ICT FOR SUSTAINABLE AND EQUITABLE DEVELOPMENT - A PROJECT FOR THE ETHNIC INDIGENOUS TRIBAL MINORITY COMMUNITY IN THE KHAGRACHARI HILLY DISTRICT OF BANGLADESH

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ABSTRACT

The developments that shape the information society should pursue goals of sustainable human development and support for cultural and linguistic diversity. The technological knowledge of the rural ethnic indigenous minority hilly people needs to be made more accessible. They also have specific concerns and perspectives, which need to be integrated into ICT project as well as into information systems for their development. This paper will try to address this issue and will also speak the decentralized, interactive and non-hierarchical nature of an IT project which will present an easy space for the Ethnic Indigenous Tribal Minority Community to develop their views, opinions and benefit from it.

INTRODUCTION

The situation of the Jumma peoples (Jumma peoples mean: the Ethnic Indigenous Tribal Minority Community in the Hilly region of Bangladesh) has not changed despite of the change of the government in Bangladesh. The issue of genuine autonomy for the entire CHT region is not yet resolved also. Both external and internal dislocation of Jumma families, as a result of human rights violations and evictions, has severely disrupted the entire socio-economic life in the area.

The 8th National Parliamentary Election was held on 1 October 2001, by which Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) alliance government came to the state power of Bangladesh. It is notable that Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti (PCJSS), the only political party representing the indigenous Jumma people in the CHT, opposed and boycotted the election, as the electoral roll was not prepared with the permanent residents as per the CHT Accord.

In order to resolve the land disputes in the CHT a Land Commission has to be formed as per the accord. To date, the chairman of the commission was appointed only. But the commission is yet to start functioning. On the other, the previous Awami League government just one day before handing over its power to the Caretaker government passed the CHT Land Dispute Settlement Commission Act 2001 in the Parliament without having any consultation with the CHTRC. Consequently, the said Act contains some provisions contradictory to the CHT Accord.

Due to delays in the settlement of land disputes and the non-functioning of the Land Commission, the land related problems are becoming worse. Settlers are grabbing more lands. Extensions of the settlers’ cluster villages as well as infiltration of new settlers into the CHT are on.

The rehabilitation of the international returnee refugees and the internally displaced Jumma families has yet not taken place. Even the Chairman of the Task Force on rehabilitation of returnee refugees and internally displaced Jumma families is yet to be appointed. As a result, more than 100,000 internally displaced Jumma families are living in sub-human condition. For the similar reason, 40 villages of returnee refugees are still under the occupation of the Bengali Muslim settlers and over 3,000 families did not get back their own land.

Until now, since signing the Accord in 1997, no subject was transferred to the HDCs. The HDCs were not formed through election.
The UNDP-GOB Joint Risk Assessment Mission, which visited 3 (three) Hill Districts of CHT in June, has recently published an assessment report officially on 14 August 2002 in Dhaka. The Mission has reported that there is a favorable situation in the CHT for restarting development activities except in some areas. Though it has emphasized the implementation of the CHT Accord for establishing sustainable peace in CHT.

Though the CHT Accord between the PCJSS and Bangladesh Government was signed in order to find a peaceful and political solution to the CHT problem. Although there is still hope that the western donor governments, institutions and non-governmental funding organizations have been taking interest to mobilize financial aid for the development of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, that which is an encouraging indication indeed for the development of the indigenous minority people.

The Parbatya Bouddha Mission (PBM) came into existence in 1983 with a view to establish a free, fair and harmonious society based on equal human and civil rights where different groups of ethnic indigenous minority community people living in the hilly region of Bangladesh of every walk of their life will enjoy equal rights, opportunities as economic, social and political. PBM is duly registered with the Directorate of Social Welfare, Government of Bangladesh- Directorate of Social Welfare Registration No is 06/85 and PBM is also registered with the NGO Affairs Bureau, Prime Minister Office, Government of Bangladesh-NGO Affairs Bureau Registration No is 977. PBM has only been working in the hilly region.

PROJECT OBJECTIVES

i. To test whether Internet can be brought to remote communities;

ii. To check whether weekly markets can provide the leverage for “door-step” availability of Internet;

iii. To assess the impact of use of Internet on tribal indigenous minority men and women;

iv. Promote women’s voices to expression and communication through the use of ICT;

v. To identify areas where Internet can be used both in collaboration with Government & otherwise;

vi. Empowerment of indigenous minority women using ICT;

vii. To understand how the Government machinery responds to the use of this technology;

viii. Promote the use of ICT as an effective tool in distributing information about rural weekly market in the hilly area which will contribute in poverty alleviation;

ix. Leveraging the Weekly Market Center of the Functional Community for greater access to information through ICT;

x. Support civil society initiatives, especially those of women’s organizations in monitoring ICT policies and programs and promote women participation in ICT activities;

xi. The project will use this unique opportunity of thousands of people coming together every week & on daily basis for Marketing of rural product;

xii. Information about availability of agricultural inputs & prices;

xiii. Information & Help during epidemics & seasonal diseases.

