

## Innovative Project Proposals – 3: Implementing rights based programmes and access to entitlements

### ICTs for Community Empowerment and Action by Youth

**Context:** Since independence it has been the hope and expectation that the country's youth shall show a spirit of community-orientation and volunteerism towards the difficult task of building the nation and strengthening democracy. Many youth-based programmes and movements took shape in the early decades of independence. Many of these programmes have lost much of their steam today. Indeed, 'youth' is a very variable category with respect to passing time in terms of their behavioral, cultural, ideological, political and social orientations. Today, while the need for their engagement in saving and promoting our democracy is as acute as ever, the youth do not have any powerful new ideologies and platforms to organise around. This has often led to their energies being frittered on sectarian, or even criminal, purposes. Incidentally, there is today a high degree of political awareness among the youth, which, in absence of any viable means of purposeful expression, gets dissipated towards cynicism, which itself is corroding the social fabric of our democracy.

While new ICTs have caught our world by storm, their impact is doubtlessly the highest among the youth. This is even true for youth from among relatively marginalised sections, who may not have the same kind of access to a comprehensive range of ICTs as the better-off groups. Nonetheless, these youths, from relatively marginalised sections, still do considerable innovation with the ICT possibilities that are available to them, like the inexpensive mobiles. Importantly, so huge is this bottom-of-the-pyramid demand that the market has been responding rather aggressively, offering low cost Internet enabled mobiles and fast falling mobile Internet access rates, including through pre-paid packages. However, ICT use among youth is still mostly individualistic, and not oriented to community building and action. This is unfortunate because ICTs, by definition being tools of connection and collaboration, can indeed play a very important role in community building and action for democratic reform. For this, it is both important to reposition ICT use in a collaborative, community-oriented manner, and to explore the possibilities of developing new ICT-enabled platforms and incentives for organising youth and motivating them towards community volunteerism and action. ICTs here become both the tools of a new community action oriented pedagogy as well as means of networking and collaboration. Once so organised and motivated, youth groups can employ the same ICT tools for creating an awareness of rights and entitlements, engaging with institutions of governance, demanding transparency and accountability, and organising the needed action by the community.

**Project idea in brief:** A pilot project to develop a model *Youth ICT Hub* for leveraging the intense interest that new ICTs have evoked among the youth in order to energise youth movements in rural (and perhaps also urban) India for engaging with community building and action, especially in the areas of (1) ensuring access to rights and entitlements, (2) transparency and accountability, and (3) engagement with governance systems (especially, *panchayati raj* institutions).

The project will work with youth in a few village clusters, each of about 5-10 villages. Each village cluster will develop a *Youth ICT Hub* with a range of ICTs - ranging from sms based networks, to computer based learning systems, and radio and video based community media possibilities - that will be available for community use. Community animators will encourage and organise

community oriented ICT use, and gradually transfer most project activity to be conducted by youth volunteers.

Before going for direct activities in the chosen objective areas, the project will have to work on organising and incentivising the youth/ youth groups, and developing a community-based and community-oriented pedagogy covering community building, democracy and rights. ICTs will be used centrally for all these purposes. The ICT facilities will also be available to the youth for self-learning purposes.

Once the youth groups are motivated, organised and capacitated for the intended tasks, they will be involved with organising community level work and action. The nature of activity can broadly be described as follows;

1) Sms based news and information networks, including issues-based networks catering to different groups of people;

2) Community information centres where all the public information pertaining to a particular village (or set of villages) is sourced from all the relevant places, including from different government departments, and made available at one place to the community

3) The community information centre will also develop as the local information hub for all information about the village's demographics, history, culture, and of its contemporary social, cultural, economic and political life. The local youth will be expected to be as innovative as possible in this regard (for example, holding best 'local history story from your grandparents' contest in the school). Youth groups will do demographic surveys etc to build the needed information base, apart from relying on information available from different sources.

