

## 106. CSCs Towards e-Villages

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**Abstract.** Indian Government has initiated Common Service Centers (CSCs) across the country for the rural folk to obtain all the services through Internet. In Tamilnadu, the CSCs have been functioning since 2008 and at present around 2047 do exist. The present study is aimed to find out the services preferred by the users, the services offered, the challenges of CSCs towards sustainability and the citizens' perception. Tiruvannamalai district was selected for the study. Case study and indepth interview method was employed and officials in the TNeGA, SREI, operators and users of the CSCs were interviewed with semi-structured questionnaire.

Keywords: Common service centers, e-Governance, ICT, Sustainability

### Introduction

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are considered as the strategies to transform the world and to achieve most of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). ICTs have achieved a great extent of improvement in transparency, accountability, service delivery speed and lower service charges in the service process. E-governance can be explained as the use of Information and Communication Technologies by Government agencies to deliver the services to the citizens. Many of the Governmental agencies have succeeded in delivering the low cost, speedier and efficient services to the public.

India has witnessed so many successful ICT initiatives. The e-governance services have enhanced the efficiency of Educational, Revenue, Social Welfare, Transport, Passport, Commerce and other such services in India (Kumar & Best, 2006). Many researchers have documented the success stories of these initiatives. On the other side, there are researchers who studied the sustainability and applicability of these initiatives (Heeks, 2002 and Kumar & Best, 2006). Heeks explains about three categories—complete failure, where the goals were not achieved; partial failure, where the major goals were not unattained and successful, where most of the goals were achieved.

Shaun Goldfinch (2007) quoted that, 'the majority of the ICT developments are unsuccessful, particularly 'large' ones over \$10 million. Indeed, 20-30% are abandoned altogether, while around half are over time, over budget and/or do not deliver on expected applications or performance'. In India many of the rural based initiatives have failed to stand as the years went by. Chiraag Internet Centers were closed by the early of 2009, due to various reasons. Howard (2008) commented on such failures as, "the lapse is due to the many ill executed or misguided projects that failed due to limited local but-in, flawed economic models, inadequate training, and/or use of inappropriate equipment. From the perspective of donors, the most obvious failure of Information and Communication Technologies for development initiatives was that few were able to persist without their continued intervention and financial support, leading to an impression that Information and Communication Technologies for development projects are largely unsustainable".

Based on our various personal field visits to the rural ICT initiatives in the Southern India, have clearly showed that none of them are sustainable. It still exists as the initiators strongly depend on the funding from donor agencies. The dominant issues were lack of monetary benefit, lack of long term strategies, lack of periodical evaluation and research, lack of need and community based content creation, lack of local participation and lack of trained technical personnel to solve the problems without much delay. Even after the state's rural ICT profile has not showed positive response, there are agencies to implement the project. At this juncture, Government of India has initiated Common Service Centers (CSCs) across the country to make even a rural folk to obtain computer literacy and all the services at their door step irrespective of distance, space and time.

### Common Service Centers (CSCs)

Ministry of Information Technology, Government of India had set up the National e-Governance Plan, through which it has planned to initiate a Common Service Center (CSCs) for each six villages all over the country. The Central Government funds and the state government implements the project through Public Private Partnership (PPP). Through bidding, the Government has selected the Service Center Agencies(SCAs) to deliver the services through Village Level Entrepreneurs(VLEs). Every CSC is equipped with Desktop PC/ laptop, printer, web camera, digital still camera, scanner and a high speed broadband connectivity. The total infrastructure costs around Rs. 1, 62, 000 and

at the time of installation the VLEs need to pay Rs. 42,000 and the remaining amount will be arranged as loan and the VLEs are expected to pay back in installments. The VLEs were selected in consultation with the local bodies and screening, so as to make sure that the VLEs would serve the society. They should have the minimum pass of school education and they were trained by SCAs. It is mandatory for the CSCs to offer Government services to the citizens in the areas of e-governance, education, health, agriculture and commercial.

