Crossing the Finish Line

Telecenter jobs bank helps ICT training graduates find work in Sri Lanka

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Evidence Narratives at the Center for Information & Society

This paper is part of a project at the Center for Information and Society to broaden and deepen our understanding of the impact of Information and Communication Technologies and Development (ICTD).

Our intention is to choose examples of ICTD implementations carefully and to write about them in such a way that each one, individually, illustrates important aspects of the featured settings and so that, taken together, the examples describe and reveal larger themes about core aspects of ICTD. It is our hope that by being systematic at every stage in the research process we are able to expedite the accumulation of credible and accessible information about the impact of ICTD on individuals and communities.

The ICTD field is filled with success stories extolling the benefits of access to Information Technology. As these often rhetorically powerful and memorable stories describe what can be achieved under the best of conditions, they may distort our understanding of what is achieved more typically, or may fail to describe aspects of their settings or strategies that were crucial to success.

Each setting in which ICTD projects are implemented is unique, but our experience is that with careful attention to the idiosyncrasies and commonalities across settings, patterns soon emerge which reveal more general themes about the qualities of settings, people, and programs that make a difference.

While tension may exist between an organization's desire to feature certain cases and the critical researcher's commitment to rigor, we believe that a methodology built on intensive questioning and attention to detail can yield stories that uncover and communicate an accumulation of credible evidence about why individual programs and larger strategies succeed and fail.

By crafting exemplary stories, by developing and disseminating useful methodological tools, and by promoting these techniques among NGO managers and grant makers, CIS aims to shape a research framework that can fulfill the needs of NGOs and donors, with stories that accurately represent realities in underserved communities, accumulating evidence that serves the ends of rigorous analysis while publicizing good work.

This paper is an example and an experiment in this methodological landscape. It is supported in large part by a grant from Microsoft Community Affairs. Direction, guidance and leadership has been provided by Andrew Gordon of the Daniel J. Evans School of Public Affairs at the University of Washington. Joe Sullivan, staff researcher at the Center for Information and Society, is the lead editor for this project.

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After finishing high school, and then a vocational degree in science, Inoka knew she would need further skills to compete in the job market. She was also aware that more training costs more money, and that her elderly parents – having already raised Inoka's older siblings – were having trouble making ends meet in rural Sri Lanka. Still, Inoka convinced them that ICT training at the local village telecenter was worthwhile, and her parents managed the five hundred Rupees (fifty dollars) monthly tuition for six months.

As her ICT training course was winding down, Inoka asked her telecenter for one more piece of assistance: help finding a job. Through the telecenter jobs bank Inoka found a well-paying, full-time position at the local pharmacy.

"It was difficult to pay," Inoka Thushari recalled during an interview at the pharmacy where she works. But her parents knew the importance of their daughter's education. Their sacrifice made Inoka even more committed to finding work after completing the 120 hour course and receiving her diploma. The first step in the job hunt was to seek advice from the telecenter staff where she studied.

When Inoka asked for help, Latha, the telecenter manager, was already one step ahead. Over the past two years, the community telecenter in the village of Sevangala in southern Sri Lanka has been weaving job placement assistance into its ICT training programs. For Inoka, the "jobs bank" resulted in a well-paying and secure full-time job at a pharmacy in the main town five miles up the road. Among the other Sevangala ICT graduates looking for work, so far about 40% have found jobs in this way.

Though it is slowly growing into a more complex database (it now has a website: www.srilankajobs.net), the jobs bank is really just a simple, logical idea. Why not help your training students find work after their course is over? And while you're at it, why not have the job search be part of the training sessions in the ICT courses?

The Nenasalas of rural Sri Lanka offer a wide range of ICT support to a broad cross-section of the public. This monk stopped in to fax billing information to his Buddhist temple's mobile phone service provider.

Training and Job Placement Go Hand-in-Hand

Standing in the training center on a hot June afternoon, manager Latha explained the importance of the practical job search aspect of the training program. "When they are studying they upload their CVs and they see what kinds of opportunities are available for them…they can see what are the qualities they should develop

to get the job, that way they have a clear idea." It's a practical approach that makes sense, says Latha. "While they are there they should know what are the potential in the society, what are the qualities they should develop, and they are opened to the outer world."