4) Local community media will be developed through sms/ telephone, audio and video technologies, developing local content, in a rather inexpensive and reiterative manner. (Youth are already quite adept at recording stuff on mobiles etc.; this inclination and skill can be systematically developed for community purposes. However, it requires a significantly different attitude to these new ICT-based 'media' technologies and processes than what is currently practiced, developing which will be an objective of the project.) Such local media will be used to develop a context and public discourse for proactive citizenship focusing on rights and entitlements.

5) ICT based informational and collaborative tools will be used for community monitoring and social audits, including, when possible, by plugging into official social audit and community monitoring processes. However, *suo moto* community monitoring and social audits will also be tried out. What will be attempted is to built the community's capability for continuous (as against currently practiced, one-off) monitoring and social audits, across different sectors (livelihood, health education, child rights etc). ***This should take initiatives like PAHELI further down from district level to the village community level, and make generation of development and governance information an ongoing process, rather than one off. Such a paradigm shift has to be explored to make communities themselves at the core of use of 'informational power' for gaining rights and entitlements.***

6) ICTs will be used to create awareness of rights and entitlements,, especially among the marginalised sections. ***The Youth ICT hub may also act as a 'My Rights Centre'<sup>1</sup> to create a point in the community that institutionally looks at governance purely from the citizen's end.***

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1 The name of such a rights-oriented centre can be even more evocative in some Indian languages, lile *Namma Haqqa Kendra*, in Kannada.

7) While decentralisation has taken place in terms of legal allocation of roles and responsibilities, there is an acute lack of capacity at the community level to exercise all the allocated governance roles. One of the most significant gaps is in the area of capacity for micro-planning, which hinders effective decentralisation. Youth groups will be trained to use local information databases (developed locally as well as sourced from outside) and GIS technologies to enable local people's planning. Data, figures and facts projected through audio/video technologies (using digital projectors) will be employed to make *gram sabhas* more effective.

**Project Outputs:**

- 1) Youth groups become active in systematically employing ICTs for community purposes
- 2) Extensive public information becomes available to the community, which includes properly organised community-based and community-generated information and knowledge;
- 3) Community media builds a local discourse on governance, rights and other issues;
- 4) Ongoing community monitoring and social audit of governance activities is made possible, which greatly improves governance outcomes, especially in the area of rights and entitlements;
- 5) Community youth improves its engagement with PRIs, through participation in micro-planning, *gram sabhas*, etc

**Project outcome:** A model for the application of ICTs in 'community empowerment' is developed in a manner that enhances the processes of local democracy, and socially and culturally enriches community life. Such a model is documented, and consolidated for upscaling with the support of convergent funding from different community level government programmes, all of which would benefit immensely. The benefits to these programmes will be in terms of community monitoring, social audit, local availability of public information and community linkages with institutions of governance.

**Estimated cost of proposed project activity;** If the pilot project is planned over 5 village clusters (each of 5-10 villages), over three years, we estimate a project budget of around Rs 1.3 crore rupees. We estimate that once the proposed model is up and running such *Youth ICT Hubs* can function at an estimated annual cost for about 1.5 lakh rupees a year. This cost should be considered small for benefits that these centres will provide through making available a host of ICT, informational and local community media services. These facilities can be employed for providing resource support for community monitoring, social audit and micro-planning and thus enabling improved access to rights and entitlements. Apart from strengthening local democracy, such extensive community-oriented use of ICTs can considerably enrich the cultural life of the community, especially of its youth.

**Partner organisations;** Such organisations that have a record for organising youth and community mobilisation, with an accent on governance reform. It is not necessary that these organisations should have worked with ICTs, but, indeed, they must be very eager to do so, and the overall project idea should appeal to them. Support/ partnership with departments with community-level convergent responsibilities, like the department of rural development, directorate of social audit may be sought. It also possible to leverage ICT based community infrastructure developed under schemes like *Rajiv Gandhi Sewa Kendras*.