

# Remote Area Networking (RAN) Project, Foundation of Occupational Development (FOOD), Chennai, Madras.

## ***Introduction***

### ***Description of case Study***

*“FOOD India is a 20-year-old non-profit organization based in India conducting research on social development and implementing welfare programs in the field of employment generation, poverty alleviation, cost effective housing, education, health, water and sanitation, energy conservation, ICTs, electronic NGO networking, E-commerce, institutional and capacity building for women networks”* (source: <http://www.xlweb.com/food/index.htm>, accessed 06/11/02).

The RAN project envisages the establishment of a remote area electronic networking using packet radio modems in 10 remote sites. This is done primarily to enable Community Based Organisations (CBOs), Non-Governmental Organisations and Development organisations working in remote, rural and tribal areas to network with like-minded organisations within the region and with national and international NGOs and partner organisations.

The overall strategy in operating the network was to be an Internet Information Provider rather than just be an Internet Access Provider. That is to say, the network emphasised more on offering information services to its users like electronic conference, information searching etc. as to enable them to achieve their individual objectives rather than just offering Internet connectivity alone.

### ***Aim of Project***

To enhance the networking capability of development organisations in remote and rural areas through ICTs and act as backbone for providing cost-effective Internet access to NGOs, CBOs and telecentres in remote areas utilising wireless networking wherever appropriate to facilitate social and sustainable development.

### ***Role of ICTS***

Use of pocket radio modems to establish a remote area network, which includes the provision of information as well as internet access.

The ICTs are used in this project by the target groups to communicate with their counterpart organisations and donors, to share information about their activities and also to gather information on topics of interest to them. The network is also used by the NGOs/CBOs to post information about their activities on the Internet and spread awareness.

### ***Sources of Funding***

Startup funds are provided by donors while the projects itself has become self-sustaining in two years.

Total budget = Rs. 61,30,000

Contribution from donor (IDRC Canada) = Rs 32,10,000

Contribution from FOOD = Rs 9,70,000

Contribution from sub-host operators = Rs 19,50,000 (sub-host operators pay a sum of Rs 10,000 per year to FOOD to contribute towards maintenance and support services. They reach breakeven when they cross 100 users in each area. The sub-host operators charge an annual amount of Rs 2500 from the NGOs/CBOs towards the services offered).

## ***Project process***

The methodology for establishing the network was to use a demand-driven approach to identify remote areas where sub-host systems could be established. Dedicated individuals and organisations who had knowledge on computers and some knowledge on Internet electronic networking were identified and trained to undertake the day-to-day maintenance and user support at each remote sub-host system. A target of 100 users to be mobilised in one year was set in order to ensure that the sub-host systems become self-supportive at the earliest possible time. Goals were set to build the capacity for NGO users and bring more NGOs working for the rural poor in remote areas under the fold of electronic networking by providing cost effective access to information databases, facilitating exchange of information and sharing experiences.

A total of 14 sub-host centres and 11 telecentres were established within the project period, exceeding the initial project targets of just 10 sub-hosts. To add further two of the 14 sub-hosts were elevated to the level of licensed ISPs.

One week training was provided to the sub-host operators on sub-host operations like maintenance of radio modem system, operation of commands related to wireless communication like AX.25 protocol commands, user support, adding content to the local web server using HTML layouts etc.

## ***Points of Interest***

Linux: Providing technical training to sub-host operators in handling Linux was a slightly difficult process since it looks complicated compared to readymade host software available in the market. However they found that once the system operators understand the logic of Linux it proves to be a more stable platform for the system operators to customise or upgrade to suit their operations.

While efforts were made to bring them together through electronic networking the main constraints we face were lack of infrastructure in rural and tribal areas, frequent power cuts, little or no telephone facilities, etc. In exceptional cases no resources were available for buying computers and there was a lack of knowledge on operating computers.