### **Common Service Centers (CSCs) in Tamil Nadu (TN)**

The Government of Tamil Nadu through Tamil Nadu e-Governance Plan (TNeGP) has been initiating one CSC for three villages since 2008 taking one step ahead of the National plan. Two private firms were selected as the SCAs—Sahaj SREI and 3i-infotech through out the state. 3i-infotech has withdrawn from the scene after initiating the CSCs in all districts of Tamil Nadu except Chennai, Dharmapuri, Krishnagiri, Tiruvannamalai and Vellore districts. The VLEs are left without any help. Sahaj SREI has been operating in the four districts—Dharmapuri, Krishnagiri, Tiruvannamalai and Vellore. They are entrusted to provide Government services like land records, registration, issue of certificates, Government schemes, employment exchange, ration cards, electoral services, pension schemes, transport and public grievance. In Tamil Nadu there is a total of 5440 CSCs.

### **The Study**

The broad objective of the present study is to assess the effectiveness of these CSCs initiatives in bringing change in the community and the contingency factors which affect the change in the existing situation. This study is aimed to find out the services preferred by the users, the services offered by the CSCs, the challenges of CSCs towards sustainability and the citizens' perception on the CSCs.

The researchers have adopted the intrinsic case study methodology along with the indepth interview. Everett Rogers (2003) comments that, "the usual survey research methods are less appropriate for the investigation of innovation consequences than for studying innovativeness. Extended observation over time or an in-depth case study is usually utilized to study consequences. Diffusion researchers have relied almost entirely upon survey methods of data gathering, ignoring the study of consequences, as the usual one-shot survey methods are inappropriate for investing the effects of innovations. An innovation's consequences cannot be understood simply by adding an additional question or two to a survey instrument, another hundred respondents to a sample population, or another few days of data gathering in the field".

The researchers have selected Tiruvannamalai district as it is backward socially, economically and in lack of computer literacy than the southern districts of Tamilnadu and also the services are implemented to the full extent. The district has 367 CSCs in the ratio 1:3. Interviews were conducted with 50 respondents which include officials in the Tamil Nadu e-Governance Agency (TNeGA), service providers (SREI), VLEs, CSC operators and users of the CSCs in various CSC villages with semi-structured questionnaire.

### **The Results**

The study has clearly revealed that the project needs a midterm evaluation and different approach in the service implementation. The findings are discussed as follows:

#### ***Frequently used services***

When the services, which are frequently accessed, are ranked, the offline services topped the list while the access to Government services left behind. The people have widely accessed the recharging service to recharge their mobiles and DTH. Photocopying and photo printing was used frequently as the villagers otherwise have to travel far to access these services. Very few people have sent emails and the youth have downloaded songs from the internet. Youth have also used the e-learning services. People also access the online ticketing facilities and the government certificates whenever they need. Many of the VLEs and CSC operators have expressed that they had to introduce the DTP and photocopying services to increase the users and gain income. They acknowledged the inefficacy of e-services alone to gain income in a rural setup. Some of the VLEs have even raised income by taking photographs to the village people. Initially, the majority of the VLEs have reported the centre has more than 15 visitors in an average every day. But later it has been revealed that most of the centers have stationary items in their shop and the people come for those purchases.

### ***e-Governance services***

The CSCs provide space for applying the Government certificates through online. The VLEs are authorized to submit the forms online after thorough inspection and to process the application to the district officers. In turn, they would get the certificates to supply them to the applicants in a due course. Most of the Indian villages are not connected with frequent transport. This would allow the people not to travel a long distance and no urge to wait in a long queue from morning to evening. Moreover these processes avoid the middlemen and promises transparency. But in some of the villages, the VLEs and the operators have said that most of the services which Government has introduced are yet to be initiated.

The people are enabled to make their petition every Monday to the District Administrative Officer (The District Collector) for all their problems to be solved at the District headquarters. So at present, the TNeGP has set up a provision that the people need not travel a long distance and they can file their petitions in the CSCs itself. But the Government officials do not open these online petitions and rectify them. It forces the people to lose their hope on e-governance system. Even in applying for the certificates, the incomplete forms are not reported back immediately. They are rejected, without the applicants being uninformed. So the people prefer to go in presence and get things done without waiting for a long time.

