Innovative Project Proposals – 1: Decentralised governance

Moving beyond capacity building mode to ICT-based resource support system for elected representatives

Context: Decentralisation has been seen as the cure of many an ills of governance systems in India. Considerable devolution of power has taken place, and PRIs are out of the early experimental phase in most places. However, the capacities of elected representatives (ERs) still remains an area of great concern. Decentralisation has rightly aimed at extensive inclusion of ERs from the weaker sections, like SCs, STs and women. Due to reservation quotas there is also a high turnover of ERs. These contexts have further accentuated the 'capacity' problem. The government has spent a lot of energy and resources for capacity building efforts, and these have had an impact. However, traditional modes of capacity building have their limitations. For instance, they are supply side driven, and mostly one-off, trainings; information is not made available when required and in a locally contextual form; learning is not sustained and strengthened, because there are no avenues of continued learning available between capacity-building sessions, and much of it gets lost; learning is one-way, top-down, and ERs do not have good opportunities to contribute their 'knowledge' and experience, and engage in peer-learning processes, and so on. It is important to explore how ICTs can help devise new capacity building and resource systems for ERs.

The proposed project: The proposed pilot project seeks to make a clear shift from a capacity-building approach to a demand-driven resource support approach, whereby a set of simple ICTs will be used to provide a 360 degree all- and any-time learning environment.

The key premises of the project are that adult learning, especially concerning complex and contextual issues like fulfilling governance responsibility, in a very dynamic and unpredictable environment, is best done through a demand-based approach. Further, such learning is most useful if it employs a constructive approach, whereby learners contribute as much as they take. Quoting a definition of constructivism is very relevant here, and shows how well it captures the needs and context of learning by ERs .

Constructivism is basically a theory -- based on observation and scientific study -- about how people learn. It says that people construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world, through experiencing things and reflecting on those experiences. When we encounter something new, we have to reconcile it with our previous ideas and experience, maybe changing what we believe, or maybe discarding the new information as irrelevant. In any case, we are active creators of our own knowledge. To do this, we must ask questions, explore, and assess what we know.[1]

Further, ERs are relatively empowered persons, or are receiving training to be empowered in order to be able to fulfill very demanding political roles. They can learn best through peer-to-peer, horizontal networks. They also have a great hunger for information and knowledge because they know how much it can immediately add to their 'power', given that they already nominally are in an important community leadership role. Also, there is an important need for learning resources to be locally relevant, and, if possible, locally produced.

ICTs enable easy on-demand information support. ICTs can also be used to set up peer-to-peer networks where learners use locally developed resources to learn as well as contribute. Such networks can become mutual support systems. Inexpensive personal devices are available now a

1 http://www.thirteen.org/edonline/concept2class/constructivism/index.html

days through which ERs can learn on their own time, and at their own pace, using locally made contextual videos. Finally, as ERs develop their capacities, they should have the necessary resource support to be able to fulfill their governance roles. ICTs are again immensely useful here, as they provide access to both governance related information and local community information, that can help in micro-planning.

The proposed ***ICT based resource support system for ERs*** will have the following components;

1. On-demand contextual resource support through ICT means (like a helpline, and assisted email interaction, through the assistance of a community information centre worker),
2. Peer-to-peer learning platforms through ICT-based networking among ERs in a local region (possibly, a district), using sms based networks, participatory videos, voice-based online community messages accessed through mobile phones (on *CGnet Swara* model[2]) etc.
3. Personal learning using locally made contextual videos, shared through USB drives, and accessed on inexpensive personal devices (cheap tablets, like *Akash*, which can be shared on a library system basis)
4. Decision support systems; complete online (assisted or direct) access to governance information and local information, including locally generated information, household surveys, local GIS mapping etc, which enables ERs to do micro-planning.

The pilot project can either leverage the ICT resources of MNREGA *Rajiv Sewa Kendras* that are being set up, or, for the sake of extensive experimentation required during the project, set up ICT and information centres specifically for the project, Later, the learning from the pilot project can be upscaled along with Seva Kendra project, and/or other community ICT/ information centre projects.

***Project Outputs*:**

1) ICT-enabled resource support system is available to ERs in the project area with components as mentioned in the project description.
2) ERs are able to access information and resource support when required, including through helplines, peer-to-peer networks and personal devices, creating a continued learning environment;
3) ERs networks help form vibrant communities focusing on local governance issues, which can connect at local, regional as well higher levels depending on factors like language, shared cultures etc;
4) ERs are enabled to carry on their governance responsibilities aided by decision support systems, and access to required information (including local community information, which helps micro-planning).

Project Outcomes:

1) ERs, including from weaker sections, are able to carry out their governance responsibilities in a more effective manner.
2) A model for ongoing resource support to ERs is developed that will be proposed for scaling up as a state and/or national-level models, to complement existing efforts at capacity building of ERs.

Partner organisations: The project should use partner organisations that are already working with ERs, preferable ERs federations. It is not necessary that these organisations should have worked with ICTs, but, they must be rather eager to do so, and the overall project idea should appeal to them.

Estimated cost of proposed project activity: This really depends on how large a coverage is proposed for the pilot project. Too small a coverage does not provide the significant 'network effect' involved in almost all elements of the project; too large an area will mean difficulty in focused project activity, in which a lot of initial intensive work, including experimentation, will be involved.

2 See the story at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/8617943.stm .

However, as a rough estimate, if the project covers about 10 contiguous panchayats, and does not depend on MNERGA *Sewa Kendras'* infrastructure, about 1.5 crore rupees over a 3 year period may be required.