

New Media Technologies and
Community Development in ActionAid
----- Content Creation and Strategy

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1. Actionaid Objectives

Actionaid mission of Fighting Poverty Together is based on our continued engagement with Rights-based Work. Information and Communication Technology plays a crucial role in our mission-related activities, especially in Community Development, as well as in our organisational initiatives, toward meeting our organisational Goals (Appendix 1).

Organisationally, Actionaid has been a great beneficiary of the “New Media Revolution” of using the Internet. But how has it affected our Work in Community Development? **The synergy of poverty eradication work with technology needs to be such that the net result is more than the sum of each alone.** ActionAid and its partners and Communities use the rights-based approach towards empowerment, where the poor and marginalised are increasingly made aware and conscious of their rights, entitlements and needs, technology, especially ICT can become the tool to make a real difference to the lives of the poor. *But it is also necessary that we never lose sight of the fact that Technology should be the slave and not the master. Applications using technology need to be analysed in detail and have to be driven by the Needs of the Community and not by Technology itself.*

Information is the key to awareness and that leads to accountability of the dutyholders - governments and institutions -- the main essence of our rights-based and advocacy work. The relevance and importance of the Information to the Community needs to be clearly understood and analysed. Quoting from the experience of Dharitri Patnaik of India, in “Radhamoni’s story” where she has outlined the impact of exposure, and awareness on the people of a drought-prone village in Bolangir district of Orissa state in India -- this is what Radhamoni and her fellow villagers had to say ---*“We were astonished that there were so many government welfare schemes for poor people which never reached us ...for months we would go without food. The information regarding the various Govt. schemes helped us to know and understand our situation better”. Last year the expenditure against the budget for drought relief and food aid schemes to mitigate starvation and stop forced migration in this area was less than 10%.*

2. Learnings

ICT for development has been an area where diverse projects have been undertaken by State, Funding institutions, NGOs and many local agencies. At Actionaid we tried to understand and base our learnings from some of the successes and failures.

- ☛ Govt policies in the developing world have improved the infrastructure for Internet access, but this is restricted to urban pockets (example of cities like Bangalore and Hyderabad in India). While this has provided **economic opportunities for some** it has led to further marginalisation among those who do not have access to these. It has generated ‘islands of prosperity’ and increased the inequities and the barriers to poverty eradication leading to the so-called **digital divide**.
- ☛ The solution to this was thought to be *Internet kiosks for the rural poor?(Telecentres)* But in the absence of relevant information and sustainable technology these have only been misutilised. As most of the Projects are brought to the Community from outside, **the existing power structures which have led to the inequity in distribution of resources** are only further

reflected in the new resource, namely Information and the poor and marginalised often do not have access to or control over the Technology.

- ☛ **Technology has been used by developing nations to provide solutions for the rich and urban population.** In India, there are facilities to apply for passports, income tax over Internet. One state govt. has been lauded for setting up one-stop service centres or e-Seva Kendra to pay electricity bills, telephone bills, property tax in Hyderabad. None of the poor communities would need these services. Are such high investments justified which only serve the well-to-do? Is not possible instead to provide simple facilities for the poor and marginalised (like applying for ration cards and entitlements for food subsidies)
- ☛ The absence of relevant information and the traditional barriers like language, social structure, lack of education only serve to make the use and “ownership” of the new media and technology the privilege of the rich and powerful within the community leading to further marginalisation - which often leads **development practitioners to mistrust the whole concept of technology use in development!**
- ☛ The needs of Information for the Community is often the **knowledge and information existing in neighbouring communities or areas**, which is commonly not available on the Internet and hence the **Content Creation needs to be closely linked to the infrastructure for access.** With access to Internet it is perhaps equally important to have inexpensive tools that allow the **Communities to add to the content in user-friendly, language-independent manner, especially as language and literacy are issues that we need to deal with.**

Vietnamese villagers are keen to share experiences in their fish-rearing projects and disease prevention with neighbouring ones

Communities in Bolangir, India want to understand how their neighbours have pressured the local schoolteachers to attend regularly and conduct classes, or even ensured that the free food schemes reach the poor families in the village

Street Children in Biratnagar, Nepal are preparing to display their Wallpaper and share experiences

In Brazil and Guatemala CSOs and activists plan to use the WEB as a virtual meeting and Resource centre in an Anti-Poverty Vortal.

