MULTIMEDIA TRAINING KIT

Case Study Name : Volunteers Contributing to MDGs:
#3 Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women

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The M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF) operates the Information Village Research Project in rural southern India (in 12 villages near Pondicherry). The Project is run with funding from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA).

A large percentage of the families in these villages are officially classified as 'below the poverty line'. MSSRF has set up knowledge centers in these villages, connected through a hybrid wired and wireless network. Each center has several computers and some means of communication (telephone and modem, spread spectrum, VHF two-way radio, etc).

One of the things that makes this project outstanding is its emphasis on local volunteer involvement and capacity-building, as well as its emphasis on involving local women as volunteers in the knowledge centers. Subbiah Arunachalam (Arun for short), who is affiliated with the project, discusses this ICT project and its involvement of local women volunteers:

"We have set up knowledge centres in these villages and each centre is managed by local volunteers selected by the local community. More than half the volunteers are women. They all use computers, input information in Tamil (the local language which has 247 letters in its alphabet) using the standard QWERTY English language keyboards, send and receive email messages, prepare reports, code html, transmit data and voice messages, and so on. Some of them surf the net as well. Incidentally none of them had ever seen a computer, nor had used a telephone, before the knowledge centres were set up six years ago."

"The women in the Pondicherry villages have acquired some status and standing in the community. Men - farmers, landless labourers, traders - come and ask them for information and they provide the answers. They have set up self-help groups and micro-enterprises. They have taken part in discussions held at our Foundation and answered questions posed by many overseas delegates. Only a few years ago they would not have ventured out of their village unaccompanied by their husbands or in-laws. They are better off in every respect today than they were a few years ago."

According to one volunteer: "Initially, my husband was not happy. He did not like the idea of my spending several hours at the knowledge centre without any income. But one day late in the evening an elderly lady came to my home and thanked me profusely for saving her cow, the only source of her income (On coming to know that the cow had problems delivering her calf, I rang up several veterinary doctors in the neighborhood and one of them came and saved the cow). After that incident, my husband became very supportive of my work in the knowledge centre."

Arun notes that the process for the introduction of the knowledge centers plays a role in how local women volunteers become involved: "Setting up a knowledge centre in a village is a fairly long process. First the choice of a village and then getting accepted by the local community. We have social scientists in our team who do this part of the work. Initially, people would like to know if we were part of the government and if we would give away some freebies. Of course, we are neither part of the government nor are we interested in giving away anything. We tell them about the benefits that can accrue if we work together. Tell them how simply because they do not know something they are unable to take advantage of a government scheme or miss an important event. Tell them about the advantages of knowing in good time the market prices of farm produce and farm inputs. Tell them how they can use the centralised facility to file their grievances with the government, and so on. Once they are convinced, we enter into a Memorandum of Understanding with the village community. Some Panchayat (local government leaders or temple trustees from the village and our chairman sign on a solemn document."

Another volunteer described the problems of bringing computers to her village: "Our village is a Dalit (untouchable) village. People are very poor. Most of us live in mud houses with a thatched hut. We had never used a computer before, and there was not even a telephone in our village. The centre provided us with computers, and we are now able to get the information we need. When important information is provided, such as state level school examination results or details of new government schemes, people from our neighborhood upper-caste villages come to our centre to obtain information - they also use our centre for typing biodata and other documents."

Arun goes on to say, "Usually the community agrees to provide a good room to locate the knowledge centre and provide volunteers and then the Foundation agrees to provide all the technologies and to train the volunteers in using the technologies. We insist that the programme should be 'inclusive' and no one should be excluded. Everyone, the rich and the poor, old and young, the educated and the illiterate, men and women of all faiths and castes should have access to the centre. We request the community to nominate several volunteers and suggest that at least half of them be women. WE DO NOT CHOOSE the volunteers. The local community nominates them. But we do make suggestions about the composition. In one village [Embalam] all volunteers are women and we never had a single male volunteer. In some villages men outnumber women. But in all the villages put together, we have more women volunteers than men."

Another volunteer described her experiences this way: "I feel happy if I am able to be of some help to others. After all when I am finished with my work and my husband goes to the field and the kids go to school I am not really doing much at home. I use the time for the benefit of all. When people say that the information we provide resulted in some benefit to them, I feel very happy."

