

Potential impact of ICTs on rural & urban disparities in India

There is an increasingly widening gap between urban and rural areas in India, with 70% of India's poor living in rural areas.

Fundamentally, poverty is a result of a lack of access to the 5 capital assets; Natural, Social, Human, Financial, and Physical. People in rural areas often find it harder to access these capital assets, especially human, financial, and physical, as the supply of basic services and infrastructure is severely lacking.

For example, with regard to education (human capital), many rural people have to organise and build their own schools, as well as paying teachers' wages - if indeed there are hardly any teachers available. In urban areas, however, education is managed and arranged for by the government. It is important that the government looks at rural areas with equal focus.

The same disparity occurs with electricity supply (physical capital). About 60% of rural Indian households do not have a power connection, but in urban areas, this figure is only 20%.

There is no level playing field between rural and urban areas, and as long as this remains the case, the gap between rural and urban areas will continue to widen.

Information and knowledge (human capital) are a key requirement for accessing other capital assets, and therefore an extremely powerful tool for empowering people and striving towards social equity. ICTs have the potential to play an important role in poverty reduction strategies, and allowing rural people the same level of access to timely and relevant information as in urban areas, such as market information or new government schemes. One example where poor information and communication have hampered the poor is the lack of information with regard to NREGA (National Rural Employment Guarantee Act), an act passed with the aim of boosting the rural economy by offering up to 100 days of work per household. However, many of the rural poor are unaware of the scheme or how to access it.

There are a number of issues affecting the accessibility of ICTs in rural areas, including a lack of physical

infrastructure, such as electricity supply. A poorer standard of education is also an issue, as accessing ICTs usually requires a level of literacy. Another issue is the lack of investment by IT companies, who focus on the wealthier, and hence more educated in urban areas.

One initiative to try and address this imbalance has been the establishment of Village Resources Centers (VRCs) by Gram Vikas, (in collaboration with the Department of Space, and Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO). Gram Vikas is a rural development organisation working with the poor and marginalised communities in Orissa. Their primary focus is to work with villagers to access sanitation and safe drinking water, thereby restoring some elements of dignity into people's lives. However, an after effect of this process is villagers feeling empowered and motivated to tackle other issues, such as the lack of access to information, hence establishing VRCs.

VRCs hold a variety of information; both local and external, including a place where government related information, such as details about NREGA and market prices can be disseminated. Computer and television access is often available at these centers, as well as consultants visiting to provide information on a variety of topics such as veterinary and health care. All this goes

some way to ensuring rural areas have access to timely and relevant information, which can increase access to other assets.

Addressing poor communication and information channels in rural areas through initiatives such as VRCs is crucial in addressing the increasing disparity between rural and urban areas. For it to be successful on a much wider scale, it will however require poverty to be put at the heart of future ICT policy, as well as ICT companies being prepared to invest in rural areas.

References:

Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (2001). Reducing disparities: Balanced development of urban and rural areas and Regions within the Countries of Asia and the Pacific

DFID (2004) India Country Plan.

Holt, G, Sulaimen.R.V (2002) Extension, Poverty and vulnerability in India.

Country study for the Neuchatel Initiative. ODI

Joe Madiath, Founder & CEO; Gram Vikas. He can be reached at info@gramvikas.org

I want to subscribe to dcontent

d CONTENT

NAME: _____

INSTITUTION: _____

ADDRESS: _____

STATE: _____

COUNTRY: _____

SUBSCRIPTION: 1 YEAR (RS 500/-) 2 YEARS (RS 1000/-) 3 YEARS (RS 1500/-)

I WISH TO PAY BY: CASH CHEQUE/DEMAND DRAFT CHEQUE/DD NO DATED: _____

PAYABLE TO DIGITAL EMPOWERMENT FOUNDATION AT 12/17 SARVAPRIYA VIHAR, NEW DELHI - 110 017