Strategies

The following two principal considerations have been kept in mind while designing the proposed project:

- Responding to user needs
- Fostering scalability and sustainability

The project plan has been designed in full consultation with the stakeholders (the indigenous minority community) and takes into account the long-term strategy of the Government of Bangladesh for the use of
information and communication technologies. At the same time, care has been taken to incorporate elements that address some of the key concerns particular to the accessibility of ICT for the community people.

Features of the Project Area
- About 3000 thousand people from 8 hilly villages come to this weekly market centers every week on a fixed day;
- About 500 people visit the village market center place for their daily needs;
- More than 85 % of the population in the hilly area is below poverty line;
- They have no money to travel to markets & Government offices;
- The District head quarter is about 35 km away from the proposed project area;
- Indigenous minority women never get an opportunity of traveling to Government offices or business/market centers;
- Most important feature is that no ICT or such related project has implemented yet for the indigenous minority community in the Khagrachari district;
- There is serious scarcity of telephone lines in the hilly district Khagrachari. Availability of use of telephone line at Khagrachari District headquarter is less than 10%;
- The village does not get electricity for even few hours per day.

What project will address:
There is no Internet availability & will not come for another 23 years or so on in the project area;
- Presently, the tribal indigenous minority community in remote hilly areas has little access to information on commodity markets;
- Presently, the tribal indigenous minority community in remote hilly areas has little access to information on employment & labor markets;
- Presently, the tribal indigenous minority community in remote hilly areas has little access to information on government schemes;
- Presently, the tribal indigenous minority community in remote hilly areas has poor grievance redress mechanism at Government level;
- Presently, the tribal indigenous minority community population in remote hilly areas has spent a lot of time and money for getting information.

How project will work
The project will be implemented in remote poorest tribal indigenous minority community dominated areas of the Khagrachari district of the hilly region.

The project will provide a facility of email, Internet & computers to the indigenous minority community in the 8 villages of the hilly region to access information, avail better e-governance facilities & send/receive messages through three IT centers.

The poor villagers of the indigenous minority community living in the hilly area will expose them to this facility over the project period and after the project period.

It will be centered on a weekly based three-market centers village named i) Kamalchari, ii) Headmanpara and iii) Gargajyachari which is visited by about 3000 indigenous minority community every Thursday and another 500 villagers on other days of the week.

It will also investigate the feasibility of using ICT in the context of Functional Communities & Weekly Market Centers.

The project will save substantial expenses which poor villagers currently make to access information by traveling & spending their time (equivalent of daily wages).

The project will take help of women in the villages who will act as the catalyst in this information exchange activities.
PROJECT IMPACT

♦ Benefit to rural poor indigenous minority community in the hilly district of Khagrachari;
♦ Saving of time & money;
♦ Quicker redress of complaints;
♦ Quicker satisfaction of information needs;
♦ Lesser harassment;
♦ Internet access is possible by the indigenous minority community who live in the remote hilly areas;
♦ Weekly markets provide the leverage for “door-step” availability of Internet;
♦ Facilitated indigenous women empowerment;
♦ Areas identified where Internet can be used in the hilly area;
♦ Identified complimentary technologies such as public address system;
♦ It is possible now to understand how the Government machinery responds to the use of this technology;
♦ Community now has assess the economic benefit;
♦ Indigenous minority women’s rights to expression and communication through the use of ICT has promoted;
♦ Information dissemination has ensured about rural weekly market in the hilly area;
♦ Civil society and women’s organizations participating in monitoring ICT policies and programs have increased;
♦ Information about availability of agricultural inputs & prices will be available to the community.

Who are the intended beneficiaries

The project will immediately benefit roughly 3000 indigenous minority villagers (out of 3000, 1350 is young women/girls who usually go to the market place, this is the tradition among the indigenous minority community in the hilly area) of the hilly district of Khagrachari District. Direct beneficiaries will include:

75 young women/girls and 50 men will who receive computer training that will assume the sustainable operation of the centers in their villages.

Villagers who will have much-needed access to pricing and other information from the weekly market.

Project will also include as beneficiaries about 500 people from about 8 villages who come to Kamalchari on other days.

Member of the civil society organizations, NGOs and other organizations members who are working in the hilly project area.

The indigenous minority community women and men who do not have enough money to travel to markets or Government offices will also be the beneficiaries.

What project will produce

Three centers will be setup under the proposed project at i) Kamalchari which is a functional community based weekly market place ii) Headmanpara and iii) Gargajyachari (other two potential market place for IT center).

