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A Study on Sustainability Plan of Village Knowledge Centre in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh

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Abstract

The Village Knowledge Centre has made its mark in bringing out knowledge connectivity among the community members by its services pertaining to content dissemination, capacity building and linkages. Thus far it positioned its stand among different players in the national scenario due its focus on knowledge connectivity leading to development with social inclusion principle. The journey with the Village Knowledge Centre for more than a decade with an M S Swaminathan Research Foundation supported by various funding agencies, who believed in this concept, yielded quite good experience on ground. At this juncture, an inter programme area collaborative initiative was done between Informatics Division and Coastal System Research by designing a project on "Strengthening the Resilience of tsunami affected community". The project incorporated the components of Bio-shield, Village Resource Centre (VRC) and Village Knowledge Centre (VKC), Livelihood and Disaster Risk Reduction. This was implemented in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh of India from April 2006 to March 2009. The project covered 18 villages encircling 10 in Tamil Nadu (TN) and 2 in Andhra Pradesh (AP), in which VKC was established in 10 villages (4 in AP and 6 in Tamil Nadu).The profile of the villages both in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh indicates that some of the villages are homogeneous in terms of caste and livelihood pattern while some are heterogeneous by caste and livelihood pattern. The major livelihood of the villagers lies in fishing, agriculture and livestock in TN and AP.

Key words: VRC, VKC, Social Inclusion

Introduction

The Village Resource and Knowledge Centre component of this project was coordinated by the Informatics Division of M S Swaminathan Research Foundation. The Partner NGOs were oriented and guided on the process of establishing both VRC and VKC including the purchase of needed equipments. The key persons and the panchayat leaders were oriented on the concept of VKC and its establishment process. The knowledge workers were given training on General Management of VKC both in TN and AP. Required exposure visits were done to ensure that the representative of community members acquire the pragmatic knowledge on VKC establishment and its functioning. The Informatics Division also coordinated the process of

conducting the training on gender sensitization among the staff and the community as well as building the system of monitoring and evaluation of the entire project components.

The VRC and VKC component started in the year 2007 and as a phasing out strategy, it was planned to develop a sustainability plan in a participatory manner for all the Village Knowledge centers by understanding the current situation and challenges. The plan was done for 7 village knowledge centers out of 10.
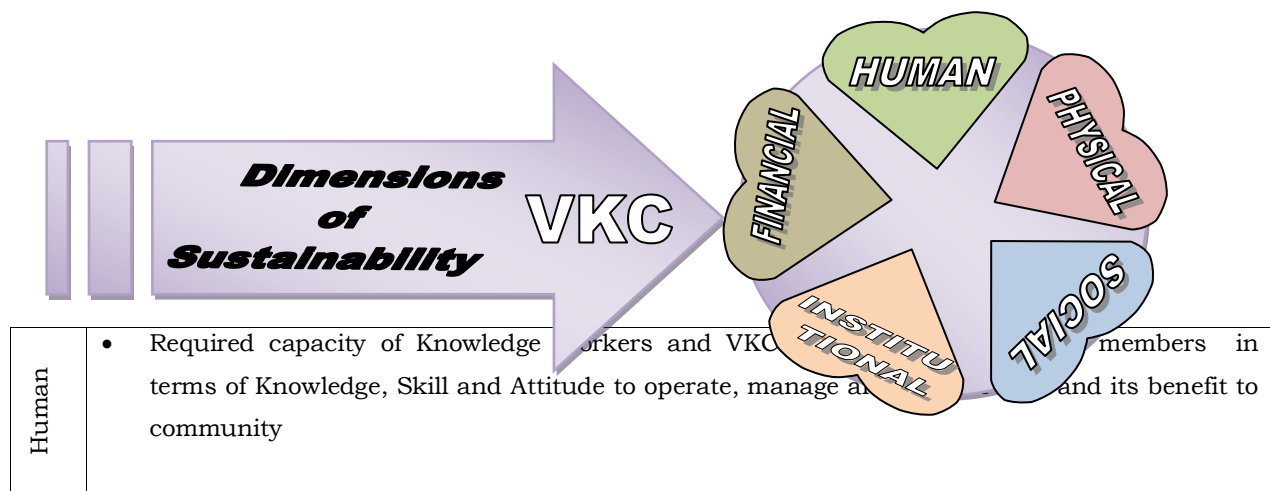
This report would brief the process undertaken for evolving the plan as well as elaborate the sustainability plan of the Village Knowledge Centers both in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh.