- ☛ For information dissemination of state-sponsored schemes and other information on Health, Livelihood opportunities, there is also a need to set up a channel for **obtaining the relevant information** and making it available to the Community in a lucid manner ... either by translation or pictorial depiction keeping in view the language and literacy levels and the Web-based options here are an important tool for any Community Resource centre. The content creation and Planning exercise needs to take this part of the supply end into account.
- ☛ ICT does not, as commonly believed, encompass the technology of Internet and its inherent Communication gains alone -- but should be **broad based** to include areas of more traditional technology options like **radio, video, photography and speech recording** and amplifying equipment, even paper bulletins which can be computer generated, all of which can be integrated for community development.

- ☛ **Critical Success factor for interventions** is a ground-up approach to community information needs and their requirements which is linked to the technology options available, through participatory methods. **Examples :**

INDIA

In Pondicherry, India American Bureau weather forecasts for wave heights and **storm warnings - downloaded through the Internet are broadcasted over loudspeakers** to save the lives of fishermen going out to sea and thus increasing livelihood options

In Dhar, MP, India farmers access to market rates at nominal costs to do away with middlemen

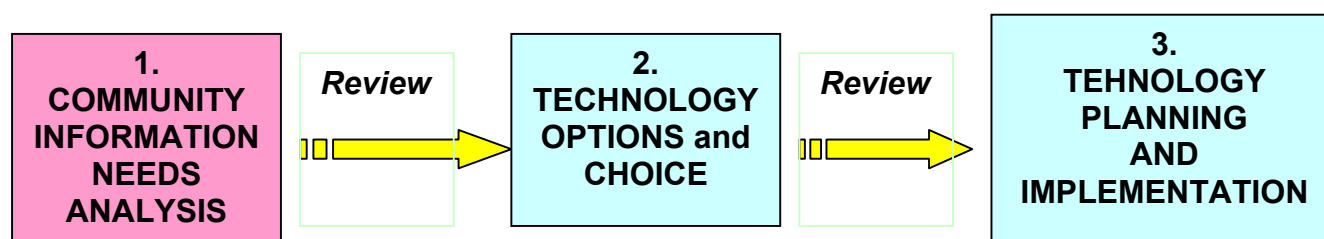
HAITI

In Port-au-prince, Haiti the Internet Centres , powered through generators are used mostly by **the poor communities to call overseas using the VoIP options.**

3. AA Approach

Our approach in deployment of IT in our mission-related work, strongly reflects our strategic objective— namely eradication of poverty, by overcoming the injustices and inequity that cause it, through sustainable interventions, which use participatory processes towards empowerment .

ICT Initiatives go through a 3-Step Process, namely - Information Needs Analysis, Technology Options, Implementation of Pilot all of which involve participatory processes, by the Program Staff supported by IT staff.



4. Our Pilot Projects

- ☛ **Community participation** in choice of technology and its use is an important criteria for empowerment, and hence successful projects. Active engagement of Communities in these projects is crucial to development. Actionaid is exploring the use REFLECT in linking ICTs to means for sustainable livelihoods through a 3-country **DfiD sponsored Action Research Pilot project** where we hope to develop and refine the participatory processes using the REFLECT Methodology, which is being shared internally **(India, Burundi, Uganda) (Appendix 2)**
- ☛ In another Project in **Delhi, AAIndia** with its partners works for the rights of the evicted **Slumdwellers through the network Sajha Manch Alliance** and have developed the Information

needs for the community through a participatory approach. The project now is in the process of bringing this information to the community. There are plans of using a Local network of Computers for the dissemination of Information to increase the outreach. **(Appendix 3)**

- ☛ Project plans for linking with the School children at UK (under the Get Global Project) and using the Internet and Web in our Community Centres and Non-formal schools for youth in the developing world to communicate with their counterparts in the Northern world , perhaps allow space for dialogue in larger issues of Global Citizenship and World Peace
- ☛ As part of the learning process, Actionaid has also undertaken independent assessment of Projects already undertaken and the Gyandoot project at Dhar, Madhya Pradesh , India and UNDP Information Kiosk Projects at Bolangir and Naupada was reviewed **(Appendix 4)**

5. In conclusion

It would be clearly unthinkable to install a business system or process without carrying out the Systems Study or analysis - the functional specifications. Drawing a parallel to the field of development I would like to comment that **lack of sufficient involvement or the 'end-users'** in formulating systems based on their need is the major cause for the success or failure of these projects. In many cases, as we see from our Projects on the field, **it is difficult to bypass the current social structures and reach to the poor and marginalised communities** . Through the use of ICT we need to find the means to involve them both in the choice of technology as well as in content creation through simple and easy methods to capture their knowledge , culture and traditional skills.