The Sevangala telecenter is a beehive of activity: on a recent Wednesday morning two Buddhist monks sit waiting while a third faxes billing information to his mobile phone service provider; two local government officials stop in to make photocopies; a steady stream of locals use various communications equipment as Rupees slowly fill the wooden cash box. These public services are located in the main entrance, and provide a good portion of the center's income.

Equally as much traffic heads to the classroom in the back – where Inoka had taken her ICT training. Twelve computer work stations fill the rear of the telecenter, and on this day nearly a dozen students follow their trainer, Sumit Subasingha, matching his Word lecture at the white board with their own keystrokes on their PCs.

Also in the training room, a telecenter staff member enters the job posting for a secretary at an accountant's office in the nearby city of Galle. The young woman types a job summary and uploads a scanned copy of the job announcement clipped from the Sunday newspaper.

When asked how she developed all the ICT skills necessary to update the jobs bank, the staff member replies with the obvious: she, too, is a graduate of the Sevangala telecenter. Center manager Latha explains that the telecenter would like to hire more training graduates to work as staff, but it's not a practical approach. Graduates, instead, go to "the outer world."

National Network Grows from Pilot Program

Referred to as a "Nenalasa," or village information center, the Sevengala telecenter is part of a nationwide scale-up from a pilot program begun in Sri Lanka in the mid-1990s. Begun by a leading Sri Lankan NGO called Sarvodaya, a core of seventeen telecenters grew to form a much broader network today. Midway through the decade-long experiment, the Nenasalas got a shot in the arm from Microsoft in 2004. The grant helped refurbish six of the centers, build six more, and provided the centers with Microsoft Unlimited Potential curriculum to guide the trainings. Today, that curriculum has grown into what is locally called the "Diploma in Computer Applications": a training program that tracks the UP curriculum, adds other elements, and is available in both English and the local Sinhalese language.

The village telecenter in Sevanagala, Sri Lanka – called a Nenasala – is one of 500 across the country. The Sri Lankan telecenters benefit from the legacy of a pilot program, whose first expansion was supported by Microsoft UP.

During the telecenter expansion, the Sri Lankan government took notice. They decided to expand the telecenter idea nationwide under its ICT Agency. Through a World Bank grant, and support from Sarvodaya, Sri Lanka now has five hundred Nenasalas nationwide, and is on its way to a total of one thousand. Government funding is only guaranteed for three years, and after that the Nenasalas need to be self-sufficient. The pressure of sustainability motivates the Sevangala center to offer its broad menu of public communications services: faxing, photocopying, scanning, Internet use, the training courses, and the jobs bank.

The center director, Bimal Prasad, has also set up a recycled computer sales department – helping some training graduates leave not only with an education, but with a PC as well.

According to Isura Silva, the Colombo-based director of the Sarvodaya program assisting the Nenasalas, some of the telecenters will be able to continue on independently, and others will not. Sustainability is tough. But the Sevengala telecenter approach is a model for entrepreneurship, Silva says, and they will make it.

Using the Jobs Bank

For Inoka Thushari, securing employment meant asking for assistance from the jobs bank. It's free for those taking training courses, and fifty Rupees (about fifty cents) and hour for those wishing to search for jobs. Posting a CV is free for everyone. During the three months after completing her ICT training and passing the final exam, Inoka continued to practice her skills at the center and used the jobs bank to search for work. Soon she learned that there was a position available for a lab tester at the local pharmacy in Embilipitya, just up the road. With her previous science training through a post-high school vocational program, and now her e-skills, Inoka applied. Her employer was pleased with her ICT training and certification, telling her: "these are the skills we need."

Now Inoka earns 5000 Rupees a month working at the pharmacy – a very good salary for the region. The job also comes with significant benefits: free housing in a staff dormitory, a food allowance, and a retirement program. Inoka's work primarily involves preparing lab reports for patients, and she uses her new Word and Excel skills throughout the workday.

The telecenter jobs bank is well-used by employers and job seekers alike. Telecenter staff take the relationship between ICT training and employability seriously, and demonstrate real results: such as the new profession for Inoka Thushari as a pharmacist.