Objectives

- To comprehend the existing situation of Village Knowledge Centre in different dimensions and its benefit to community members
- To identify the gaps pertaining to Village Knowledge Centre in achieving sustainability
- To evolve sustainability plan for each Village Knowledge Centre

Sustainability of VKC: What does it mean? and Why?

Different players define sustainability with different perspectives depending upon the context with which they work. More than a decade experience of M S Swaminathan Research Foundation on Village Resource and Knowledge Centre enabled to view sustainability of VKC in different dimensions. The Village Knowledge Centre focusing on knowledge connectivity has its vital features for progressing in the ladder of sustainability in terms of human, social, institutional, physical and financial, i.e the broader and basic elements for strengthening and building the livelihood capacities of any vulnerable community. The following are the 5 dimensions that are essential for enabling the VKC to be sustainable and successful. Each dimension denotes specific aspects of VKC leading towards sustainability as follows:

Human	• Required capacity of Knowledge Workers and VKC ___ members in terms of Knowledge, Skill and Attitude to operate, manage a___ and its benefit to community

Physical	• Infrastructure facilities in VKC and its functioning to enable the users to benefit from the community. • Availability of content as material resource to cater to the requirement and felt needs of the community. • Linkages with different partners to provide content and capacity building support
Social	• Accessibility of VKC by the entire community barring caste, religion, gender and age. • Extent of VKC services reached community based on their demand driven needs including gender specific needs. • Level of community participation in VKC related activities
Institutional	• Constitution of a committee eliciting representation from the entire segment of the community • Technical know-how, do-how and active participation of committee to effectively and efficiently manage the Village Knowledge Centre
Financial	• Community contribution to have a sense of ownership over VKC • Current utilization pattern of existing VKC structure for generating financial resource • Plan and opportunities both external and internal for revenue / resource generation for VKC operation and maintenance

The aforementioned five different aspects are inter related and need to corroborate with each other for binding the functionality of village knowledge centre with the ladder of sustainability. The intensity and degree of each dimension paving to the expected level of output and outcome need to be brought to the equilibrium state for ensuring and realizing sustainability of VKC. Yet it is imperative to note that reaching out to this level requires witnessing process intensive maneuver and operation in correspondence with each village and its dynamics.

Understanding these sustainability dimensions in a VKC is essential to evolve a sustainability plan and this required a detailed assessment as it would shed light on the existing status and gaps and the good practices which are being right now existed on ground for strategizing the future efforts leading to sustainability.

Sustainability Plan of VKC - Villages Covered: An Overview: Together 4 VRCs and 10 VKCs have been established in both Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh with the support of partner organizations and community. Out of which, seven villages have been taken for evolving the sustainability plan in a participatory manner and as follows:

Organization and Place	state	Village Name
People's Action for Development - PAD, Vembar	Tamil Nadu	Roachmanagar & Thangamalpuram
Shelter, Kattumavadi	Tamil Nadu	Kattumavadi & Kandanivayal
Praja Pragathi Seva Sangam - PPSS, Machlipattinam, Krishna district	Andhra Pradesh	Sorlagundi & Edhirmundi
MSSRF, Kakkinada	Andhra Pradesh	Dhavaipetta

Process and Methodology Followed: In order to accomplish the task developing sustainability plan within a stipulated time, a systematic approach was followed by designing the assessment and plan process into a workshop mode for the VKCs under each Partner NGOs. Along with workshop, field visit was made to the Village Knowledge Centre to observe and discuss with the representatives of community members.

The Partner NGOs were requested to bring the knowledge workers and key persons who are given the responsibility to take care of VKC from the Village Development Management Committee to the workshop. It was also insisted that the represented members to be at the decision making level or at the level of influencing the decision making process as well as represent both sexes. The participation of staffs who are responsible to the VRC and VKC from the partner organization in this process was also ensured in all the places other than MSSRF personnel.

The workshop was designed in a way to facilitate a parallel "VKC specific focus group discussion" among the community representatives. A detailed tool to assess the existing situation and evolving the sustainability plan encompassing five dimensions such as human, social, physical, financial and institutional was designed and shared among the facilitators who led the focus group discussion. A brief discussion was held among facilitators prior to the workshop to have a uniform understanding about the workshop process, implementation of tool and the expected deliverables. Most of the partner organizations were able to mobilize key persons limiting to 1 or 2 villages to the workshop. Also despite of 2 Days allotment for the workshop, the representative members in few villages could not spend more than a day due to their occupation.

