

Projects that can serve as guideposts for UNDP project development -4: Making a difference to the persistently excluded and marginalised sections

Information and networks for community-based strategies towards empowerment:
The case of *Kutch Nav Nirman Abhiyan*

Short Description: *The Kutch Nav Nirman Abhiyan (<http://www.kutchabhiyan.org/>) has managed a fine balance between the twin imperatives of standardisation and contextualisation that any large scale developmental intervention attempting to address the needs of marginalised groups across a wide geographical area, has to contend with.*

Abhiyan is a network of 38 non-profit organisations (as of October 2011) whose stated objective is to “synergise human knowledge, physical and financial resources and to collaborate towards a Kutch governed by community initiatives, (and which) encourages self help development, especially with marginalised sections; integrates traditional wisdom with new technologies; and innovates and balances issues of human rights with human responsibilities”¹. The organisations within the network represent an expanse of development work covering various domains such as education, women's empowerment, natural resource management etc., preserving their own unique identity yet working collectively when required through the platform of *Abhiyan*. For the day to day functioning of the network, the member organisations elect a Governing Board.

The network was established in 1998, as a response to the Kandla cyclone, for ensuring better coordination and collaboration between NGOs, in working with government and donor agencies for the post-cyclone relief and rehabilitation efforts. An important watershed in the evolution of *Abhiyan's* work was the 2001 earthquake in Gujarat – when it was summoned to assist in the post-earthquake relief and rehabilitative measures. The members of *Abhiyan* then realised that one of the fundamental requirements for any intervention, was the need for real time interventions and generation of local data pertaining to the region. To address this need, *Abhiyan* started its *Setu* (bridge) programme. *Abhiyan* set up 22 *Setu* centres reaching out to 404 villages across the Kutch region, to ensure the effective decentralisation of relief and rehabilitation management. During this period, *Setus* were involved in activities such as data collection of individual households, assessment of seismic safety features in the housing and infrastructure constructions. This was followed by their monitoring, policy feedback regarding nature of settlements (*in situ* vs relocation), grievance redressal, undertaking anti-corruption campaigns, co-ordinating with 66 NGOs on various tasks, creating support funds for vulnerable families and 'innovation / bridge' funds, identifying youth from *Setu* villages for non-masonry skill up-gradation training in urban construction practices, etc. When the *Setu* centres began sending in local data to the central office, it became necessary to develop a MIS to process the large number of data-sets quickly, in a meaningful way. When efforts to contract out the development of the MIS to a corporate agency turned out to be unsatisfactory, *Abhiyan* set up the K-Link programme in order to: (1) Provide a live platform to bring the power of ICTs in rural development and integrate ICTs with rural development and empowerment and (2) Bridge the technology gaps between corporate “haves” and non-profit “have-nots”.

After the completion of the relief efforts, *Setu* centres continued their operations in the areas where local communities demonstrated their interest in the continued functioning of these centres. Thus, they slowly evolved into village level information and facilitation centres engaged in community mobilisation and facilitation for equitable and socially just development and governance at the local level. Currently, there are 18 *Setu* centres reaching out to 340 villages in Kutch district.

¹ *Abhiyan*, 2007.

All the *Setu* centres share the mandates of strengthening the *gram panchayats* in the cluster of villages served by them, organising and working for the rights of marginalised groups engaged in traditional occupations, and using information technology to set up a E-self-governance system in the villages in the cluster.

However, the specific strategies the centres undertake are extremely contextualised. Every *Setu* is unique in terms of the specialised nature of work it might undertake- for example, one *Setu* centre works with communities who are traditionally involved in cattle breeding in the north of the district, another with fisher-folk in the south, a third with saltpan workers in the east and some others with dry land farmers and craft artisans. The K-Link programme (that initially supported *Abhiyan's* database management for the post-earthquake relief efforts) has continued to support the *Setu* centres in their efforts.

