needs and support needs of farmers – right from cropping and weather forecast information, to information about market linkages, and agri-marketing. As there are a plethora of agricultural agencies devoted to specialised areas of agricultural research and support services, web based platforms are useful, as a farmer may need the services/support is then able to access any of them, at various points of time in the crop cycle. *E-krishi* addresses this need through its communication platforms that enables farmers to interact with agricultural experts from various State agencies.

As in the case of *Ente Gramam*, the involvement of *Akshaya* centres in the implementation of *E-krishi* is an effective strategy for motivating and facilitating communities to access a web-based information and support service in a context where internet penetration is low. Moreover, the creation of off-line support groups (such as the *Bhoomi* clubs in the case of *E-krishi*) for motivating communities to access a digitised service, is also a move worth emulating, in the design of web based information and support service portals.

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4 *Bhoomi* clubs are envisioned as farmers' associations at the *gram panchayat* level that can support the implementation of the *E-krishi* initiative. Their membership is drawn from local farmers, *gram panchayat* members and women's Self Help Groups. *Bhoomi* clubs meet periodically to brainstorm on various aspects pertaining to the *E-krishi* platform as well as assess the training and capacity-building requirements of local farmers.

5 See IT for Change (2008), *Akshaya and e-krishi*, [http://www.itforchange.net/Akshaya\\_e-krishi](http://www.itforchange.net/Akshaya_e-krishi), for a discussion on *E-krishi* including some operational changes. Retrieved 29 July 2012.

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## Digital systems for streamlining decentralised plan formulation and monitoring: The case of *Sulekha*

**Short Description:** *Sulekha*(<http://plan.lsgkerala.gov.in/>) is a digital system for streamlining the plan formulation, appraisal and approval, and monitoring the plans of local governance bodies. This system was designed in 2002, by the Information Kerala Mission – a State agency that aims at employing the potential offered by ICTs, for strengthening governance. The *Sulekha* system was developed in response to the need for designing new planning, budgeting and reporting processes of local bodies across Kerala, when the State Government decided to directly transfer 40 percent of State funds to the local bodies (*gram panchayats*, *taluk panchayats*, *zilla panchayats* and urban local bodies) at the start of the ninth Five Year Plan, as part of its financial decentralisation measures. The *Sulekha* digital system allows each local body to enter the details of each plan formulated by it, including details of: the sector, sub-sector and micro-sector to which the plan corresponds; the scope of the planned project including time-line and financials, beneficiary details, resource flows, physical target measurements, asset details and approvals by the *panchayat* community. *Sulekha* uses an open source software platform that supports local language content.

Before uploading the plans on *Sulekha*, each local body has to get them approved by the Technical Advisory Committee and the District Planning Committee, as required by local body plan processing regulations in the state. Prior to digitisation, this was a time-consuming process especially for the *Gram Panchayats*, as the plans were manually transferred to the Technical Advisory Committee and the District Planning Committee for approval. After *Sulekha* has been set up, this process has been sped up as the plans are prepared digitally, and then transferred using a combination of a CD-courier method, and data transfer over a dial-up, through a virtual private network (VPN). The *Sulekha* software also classifies the uploaded plans by a unique ID based on sector, sub-sector and micro-sector. This enables comprehensive tracking of local plans across the state. Under *Sulekha*, a database of legacy plan data has also been created that enables the State Government to plan its budgetary allocations to *panchayats*. The data uploaded on the *Sulekha* software is located on a central server, and is published annually on the website of the Department of Local Self Governance for public scrutiny.

**Reason for selection:** *Sulekha* has reduced bottlenecks in decentralised planning, especially those that arise due to the long processing time for approvals of the plans formulated by local bodies. *Sulekha* also offers the potential for becoming a system that can be tied to social audit processes of local bodies – already, steps are being taken to make local body plans public on a monthly basis and ensure that local bodies comply with the requirement of entering on the *Sulekha* platform, details of physical progress towards set targets for monitoring purposes.

The *Sulekha* experience also demonstrates the importance of paying attention to the social context while designing e-governance solutions. In Kerala, the State has historically strengthened the financial and decision-making autonomy of local bodies. In another context where decentralisation of governance has not been effectively implemented, such an initiative may not be as successful.

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