During the workshop, a briefing was done in the beginning of the workshop to emphasize the need and importance of the sustainability plan to the members. The community representatives were divided into village wise groups. The discussions were done with the community representatives for each dimension in a logical sequence placing physical, human, social, institutional and financial, in order to keep them in tact and acquaint them with the status of VKC and the interrelationship between the different dimensions. The design of the tool covering checklist and matrix focused mainly to ascertain existing status and gaps in the system corresponding to sustainability, SWOT (Strength, Weakness, Opportunities and Threats) pertaining to VKC, the plan for each dimension and the overall 3 year strategic plan for VKC.

The following are the VKC villages for which sustainability plans were prepared:

PAD, Vembar, TN	Thangamalpuram and Roachmanagar
SHELTER, Kattumavadi, TN	Kattumavadi and Kandanivayal

PPSS, Machlipattinam, AP	Sorlagundi and Edhirmundi
MSSRF, Kakinada, AP	Dhanavai petta

Following the workshop, a visit to the village was made by the team to observe the status of the VKC except Sorlagundi in Andhra Pradesh due to the effect of recent LYLA cyclone. Records like user registers, Computer Aided Learning Programme (CALP) attendance, and Microsoft Unlimited Potential Programme (MUPP) attendance were verified to basically understand the user pattern and usage of VKC and functionality of VKC etc. Few VKCs were in a closed state for months together and the reasons for the same is discussed and given in the findings.

Finally the team had a discussion with the officials of Partner NGOs about the status of VKC and the plan evolved to bring sustainability along with areas of improvement.

Sustainability of VKC both in TN and AP based on Assessment outcome: The details pertaining to current status of Village Knowledge Centre in different dimensions of sustainability such as human, social, physical, institutional and financial for each village both Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh is given in the Annexure of this report.

The Sustainability of VKC in operational term for the purpose of this assessment is defined as "VKC delivers its continuous services both proactive and reactive to the entire community and managed effectively and efficiently by the VDMC members without the support of implementing organization". If each VKC assessed is seen under the light of this definition, the result indicates that a minimum of 3 years period is further required to bring sustainability, provided each VKC is constantly supported by the implementing agency in the first year to enable them build their capacity for about initial 2 years on different aspects and then withdraw its support on the 3rd year to make VKC continuing and accomplishing its self reliance. Each VKC (VDMC members) has developed a three year plan, which emphasized their interest and enthusiasm to achieve sustainability of VKC within 3 years.

The facts and data emerged during the assessment and discussion with the members were taken carefully keeping various factors to compare and contrast the functioning of VKC in the backdrop of sustainability in both the state and given below:

Human Dimension - Tamil Nadu Vs Andhra Pradesh: The core of human dimension is the knowledge and skill possessed by both Knowledge Workers and VDMC members on various aspects that facilitates to continue the functioning of VKC. As most of the aspects related to VDMC members come under institutional dimension, knowledge workers alone are taken for assessment in this.

The KWs of Thangamalpuram and Roachmanagar under Vembar - TN, and Salmagundi and Dhanavaipetta of AP are comparatively good than others as they try to impart computer courses to youth and children, render information services / dissemination of need based information to the users using local content database and maintain required records. The KWs

under Manamelkudi VKC required continuous support of the VRC as there is a gap in the selection itself. More so ever, the VKC is now being rejuvenated after the closure for a period of 6 months.

Conversely retention of knowledge workers is found in all the places both TN and AP where VKC is due to further education, better employment opportunity and lesser honorarium. In some of the places like Thangamalpuram (TN), knowledge workers became effective during the process and then got recruited by the implementing organization - PAD, Vembar. As it is a progress in their life, it can be seen as a shift to fetch considerable economic benefit and social status for such members. But replacing the members with same caliber or handhold the selected candidates to bring up to the level of the previous members is yet to be done and this should be done by both the Partner organization as well as VDMC.

The implementing organizational capacity on technical know-how on computer handling, need assessment and dissemination is an added advantage to constantly build the knowledge workers' capacity to satisfy the need of the community. The implementing NGOs need to be oriented on content development process. In Edhirmundi village (AP) one of the key functionaries of VDMC is acting as a knowledge worker and the time and efforts put in by him for VKC is insufficient and this VKC needs a Knowledge worker.

NEED: In all the places, Knowledge Workers needs to be identified in a way that they meet minimum criteria to function effectively in the VKC for addressing the needs of the community on different dimension in time and deliver computer related courses for the youth group or persons who raised their interest. Training programmes on various aspects such as computer based education, computer handling, general management of VKC, content development and need assessment is a high time need in all the places. Also the VDMC should be oriented to take up a supportive and stimulating role to enable the Knowledge workers perform in VKC for the benefit of community members.