K-Link's role in the current context is to support *Setus* in their efforts to help communities realise the power of ICTs in rural development – especially in areas such as strengthening local governance and development planning.

Setus conduct village level data surveys to regularly update information pertaining to the village, such as available infrastructure, etc. All *Setus* have a local database in which these data-sets are entered. Secondary government related information pertaining to new schemes is collected manually from government departments, and then entered into this database to which all *Setus* have access. K-Link supports the *Setus* with data entry into a single networked database, and its maintenance. The information on this networked database is thereafter shared with other NGOs and the government pro-actively. K-Link has also supported the efforts of *Setu* centres in setting up a Local Government Support System (LGSS), based on consolidation of village level information generated through GIS mapping of the villages along with data collection at the household and village level, by trained staff from *Abhiyan* and the *Panchayat* members. Under LGSS, this information has been centrally consolidated through K-Link. An user friendly online interface which allows data manipulation and pictorial representation of data, has also been created for the *Panchayat* members. *Panchayat* members have been trained in accessing this system, and in using social networking applications and in accessing websites for information – all this is oriented towards building the capacities of local government elected representatives.

Another critical programme of *Abhiyan* is *Mahiti Mitra* – under which decentralised rural kiosks have been set up, to meet the informational and service needs of communities at the last mile. Even in the case of *Mahiti Mitra*, *Abhiyan* has relied on the technical services of K-Link. It has successfully established a post of the District Liaising Officer, at the district administration office, by mutual agreement. The officer is sent the queries and grievances received by the *Mahiti Mitras* and s/he has the responsibility of following it up with the respective departments. Also, the officer is required to collect information from 30 departments of the government, which are then digitised and made available for distribution through the *Mahiti Mitras*. The *Setus* are in charge of mobilising the community, conducting needs assessment studies and monitoring the impact of the *Mahiti Mitra* initiative. The *Mahiti Mitra* space has been clearly separated from the *Setu* space, as *Abhiyan* makes a clear distinction between the role of the two centres. While *Setu* plays the role of a constant facilitator, the *Mahiti Mitras* are purely for service and information provisioning in the context of grievance redressal. *Mahiti Mitras* have enabled local communities in acquiring timely information about local government schemes and services.

Additionally, *Abhiyan* creates and sponsors institutions, such as the *Hunnarshala*, for documenting traditional wisdom relating to construction technology and innovations; and *Khamir*, for promoting and revitalising local art, craft and heritage.

In all aspects of its work, *Abhiyan* promotes the spirit of decentralised networking and collaboration. This is very clearly visible in the *Setu* programme. *Setu* centres share a support

structure and overall vision, but are extremely context-specific in their strategies and also independently engage in local action, forming their own networks outside *Abhiyan*. For example, the Bhadreshwar *Setu*, which works with fishing communities, has set up the *Machimar Adhikar Sangharsh Sangathan* (MASS) (which is now a registered trade union), by helping the fisher-folk organise themselves with the support of other member organisations such as *Kutch Mahila Vikas Sanghatan* (KMVS) and *Yusuf Maherali Centre* (YMC). MASS' own strategy & functional structure are independently determined and it also networks with other fish-workers' groups across the country. Similarly, the K-Link programme offers its services to a wide variety of clients and like the other autonomous programmes of *Abhiyan*. It is expected to be registered shortly and function independently.

Reason for selection: The *Abhiyan* experience demonstrates how the discretionary use of the centralising tendencies of technology, is crucial for the success of ICT-enabled developmental interventions. This is best exemplified in the case of the *Setu* programme – where the the centralised technical support services and information system complements the context-specific, decentralised strategies of *Setu* centres, without stifling local-level creative collaborations. Secondly, *Abhiyan's* K-Link programme provides a number of insights for designing technical support and technological solutions for development interventions.

Finally, *Abhiyan* has managed to demonstrate one possibility for constructing decentralised, bottom-up collaborative networks breaking away from development work in silos.

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