

## **Enabling rural youth: An analysis of an NGO initiative**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The study intended to examine an initiative 'Wireless for Communities (W4C)' by Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF) and Internet Society (ISOC) from an independent academic point of view. It tried to document the perceived importance of ICTs by the tribal youth, effectiveness of tele-centres and impact of this new learning opportunity on the socio-economic aspects of the lives of the rural youth. The study was carried out in two villages namely Bhanwargarh and Mamoni block in Baran district of Rajasthan. The sample consisted of young boys and girls who were enrolled for training basic computer skills and accessing the ICT facilities in the centre. ICTs had not only enhanced connectivity but also led to increase in awareness about issues related to health, education and most essentially their human rights. Young participants were more informed about governmental programmes and entitlements. These new learning's gave them an opportunity to access technologies and devices that they could not afford on their own. The employment opportunities increased as their job profiles improved because of technical skill development. Easy accessibility and availability of ICTs helped. However, the study exposed some gender inequity especially in the access and use of ICTs which directly impacted their future prospects. For much deeper impact and sustained model of growth it is important to address these challenges while planning similar programmes in future by any government or non-government organisation.

**Key Words :** Information communication technology, Enabling rural youth, Gender differentials

### **INTRODUCTION**

ICTs are recognized as the catalyst for development, but in reality deep digital divide exists across regions. People in the tribal and rural areas are deprived of facilities and services but technological divide is much deeper in many ways. Government systems though well intended are not able to reach and meet the specific needs and requirements of people living in the rural areas. In such situations, NGOs can serve better due to greater flexibility

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in their programming to cater to specific community needs. They also perform a critical role from being a watch dog to serving unique community needs. There is an out-burst of ideas and free flow of information which creates more choices and opportunities for people around the world in their various endeavours through the easily available knowledge (Jones, 2003). Yet, over 80% of the world's population does not have access to information communication technologies (ICTs) (Heeks, 2010). The access to internet is skewed which leads to huge digital divide. There is a gap in terms of ICT implementation, access and usage rates occurring between regions, developing and developed countries, mature and emerging markets, or within countries or communities. Everyone should have the opportunity to access to information communication technologies (ICTs) which will minimize this gap and bring human progress, improved standards of living, and the benefits associated with informational economies.

The study entitled, "Access and Use of ICTs by Rural Youth: A Case Study of NGO Supported Initiative Project Wireless for Communities (W4C)" was carried out to understand the impact of the use of various ICTs tools by tribal youth in Baran district of Rajasthan. Wireless for Community (W4C) is a project jointly initiated by Internet Society (ISOC) and Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF) which utilises low-cost Wi-Fi based equipment to connect and empower rural and underserved communities.

The centres in Bhanwargarh and Mamoni the two villages under study were among the eight cluster centres provided with wireless connectivity. The digitally enabled services include telemedicine, learning and education through video conferencing, raising local issues by community with local NGOs via video conferencing, narrow casting community radio programs, providing information on government entitlements, and showing films and videos on social issues with a general objective to study the impact of availability and use of ICTs on the economic and social aspects in the lives of the rural youths.

Of the total population of Baran, 79.2 percent is rural and 20.8 percent urban population. More than 60% of the women are illiterate. More than 40% of the million strong population is tribal, "Sahariyas" or the 'residents of the jungle' (Census, Government of India, 2011). Many of them are nomadic and homeless bonded labourers. They eke out a living on a day-to-day basis.

Illiteracy, poverty, lack of identity, subjugation, and exploitation had collectively oppressed the Sahariyas and the other tribals in Baran. People from other parts of the country are not very much aware of the existence of the tribe as little to no media had story coverage on the people living in the particular geography (Sharma, 2005).

However, things have started to change in Baran quite dramatically. Through the W4C initiative, seven centers covering an air distance of 118 kilometers and a road distance of 172 kilometers have been set up using Wi-Fi spectrum of 2.4 GHz and 5.8 GHz. The network provides wireless connectivity for seven (7) night-schools-cum-libraries and eight (8) cluster centers, where each cluster center covers 8 to 10 villages. (Wireless for Communities, A case book, 2013).