Social Sustainability - Tamil Nadu Vs Andhra Pradesh: The Village Knowledge Centre is known at once widely for one of its services on computer education among community in the villages where sustainability plan was done. The most benefited community from the VKC is students and youth for computer education and women stand subsequent in the order in almost all VKCs. The discussions with the representative group of community highlighted that the potential knowledge resources of VKC are not well known to the community. Yet, compared to Andra Pradesh, places like Thangamalpuram and Roachmanagar in Tamil Nadu has quite good content base. Thangamalpuram stands first in veiling community's access to VKC for obtaining information and training services relating to government schemes, farming, income generation activities, health and education. Villages like Roachmangar (TN), Danavaipetta, sorlagundi and Edrumondi of AP follow subsequent in the list as there is lesser access of community than Thangamalpuram. The records maintained in Kattumavadi and Kandaivayal

VKCs in Tamil Nadu enumerated the fact that the VKC was accessed by the community for varied purpose when it was functioning. But for the past 6 months, it is closed due to the change in the implementing organization. The members also indicated that techno phobia is also one of the reasons for entire community not accessed VKC for information. The inflow of content into the VKC corroborating the demand of community needs to be strengthened and this was raised by the members in Tamil Nadu. Roachmanagar VDMC members shifted their VKC to another building indicating it is a common place for all to access.

NEED: The use of VKC by the community is considerably less, awareness need to be created among the community about the potential benefit for them from VKC and ensure that VKC has adequate content to address their needs.

Institutional Sustainability - Tamil Nadu Vs Andhra Pradesh: The Village Development Management Committee that is constituted for the entire project is strong in its structure and membership. In general, the approach that the project adopted was good to constitute a common institution integrating all the project components. Though the members claim that there is a sub group for VKC, the common institution ensures that the discussion on VKC is also in their agenda whenever they meet. The other components of this project such as livelihood and bio shield played a crucial role to up keep the momentum of continuing the functions of VDMC. This might be due to the onus and power devolution on finance management given to the community.

The constant pragmatic discussion and facilitation of implementing organization resulted in enabling the members managing the project components through the committee established. This has resulted members periodically review the initiatives of VKC in their meeting. Though it was done from time to time, VDMC's efforts towards improving the performance of VKC reflects lesser. The committees members are aware of their responsibility and interest to have Village Knowledge Centre in their village and expressed their willingness to invest much effort to improve the performance of the VKC in the future endeavor. Roachmanagar VDMC member's efforts in purchasing furniture and shifting VKC are a good sign indicating the stem of community participation towards sustainability. Few members from Thangamalpuram emphasized that they are able to diagnose absenteeism among members to the meeting during the recent past and emphasized to rectify this in the future. Such monitoring among the members signifies their involvement and ownership.

Women involvement in the committee of all VKC villages was good and it was indicated that they equally participate on par with men in decision making. Conversely proven evidence could not be ascertained to confirm the said statement. But through the discussion, it was found that a considerable amount of change has taken place in gender participation in while identifying the needs of the community and managing the financial resource. As there were no women representations from Thangamalpuram and Edrumondy villages during the

assessment, the status of women involvement could not be ascertained based on women's perspective.

Need: In terms of sustainability, the members needs to work on 3 major aspects such as networking with different partners for eliciting diversified services to address the needs of the community, strategizing and mobilizing funds for the effective functioning of VKC and periodically review and advise the knowledge workers for the effective functioning of VKC.

Physical Sustainability: The location of VKC and the condition of building is found good. Most of the computer peripherals (computers, printer, UPS and microphones) are in good condition in all the places and useful to store contents and educate the children and youth towards computer literacy. The GSM based public address system is found to be very useful as people were able to connect the entire villagers from any place through their mobile phone. Whereas out of 3 provided in places like Roachmanagar and Kattumavadi, one is under function while the rest needs to be repaired.

Content repository needs periodical updating based on communities changing needs and currently the contents are stored in different locations in the computer. Systematization needs to be done to organize and compile all the contents in a single location with theme based categorization for easy retrieval by the knowledge workers.

The stakeholder analysis carried out among the villagers indicated that they do have good linkages with some of the partners, but getting and updating information for VKC purpose was not there in their practice. Some of the key persons in the committee have good rapport with the departmental heads. Eg, Edrumondy. In some of the villages, the members are not aware of information sources as well as its related information. Eg, Kattumavadi and Kandanivayal in TN.Most of the VKC MC members have the plan of purchasing Xerox machine in the near future and require financial support from implementing organizations.