### ***E-learning***

With the partnership with Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), the CSCs offer diploma degrees and certificate courses on computer to the village people. Many of the school drop outs, young women and children avail these services. But the question arises whether the package was really “e” or not. Because the course material was completely stored up in the system and it seems like a multimedia module. But the interactivity feature of the module (which makes a slow, step by step learning possible) allows the village youngsters and children to learn computer and complete diploma and certificate courses.

### ***Monetary benefit***

The VLEs are not paid by the Government. But the private partnership enables them to receive subsidies and gifts. The private insurance and banking agencies are tied up with the CSCs for insuring and buying property or vehicle. If the VLEs find customers for the agencies, they would be gifted subsidies. So the VLEs try to publicize the benefits of private services and not the information service of the Government, which will be of little benefit. Moreover, people are still trained to invest their money in various businesses.

The installation amount forces the VLEs to charge higher amount as they want to get rid of the debt at the earliest. But the poor people feel they are charged high, which in turn minimizes the number of visitors. The Government has offered many schemes before the CSCs were initiated, but most of them are not yet introduced. So the VLEs feel as if they are cheated and they could not make profit out of it.

### ***Social prospects and challenges***

Though the VLEs are men, majority of the CSCs are run by female. They either allow their wives to look after the CSC or select the young girls in the village to look after the CSC as they strongly believe in the managing strengths of women and trustworthiness. This changes the village scenario and allow for the participation of the women in public participation, discussion and decision making.

There is a serious issue of caste (social class) discrimination. The CSCs have to be set up in the common place where all the people can access easily. But if the selected VLEs belong to the lower social class, they do not either own a place in a common place or get for rent easily. One of the VLEs has reflected that he has to pay more than it deserves as he belongs to the lower social class.

The uneducated old aged people do not understand the applicability of the eservices. So at time, they create problem and the VLEs have to struggle a lot to get things settled. The economically deprived people do not use the services as they think the technology is for the rich. But the rich people threaten and try to influence the CSC staff to get the benefits at the earliest. Only the literate folks access and browse through the internet for various things. The illiterates get the services through the technical support of VLEs.

### ***Technical issues***

CSCs are not conferred with fast broadband services. In the middle of the process, the connection gets disconnected and the uneducated get irritated of this technology and avoids to use eservices. The technical support

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was also very low as the technical errors are not rectified at the earliest. These factors force the VLEs to prefer offline services much than the online services.

### Recommendations of the Study

1. Rather than partnering with the private agencies, the SCAs should try to hold partnership with the local bodies. SCAs generally sign MOUs with the private bodies but without knowing the real need of the people. A need based study should be implemented to evaluate and improve the project.
2. The goals of the services are yet to be refined and it is a doubt whether the services would contribute to the poverty reduction. The researchers could not find benefit for any of the citizens apart from applying the online certificates. It should be also noted that people would not need certificates through out the year. So some amendments need to be made for consistency and sustainability.
3. It has been evidently proved that the Government has been using these services for election strategies as the processing fee is minimized for a short period to access the eservices. If they increase the fee, the people would not depend on it more and the model would fail. VLEs have to charge as they have invested more. The Government can move the CSC's control either to the Self Help Groups or local administrative bodies and cut off the rates. So the entire community would be benefited.
4. There is a need for some campaigning strategies to increase awareness among the rural users especially the aged and uneducated, as they are the strong opinion leaders of the society.

### Conclusion

The world is moving towards the mobile revolution in a rapid pace. The developing countries are testing the m-commerce, m-governance and so many other m-developmental initiatives. Mobile has deep rooted in the Indian society than any other medium. People of all classes use the mobiles. Rather than distributing free television sets, the Government can spend on installing new applications which would allow the people to access all the services not even at the door step, but at their private rooms. There are other serious issues to be dealt within the society before taking internet and computer. And moreover, the mobiles are user friendly than the computers. So it is the time for the Indian Government to stop spending money on the rural ICT initiatives and try to improve the research on m-governance.

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