The services that are digitally enabled in the centre include telemedicine, through video conferencing the people coming in the center learn new things they get education, The people in the community create awareness and raise local issues in collaboration with local NGOs via video conferencing, narrow casting through community radio programs, films and

videos also provide them with information on government entitlements and other pressing social issues (DEF, W4C Case let, 2013 p.2).

## METHODOLOGY

The sample in this research was selected to get a holistic picture of the ICTs initiative in the place. The researcher took rounds of Focus Group Discussion in a group of 15 young people each which helped in the initial rapport formation. The rapport building lead to more open discussion. It was followed by personal interviews using structured interview schedule which helped to get a deeper understanding of the whole scenario of availability, accessibility, and examined the change in levels of communication and introduction of new information source on the economic and social aspects of their lives.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### **ICTs and usage:**

The frequency of use of certain ICT tools had an influence on the intensity of impact of various ICTs. ICT tools selected for the study were Radio, television, mobile phone and computer. These mentioned devices were considered to be basic and important ICTs tools by the respondents as those were available and they have access. Their penetration in rural community of Baran was very strong. The frequency of use and exposure impacted their lives in a rather massive way.

Mobile phones were found to be the most popular device used by the respondents. 78% of participants had access to their personal handset on a daily basis. The participants consider mobile phone as a necessary requirement in their lives.

Second most popular device was television 77% of respondents owned a personal T.V. set. They also watched T.V. when they visited the centre. Mostly they watched films on social, educational and environmental issues in the centre.

57% of the respondents used computer and internet facility at the centre on a daily basis. Only 17% of the respondents owned personal computer system.

Community Radio was the least popular medium used by the participants. One reason behind it being less popular was that the community was yet to receive license and their own transmitter. Currently programmes were narrow casted which was only limited to a small area and to few a set of people visiting the center.

### **Perceived importance of ICTs for the growth and development of the community:**

The study also intended to understand perceived importance of ICTs by the people living in the community. This was important as the level of acceptance and awareness of ICTs as an agent for development and improvement in their lives led to overall development. Data was collected around primary reasons for which they were accessing the ICTs, the frequency of their visits to the tele-centre, their opinions about ICTs as an effective tool for development.

The respondents felt the need of ICTs, according to the them ICTs had a lot of importance in their lives; they experienced positive changes in their personal and professional life. ICTs

had become a part of their life and brought change in the following ways:

**Operate computer and explore internet world:**

After the introduction of computer and internet 98% of the youth were found to be confident enough to come to the centre and operate the computer by themselves. They used the computer for typing, painting, storing data, making AV aids, playing games, etc. With the information received about computers and internet usage the respondents reported that they were better informed. They were more aware of the various opportunities concerning their professional life through internet. Raju Mehta a computer trainer in Mamoni village shared his thoughts, he said *“Giving them basic computer skills is the first step after that without much effort, out of curiosity and interest they naturally start experimenting new things and learn the use of internet and gradually use it for their own benefits clearing their doubts and getting information”*. 60% of the respondents were actively accessing internet by themselves. These enthusiastic learners highly benefitted from this ocean of information. Their knowledge level increased with the availability of news and information about political, economic and social issues happening around them.

**Facilitating education :**

The respondents who went to school noticed better performance in their studies. In various curricular and extra – curricular activities conducted in school, they were able to easily access necessary and extra information needed through the use of ICTs. School life had become much simpler with all the information available to them. With the use of ICTs educational materials such as models, maps, printed information, videos etc. was easily and widely used by students and teachers resulting in edutainment (education + entertainment). This helped in maintaining interest of the students and teachers and enhanced the process of learning. For example- Children learn the structure and name of the districts in their state (Rajasthan) by naming and coloring the enlarged printed image of the map taken from the internet. Also, films such as *Bandu boxer* which was about a boy fulfilling his dream of becoming a boxer, *Ladli* which was about a girl fulfilling her dreams with education, etc. are shown as a part of their social issue awareness and moral lesson.