Among graduates of the Sevangala training center, Inoka is not alone. Over the past two years other students have also found work: in the big city of Colombo in the communications field, in the nearby towns working in Cyber Cafés, and others – like Inoka – in government jobs such as pharmacies. The telecenter offers training courses for various levels, including young children, and current government employees seeking promotions or transfers. Of the two hundred who have completed the training for high school graduates (Inoka's course), 80% have passed the exam. Most were not looking for work, but focused on admission to university. Of the fifty who were looking for work, twenty so far have found jobs.

The Sevangala jobs bank has a reach far beyond this southern Sri Lankan village: it is now used by the national telecenter network. With active contributions from two hundred Nenasalas, the bank has received over one thousand inquiries and CVs from job seekers. On the employer end, the jobs bank charges for ads and has a steady flow of them.

Today the jobs bank has simple functions for scrolling through job postings, and it allows users to email CVs and inquiries to staff who then forward the CVs to relevant employers. Soon it will evolve to be self-regulated by users. In the early days the "jobs bank" was simply the staff themselves: they looked through newspapers and the government gazettes, made a few cell phone calls, asked around, and made notes with pen and paper – anything to provide informed advice to their students looking for work. That informal helping spirit still characterizes the system today, as it expands in efficiency and scope.

The Human Touch

Isura Silva, head of the support team at Sarvodaya, helps the government Nenasalas transition both to sustainability and also to becoming a functioning nationwide network. The Sarvodaya program is bolstered by the legacies of programs like Microsoft UP, and current support from the Sri Lankan government. Sustainability must come through the drive and commitment of the telecenters themselves, Isura says. The "passion" of the individuals behind the wheel is essential, he insists, and "one thing, only one thing" will help them survive and thrive: "the spirit of entrepreneurship."

At the Sevangala telecenter the entrepreneurial spirit is evident. It is a business spirit, but one that is framed by service to the community. The poorest students get scholarships; those who pay for trainings are charged less than half the rate of for-profit computer schools. And the staff work tirelessly on their job bank: scouring sources for the latest positions, forwarding email inquiries and CVs from clients, providing advice on the phone and assistance typing CVs. These support activities are the difference between a Nenasala and a traditional Cyber Café, Isura explains. "In a Cyber Café, you disappear into your cubicle and get charged by the second." In a telecenter, it's about "the human touch."

The Nenasala in Sevanagala offers a menu of several ICT training programs, and runs them six days a week. Here trainer Sumit Subasingha lectures on Word in the main 120 hour course for high school graduates. The lesson plans are adapted from the Microsoft UP curriculum used in the early Sri Lankan telecenters in 2004.

For all their entrepreneurial spirit and staff dedication, these telecenters owe a great deal to the international donors and the government ICT Agency which provided the initial spark. Sitting in her pharmacy waiting room at the end of our long interview, Inoka is asked whether all the assistance is paying off. I explain about the overall goal of employability, telling Inoka that donors wonder whether there is a relationship between ICT training and jobs. Dressed in her bright white candy-striper uniform, and getting ready to head back to work, Inoka thinks for just a second and then replies: "Their ambition is fulfilled through these programs."

AUTHOR

Mark West is an ethnographer whose international research and work in the development field is based in South Asia and in Central and Eastern Europe. Mark's fieldwork has centered on the use of critical ethnography to bring a more participatory connection between local communities and international development projects.

In South Asia, Mark's research and work focus on the resistance networks of rural Dalits, or "untouchables," with a particular interest in the grassroots campaigns of barefoot lawyers. In Central and Eastern Europe he has worked to improve the transparency and communications of newly developing court systems. Since 2007, Mark has begun conducting fieldwork with the CIS on the economic and social impact of ICT programs in marginalized communities around the world.

Mark has served as a rule of law consultant with the United States Agency for International Development in Eastern Europe, and as a Human Rights Field Mentor with Stanford LawSchool. He holds a J.D. from the University of Washington, and is a Ph.D. Candidate in the School of Communication and Department of Anthropology at Northwestern University.