Need: The repair in GSM based public address system to be rectified and put in function. The opportunity for breakdown maintenance by the agencies located nearby to be ascertained and linked with the committee members for future contact. An interface between the committee members and different departmental heads needs to be done to ensure that there is a regular in flow of content into the VKC for the benefit of various stakeholders in the community.

Financial Sustainability: Currently except Thangamalpuram in TN, the remaining VKCs both in TN and AP are under deficit budget or dependant on the implementing organizations. Their plan to generate income through various sources in the future endeavor for VKC management sounds promising, but a support from organization is required to trigger their efforts to tread in achieving the plans. The members in most of the VKCs expressed that they have a plan to purchase Xerox machine, scanner because it will fetch them revenue as there is no such facilities available within and nearby villages. Such infrastructure development would also have a way for neighboring villages to benefit. Places like Roachmanagar enumerated that they

would go for owning an auto for generating income other than fixing an amount for announcing a message to the community from panchayat and SHGs through public address system. On the other hand, this exercise also made most of the VKC members participated to comprehend the need for finance to manage the centre and provoked them to contemplate devising paid services from VKC in a later period.

All who participated in the assessment from different VKCs wishes to take a portion of financial assistance / support of implementing organizations (on the basis of loan) for Investing on infrastructure building like scanner, Xerox and auto,. The members also planned to take a very less portion of amount from the interest from the seed money / revolving fund that has been provided for accomplishing other project components. The members from Thangamalpuram are good in their concepts for further development in their village, but lack technical skill to write proposal and knowledge about various sources that fund for such concepts.

Above all, the discussion with the members revealed that the members in AP, especially Danavaipetta are willing to take part in financial resource sharing for accomplishing the need of the VKC. Where as in other places both in AP and TN are inclined slightly towards an attitude of welfare approach expecting free aid and assistance from the implementing organization for VKC maintenance and management.

Need: VDMC members need to be oriented on various strategies of mobilizing financial resources from different avenues including generating income using VKC infrastructure. Also the need for shifting the members from expectation to empowerment emerged, for which the implementing organization has to sensitize the members about community participation. Similarly a shift is needed from individual contribution to community contribution for realizing ownership towards the asset created and enabling its benefit reach community.

Observation: During the discussions, the key persons actively participated and provided the data that were required. In some of the villages (Rochmanagar, Kattumavadi and Kandanivayal in Tamil Nadu and Dhanavaipetta in Andhra Pradesh) women equally participated and contributed to the plan. The group discussion on each dimension of sustainability made most of the community representatives from the different village to realize the current status of VKC and how best they can progress from current stage to benefit many with knowledge and information as well as run it independently.

When the group discussion was over, the members were also facilitated to assimilate the outcome of the discussion on each dimension and contemplate about the strategic plan of VKC for about 3 years. After an initial resentment, they started critically reviewing their existing capacity, gaps and scope for external avenues and triangulated these and devised their plan in a manner they reach the level of sustainability in another 3 years. During the plan, the role of MSSRF to provide technical guidance and support through capacity building initiatives

emerged as a plan as well as the Partner Organization role as a facilitating body throughout the process. The members also concluded that they will discuss the plan with their VDMC members to finalize and carry forward.

Action taken to address the needs: Efforts have been taken within a short span to address some of the needs expressed by the VDMC members as part of their sustainability plan such as training on general management of VKC including content development, technical training to the knowledge workers of Vembar and Manamelkudi VRC. Knowledge Workers with few volunteers participated from Roachmanagar, Thangamalpuram, Kattumavadi and Kandanivayal VKCs and exposure visit to VDMC members of both Kattumavadi and Kandanivayal VKCs. But the selection of members participated from Kandanivayal and Kattumavadi to the exposure visit to Nagarcoil VKCs are not that effective as the key members were not included in this. But the interaction and inputs given to them by the members from 2 of the villages from Nagarcoil VRC was highly motivating the members to streamline its efforts in VKC. Other than this, awareness programme to the fishing community on sea safety measures by coast guard was given at Kattumavadi village.

Conclusion: The village knowledge centers are playing a significant role in bridging the digital divide, rural urban divide by disseminating demand driven information with the help of latest technologies. Since the VKC are established by M.S.Swaminathan Research Foundation which is nonprofit research organization in collaboration with various funding partners based on project. After the project period the functioning of VKC is not stable and leads to the situation of closure.   To avoid such situation in the needy villages in rural areas, the research team has worked to identify the sustainability mode of operation and plan for the well functioning of the VKC's. In this context it was concluded that the project plan would focus on the sustainability of VKC in the implementation by adapting the above strategies.

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