**Increased connectivity :**

As a part of their training programme participants learnt various mediums to communicate like video conferencing, writing mails, social networking etc. More than 80% of the respondents regularly communicated with village leaders, friends and family.

**Community radio :**

Radio was one medium which brought varied information within their reach. Various programmes covering social, political and environmental issues were narrow - casted. 58% of the respondents who had listened to the programmes were more aware about various government programmes and schemes such as employment schemes, housing schemes, educational schemes, etc. They also become more aware about their rights listening to programmes on Right to Information (RTI), Right to Education (RTE), etc. Not only was the

information helpful for the listeners and community members but led to positive changes in the lives of the trainees who were involved in the making of the program, it boosted their confidence and knowledge level.

### **Record keeping :**

The importance of ICTs was not just limited to the trainees coming to the centre, but also the trainers. The trainers in the centres skillfully utilized the use of ICTs by maintaining important village records like health details and educational details of every child in the village. With this kind of maintenance of the records it became easy to trace the data resulting in well-being of the village.

Overall because of ICTs they led their lives with more ease and simplicity. Increased use of mobile phone and internet made communication much smoother and simpler. Internet had brought information from all around the world to their finger-tips. Through video conferencing they were able to communicate with people freely around them. This medium was also used to make primary health consultation with doctors and health officers in different cities like Kota and Bangalore.

### **Meeting information needs of young people :**

Young people are generally curious, interested and want to acquire knowledge and information about things happening around them or elsewhere around the world. Therefore it was important to understand the effectiveness of the available information/telecentre services in meeting their information needs.

ICTs helped in meeting the major information needs of the youths. The major information needs such as information related to social issues, health, education related, general knowledge and news updates. 97% of the respondents rely on ICTs for their general knowledge updates. Sonu Gangkar mentioned *“I come in everyday at the centre to search on Google and update myself with general knowledge and news. Internet has helped me to be one of the brightest student in my class with updated knowledge”*.

### **Economic impact of ICTs :**

An initiative can also be measured in terms of its impact on the economic aspects in people's life which gradually leads to increased standard of living. Therefore the study also intended to assess this platform's scope to bring about a change in financial status of the participants. Greater availability and accessibility of the ICTs for the youth, played an important role in paving a way to improve the economic aspects of their lives. These can be further elaborated as follows:

### **Increased flexibility of job profile :**

About 51% of the respondent families were dependent on agriculture and life stock as their principle source of income and about 63% were labourers who did not have any agricultural land of their own and some worked on others land as wage labourers. Some of the families who had their own agricultural land also remain dependent on earning wage as their land were not big enough to fulfilling their required needs.

Improved skills among the youth, brought changes in their personal and professional lives. Training and extensive interaction with ICTs on a continuous basis led to more job opportunities for those who were looking for jobs. This exposure also made them more confident to look for better jobs. With more opportunities to access computer, internet and various others kind of ICTs, through trainings, their knowledge level increased. They became more aware of the things happening around them and around the world. Some of the respondent even used the internet facility to search and apply jobs online. Saddam Husan from Bhawargargh village said '*internet kiwajah se meri General Knowledge badihai...jissemujhe IAS kityarimeinmadatmilegi*' (internet has helped me to get updated with the General Knowledge which will help me in preparing for IAS). Santosh Rathor from Khandela village said '*Mein accountant ki training le rah ahun. Centre mein computer kisavidha hone kiwajah se yehmumkinhua*' (I am taking training for an accountant, the availability of computer system in the centre has opened door to this different kind of job).

#### **Benefits from Government programs and schemes :**

The community members received information on government entitlements, through narrow casting of community radio programs, films and educational videos. Internet also became a central medium and channel for information gain. The centre trainers and community leaders played an important role in spreading awareness and timely updates about Government programmes/entitlements using various ICTs as their information source which helped the community in harnessing the benefits of those programmes in a better way.