According to Arun, volunteers undertake a number of responsibilities: "The main task of the volunteers is to manage the knowledge centres, which means answering the queries from the members of the community, based on information provided by the hub at Villianur (where all information is input and any value addition needed is carried out). As the information arrives on the centre's PC (from the main server at the Villianur hub), the volunteers must be able to go to the relevant file and look for the answer to the queries. Sometimes, they call the hub by phone and get a reply to a question. They should be able to input important news headlines from the daily newspaper they receive. They should be trained in typing in Tamil, the local language. Our staff from the MSSRF Informatics Centre at Chennai went to Villianur

and trained the initial set of volunteers in the use of computers, typing text, spreadsheet, etc. Later on these volunteers trained others. We also engaged a Chennai-based computer training institute to give a three-week programme to interested people (in three one-week segments interspersed with a long break for people to practise and assimilate whatever was taught). Today more than a thousand people in the ten villages we work with are computer literate. Some volunteers gather information from the government and other sources on their own initiative and pass on this information to the hub at Villianur!"

One computer user described his experience at the centre: "I heard an announcement over the public address system of the Veerampattinam knowledge centre about loans being given for the purchase of catamarans (country fishing boats). I went to the centre and prepared an application and submitted it well within the time limit. I was given a loan of Rs 15,000. But for the knowledge centre we would have missed many such benefits. There are others in our village who got jobs in the Fire Service and in the Armed Forces, thanks to the knowledge centre."

Arun notes that the project relies very heavily on local volunteers and good practices in volunteer management: "As the volunteers are totally responsible for running the knowledge centres, they must have good coordination among themselves. If someone has to leave the centre early on a particular day for some reason, someone else should be ready to keep the centre functioning. Second, they should be willing to learn new skills. Before the knowledge centres were set up most villagers in Pondicherry had not seen a computer or used a telephone. But our volunteers learnt to use computers in a few weeks."

There are often challenges to getting women to use the knowledge centres and to be volunteers in such centers. Arun's project, while having a good number of female volunteers, still has a larger number of males than females using the knowledge centers. But the women who are involved play an important role.

"To attract women to come and use the knowledge centre our staff go to meetings of women self-help groups and tell them about the variety of information that they can get from the centres. The presence of female volunteers helps to attract more women users. In some centres the volunteers organise an occasional counseling session exclusively for women and issues such as drunken husbands, wife beating, husbands abandoning wives to remarry, etc. have come up in these sessions. In Veerampattinam, the fishing village, women rarely come, as most of them are out in the field selling fish when the centre is open. Besides, the crucial waveheight information obtained from a US Navy website is broadcast over the public address system several times a day. That not only warns the fishermen when not to venture into the sea, but also alerts the wives who then tell their husbands to help them do things at home rather than go out and gossip with other men!"

Arun says the women volunteers experience benefits themselves, but also face challenges because they volunteer.

"The women volunteers are indeed very proud that they are working at the knowledge centres and helping the community. They are happy that their time is spent usefully in the service of others. Initially, there was some resistance from their families. But when people started coming to them for help and started thanking and praising them for some good resulting out of their help, the families became more understanding and supportive. Occasionally, a husband may feel jealous that the wife is getting to be known better. But the volunteers have so far handled these situations admirably."

"In the beginning it was a novel experience for the women. Usually, village women are shy and keep away from men folk from outside their families. In the early days of the knowledge centre when men used to come asking for information the women volunteers used to stand up and answer. An instinctive reaction in our culture. But now they are more comfortable."

Why is it important to involve local volunteers in this effort?

Arun says, "Because eventually the knowledge centre is theirs (the villagers) and not ours (MSSRF). This sense of ownership is very important for the success of the whole effort. The knowledge centre is collectively owned by the community for everyone's benefit. That is Swaminathan's concept. That is the only way technology can be brought to serve the poor and the marginalized. It is not only those who manage the knowledge centres who are local volunteers; the persons who gather information from the meteorological office and the markets are also local volunteers - some of them college students. We pay them a small honorarium for them to travel to the locations where they gather information and to cover their telephone expenses."

Arun continues:

"If anyone thinks that women are less capable of using technology, I would like him (or her) to hear Prof. M S Swaminathan speak about how rural women, some of whom have not even completed ten years of formal education, 'take to technology like fish to water.' As Swaminathan keeps saying, if you educate and empower a woman the benefit reaches the entire family. It gets amplified. Income earned by a woman goes to ensure food and nutrition for the family, education of the children and eventually development of the community. "

The women volunteers and users of the centers now see themselves connected to the world outside of their village.

"Prof. Bruce Alberts, President of the US National Academy of Sciences had visited our all-women knowledge centre at Embalam twice and is planning to visit again soon. He was very impressed with the computer skills of these women volunteers, and he gifted a computer to the centre. When the September 11 tragedy devastated USA, the volunteers sent an email message to Prof. Alberts expressing their concern and grief and inquiring if everyone in his family was safe. Again, days before the war in Iraq started they sent him an email message requesting him to work towards preventing the war from taking place. They are no longer the ordinary village women whose horizon does not extend beyond their village. They are on their way to becoming global citizens."

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