

M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation, Chennai, Madras

Introduction

Description of case Study

The M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF) was established under the stewardship of Dr. M. S. Swaminathan in July 1988 as a non-political trust committed to harnessing science and technology for environmentally sustainable and socially equitable development. MSSRF's research, training, communication, extension and networking programmes, in the fields of agriculture and rural development, seek to link ecological security to livelihood security in a mutually reinforcing manner.

MSSRF is currently carrying out research in the following five areas: Coastal Systems Research, Biodiversity and Biotechnology, Eco-technology and Sustainable Agriculture, Reaching the un-reached, and Education, Communication, Training and Capacity Building. The flagship project of the Informatics Group is the Information Village Research Project.

The Foundation operates through the following pathways to agricultural and rural development: conservation and enhancement of natural resources, promotion of sustainable livelihoods, gender equality and voicing the voiceless as well as information and skill empowerment. Through the "Hindu Media Resource Centre" the Foundation promotes public understanding of science through media practitioners.

The ICT project was started as an integral activity of MSSRF under the guidance of Dr. M. S. Swaminathan.

Aim of Project

To set up village information shops that enable rural families to access information and communication technologies. The project trains educated youth, especially women, in rural areas in operating information shops and maintaining a system that generates locally relevant information from generic information;

Role of ICT

This project has established a hub-and-spoke model of data-cum-voice communication in a group of six villages in *Pondicherry* in South India. The village centres can communicate with each other as well as to the Internet. A hybrid of technologies is used-wired with wireless for communication and solar with mains for power supply. The hub provides connectivity to the Internet through dial-up telephone lines, and the staff there creates locally useful content.

Sources of Funding

The projects of the Foundation are funded by many agencies, both Indian and foreign, both governmental and non-governmental. No details shared.

The foundation also receives donations for its corpus fund from individual and corporate donors.

Project process

In an experiment in electronic knowledge delivery to the poor, MSSRF has connected ten villages near Pondicherry in southern India by a hybrid wired and wireless network -- consisting of PCs, telephones, VHF duplex radio devices and email connectivity through dial-up telephone lines -- that facilitates both voice and data transfer, and have enabled the

villagers to get information that they need and can use. The village centres receive queries from the local residents and transmit information, collected from the hub, back to them.

An important feature of this project is the strong sense of ownership that the village communities have developed towards the village centres. The other key feature is the active participation of rural women in the management of the village centre as well as in using it. A system of close consultation between the project staff and the rural users has been evolved, so that information needs are realistically assessed. Quantitative data are collected on the use patterns, and stories of deriving benefit have been chronicled.

The process starts with volunteer teams that help poll the villagers to find out what knowledge they want. Particularly popular are women's health information, advice on growing local crops and protecting them from diseases, the daily market prices for these crops, local weather forecasts, and clear information about the bewildering array of programme that are provided by the Indian government to aid poor families. Value addition to the raw information, use of the local language (Tamil) and multimedia (to facilitate illiterate users) and participation by local people right from the beginning are the noteworthy features of the project. Most of the operators and volunteers providing primary information are women, thus giving them status and influence. All centres came up because of demands made by the community.

Points of Interest

The village centres can communicate with each other as well as to the Internet. Which is an addition to the facilities available from similar projects in this study

A hybrid of technologies is used - wired with wireless for communication and solar with mains for power supply. A technique that appears to deal with the communication and power problems inherent in rural India.

The whole project appears to be demand lead and therefore has inbuilt components for distribution of information in the local language.