#### **Social impact of ICTs:**

Changes in the social dimensions in the lives of the youth can be seen in variety of ways such as level of socializing, improved in exchange of communication, improved in their education, health, awareness about government entitlement and social issues, etc. ICTs had improve their social life by increasing the connectivity and thereby increasing the exchange of information.

Mobile phone was not a luxury but a necessity in the life of the rural youth. They acknowledge the use of mobile phone as the major factor for improved communication which made their day today life simpler and easier. Not only is mobile phone used for calling and messaging but its other features were also explored especially by youngsters like storing music and videos, playing games, sharing data, videos. Most importantly mobile phone was widely used as a device for narrow casting of the community radio program. Some even used it for surfing internet and were active on social networking which helped in enhanced connectivity.

Access to internet was found to have great positive impacts on the aspects of knowledge and information updates as internet had brought information at their finger-tips. Through the use of internet the trainers acted as a source of information and news for those who were not able to access it. Internet had made it easier for the respondents to become more socialize with friends and families by using social networking sites and e-mails.

#### **Increase Awareness about social issues and Encouraging social transformation:**

Access to information is of fundamental importance for the youth. The recent

development of ICT greatly facilitated the flow of information and knowledge. Most of the youth recognized ICTs as a critical tool to tackle development issues which will ultimately lead to social transformation. The respondents had an increase in awareness about the social issues and their rights through videos, films, Community Radio programs.

It was seen that ICTs has added a new aspect to the means of socializing among the youth. The respondents are now frequently communicating to their distant friends and relatives over mobile phone, social networking sites like Gmail and Facebook (most popular social networking sites used by the respondent youths) and video conferencing.

Health impact and awareness has increased. Community Radio and video conferencing were the main tools utilized for health awareness and improvement.

### **Gender and ICTs :**

Some specific gender differentials were found in access and use of ICTs among boys and girls. More boys visited the center. The regularity of visits was an indication of their exposure and interest towards the new medium. The more they interacted with the ICTs more deeper and desired impact it will have in their lives.

Findings revealed that girls faced more problems than boys. Location of the center (centers located too far from home) was found to be one of the major hurdle, especially faced by the girls. Lack of time and less number of computer systems was also pointed out to be a major problem. Restriction in mobility of girls by their families, household responsibilities lead to decrease self-motivation and interest.

### **Conclusion :**

ICTs indeed put a fuel in igniting the process of development. When the digital divides especially in the rural tribal regions such as Baran are overcame with the help of NGOs and their flexibility nature to reach and understand such community specific needs where government systems though well intended could not.

The research has brought to our understanding the impact of ICTs on the socio-economic aspects in the lives of the rural youths. The gender differential in access and use of the ICTs, were girls has a lesser opportunity of access bearing a direct impact on their future prospects. However, overall easy accessibility and availability of ICTs has helped in the overall social upliftment of youth in the rural communities of Baran. Mobile phones as we know it are not a luxury but a necessity that are largely used even in rural area as much as in urban, but this study has brought to light an interesting aspect of how the computer systems that were made available to them has greatly influence the youth to use it as the second most popularly used convenient ICT device next to mobile phone.

But for deeper impacts and sustained model of growth it is important to address the following in the future programme planning:

- More number of telecentres should be set up in villages within a specific geographical area catering to a particular number of people.
- Programmes should be designed in a more gender sensitive manner. More specific number of groups of boys and girls should be encouraged. Enrolment of at least 50% of girls should be made mandatory so that more girls are able to access the centre facilities which

may lead to increased benefits.

- Employment opportunities should be created within the centre. First priority should be given to centre pass outs. They can be further trained as master trainers.

- People from different communities have specific type of needs. Many times these needs go unnoticed in large scale government programmes. NGOs and GOs like panchayat bodies are flexible in nature by their design. They have the leverage to offer solutions and respond to specific and unique needs of the people. Thus their role and involvement should be encouraged through more collaborations and inclusive community participation.

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