Women information leaders through awareness programs will mobilize by the indigenous minority community.

The village center at Kamalchari will collect queries & complaints.

Besides using Internet information at Kamalchari, Headmanpara and Gargajyachari under the Khagrachari District, Centers will get answers to queries & complaints especially from the local Government.

The above answers to queries & complaints will be transferred to village IT center for passing on to a) the individual b) to the community by public address system c) to the community by women information leaders.

Resources needed

Money. Human resources, IT Manager, radio link equipment’s, computers and furniture’s.
PROJECT SUSTAINABILITY

Each IT Center at the market place under the project will be independently sustainable. Each center will be owned and managed by the indigenous minority community, which will employ trained two-person teams of young women/girl at each IT center to operate the IT center. They will be responsible for follow up activities to continue the each center. Wages for the employed youth and other operating costs will be paid a percentage of the gross income of their IT Center. Fees will be charged as follows:

- Charge a fee for this service from the community;
- Link with government departments & provide them the service at cost;
- Allow the traders to use this at cost;
- Get government grants;
- Get donations.

The generated fund will be kept equally in the men and women group account, which will use for the continuation of the project.

How Project will address Gender Issue

The absence of a gender perspective in assessing the implications of ICT policies, programs and projects for women and men only further perpetuate the gender and digital divide. The international community has recognized the empowerment of women as a vital element in national development efforts. Therefore, the developments that shape the information society should pursue goals of gender equality and women’s advancement, as well as social, political and economic justice, sustainable human development, and support for cultural and linguistic diversity. Communication is a basic human need, indispensable for the organization of societies, and should be the foundation for building the information society. Indigenous minority women’s effective participation will be ensured under the project, because 45% of the beneficiaries will be the indigenous minority young women/girls under the proposed project. Project will positively contribute and facilitate indigenous women’s economic, social and political participation. The young indigenous women under the project will become transformative agents in their own lives and in the society. The project will ensure that the indigenous minority women will be the information leaders in the hilly area and through training it will ensure. The project will also promote indigenous minority women’s rights to expression and communication through the use of ICT in the rural hilly areas of Bangladesh.

The rural indigenous women have scientific and technological expertise and knowledge, which should be made more accessible. They also have specific concerns and perspectives, which need to be integrated into ICT project as well as into information systems for sustainable and equitable development. The proposed project will also try to address this issue. The decentralized, interactive and non-hierarchical nature of the proposed project present a easy space for women to develop their views, opinions, benefit from the synergy of interactive communications with women at the market place IT centers.

Women are unacquainted with ICTs and uncomfortable with using them. They need to be supported in learning to work with, and to feel confident of their ability to use these technologies productively. As a result, they need more initial encouragement and training at the beginning and are less active in learning the new technologies—though once having learned the skills they work very effectively. The proposed project will address this issue.

The project participants and the community people will be actively and directly involved with its all activities. There will be a 3 (three) local committee equally consist with the men and women group members, local council members, representative from civil society groups, this committee will be directly liable for the management and maintenance of the three IT centers. The nature of the proposed project is people oriented and this project is belong to them, therefore, the ownership will be entrenched among the beneficiaries in implementing the project and project output will also contribute in realizing the beneficiaries for the ownership of the project.
CONCLUSION

The lesson for us is clear. We must learn humility in our work and support, not direct, the people we work with. We need their partnership, as they need ours. Poverty, like much in life, is experienced differently by women and men, by children and elderly people in the indigenous minority society and so it follows that strategies to impact poverty must be informed by those they seek to affect. The proposed project offers a way in which those most affected can be supported to speak for themselves and take that message in their own words to the highest levels. It means that other people do not define the indigenous minority people’s problem and decide the solution but rather the poor themselves have the power to directly affect their future.

Making modern ICTs accessible as a tool for individual empowerment of the indigenous minority people is vital if the new technology is not to compound the existing injustices. Democracy depends on representation, on being heard. It is vital that poor indigenous minority people can speak out on behalf of all poor people and that somehow they overcome the cultural and gender barriers to their use of the technology. Project will collectively strengthen young women/girl group cohesion and solidarity among themselves, which will help them to solve their socio economic and political problem.. Measuring the social and economic status of the women group members, it can be determine that the project has changed their situation. The project will also make space for the following opportunities:

- Increase women’s awareness of the potential benefits of ICTs.
- Sensitize leaders of women’s as NGOs group members of the benefits of using ICTs.
- Increase confidence concerning women’s abilities to work with and productively use ICTs.
- Project will encourage women’s active contributions and interaction, in terms of production of information for dissemination.

Parbatya Bouddha Mission (PBM) is planning to implement this project as soon as PBM receive funding from any sources.