

The Second - MSSRF South - South Exchange Travelling Workshop

30 October - 6 November 2003
Pondicherry & Tamil Nadu, India

Workshop Report



M S Swaminathan Research Foundation

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Foreword

“Set alongside the medieval living conditions in much of the developing world, it seems foolhardy to throw money at fancy computers and internet links. Far better, it would appear, to spend scarce resources on combating AIDS, say, or on better sanitation facilities.” That is a quote from *The Economist* and it is something I hear often from other well-meaning critics of the ICT-enabled development movement.

Such arguments “completely miss the fundamental point that we are talking about a revolution in the true sense of that word. ICT is transforming everything it touches, from politics, to business, to culture, to education and to health. And what we have seen so far is just the tip of an enormous iceberg. But it is an iceberg the developing world is currently at more risk of crashing into than making use of,” says Mark Malloch Brown, Head of UNDP. According to him ICTs can help us reach the Millennium Development Goals, including the goal of halving poverty by 2015. “Technology doesn’t come *after* you deal with poverty, but is a tool you use to alleviate poverty,” says James Wolfensohn, President of the World Bank and founder of the Development Gateway.

Personally, I believe that developing countries should take advantage of ICTs. For centuries we were subjugated by a few Western European countries largely because they were able to master the Industrial Revolution technologies faster than we could and they used the technology gap to colonize and exploit us. And if we fail to take advantage of the new information and communication technologies, the consequences can be even more deleterious. *The Economist* columnist wouldn’t come to our rescue!

True a few developing countries, notably China and India, are doing well in the field of ICTs. If, today, Indians are the most affluent ethnic minority in the United States, they owe a considerable part of it to their computer and other high tech professionals in Silicon Valley and elsewhere. Back home, IT industry is doing extremely well in Bangalore, Hyderabad, Chennai, Pune and NOIDA. But are the benefits of ICTs reaching the poor, especially those in rural areas? Probably not. That is why in 2004, both in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, the two states that are in the forefront of the IT revolution in India, the party in power lost the election.

How do we bring the advantages of ICTs to the rural poor? A number of agencies, including IDRC, IICD, Hivos, DFID, SDC, the World Bank, UNDP and several others, are actively supporting ICT-enabled development and poverty alleviation projects. But what can those who are actually engaged in grassroots

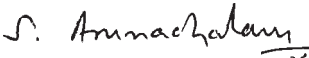
level work do? Among other things, they can share their knowledge and experience among themselves and thus enhance everyone's ability to contribute to their programmes. It is with this idea we at MSSRF started the South-South Exchange Travelling Workshop for ICT-enabled development practitioners. Such workshops, where participants come from different countries and meet with village communities and volunteers in Pondicherry and Tamil Nadu, can provide ample opportunities for cross-cultural learning.

The first workshop was held in October 2002 with financial support from Hivos, IICD and IDRC. A report on the workshop was written by Ms Julie Ferguson of IICD (now with Hivos) with the rather evocative title "From *beedies* to CDs". *Beedies* are a local substitute for cigarettes in India, and are usually smoked by idlers doing nothing worthwhile. Julie meant that such idlers are now visiting knowledge centers set up by MSSRF and are using CDs to improve their knowledge!

This report, on the second workshop held in October-November 2003, is written by Mr A Arivudai Nambi. This workshop was entirely supported by GKP. There were 17 participants from 14 countries, including two from India. In addition, Ms Rinalia Abdul Rahim and Ms Kwan Liow of GKP and Gem Marie Venkatramani, a communication consultant of MSSRF, accompanied the group on the first three days – the Pondicherry leg. Mr Anik M Haseloff, a German student and photographer, was with us all through.

I thank all the participants and Mr Arivudai Nambi for their active contribution to the workshop. I am grateful to Rinalia, Kwan and GKP for supporting the workshop. I am indebted to MSSRF staff and the volunteers in Pondicherry and Tamil Nadu, and above all the village communities, all of whom made the whole programme a delightful and fruitful event. I thank Dr K Balasubramanian, Director J R D Tata Ecotechnology Centre, and workshop director, and Mr S Senthilkumaran, Associate Director, Informatics, for their cooperation and support, far beyond the call of duty. I would also like to place on record our appreciation for Dr V Balaji, the technocrat who was largely responsible for translating the vision of Prof. M S Swaminathan into reality, and IDRC for their confidence in us and their continued support to the Information Village project, which serves as the basis for this series of workshops.

March 2005


Arun

(Subbiah Arunachalam)
Workshop Coordinator

There needs to be a move from looking at technology and asking, "What can we do with this?" to looking at people's needs and asking, "Which technology might help here?"

P. Norrish, 1998, FAO



Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are transforming broad areas where information is a central activity, including rural development and livelihood security. The transformation is based on the opportunities for individuals and communities to be information producers as well as consumers and which builds on and integrates the capacities of all media (e.g. radio and television). This enables increasingly low-cost access and distribution of information and also facilitates interactive participation in the creation and use of information. ICTs offer the unprecedented opportunity for decentralizing information access and creation. This in turn brings demand-led innovation in all spheres of information-intensive activities resulting in a change in the mode of information development and management. In the recent past various institutions like Governments, NGOs and International Organizations have started recognizing the enormous potential that ICTs offer to enhance peoples' daily lives. Personal and project level experiences shared amongst ICT practitioners (specifically, those involved in the rural development sector) are valuable in creating a clear understanding of the social context within which ICTs operate, their relevance and the range of existing opportunities.

The M S Swaminathan Research Foundation is one of the frontline organizations that have made a positive impact on rural livelihood security through effective use of ICTs. The Foundation is keen to share its experience with others as well as keen to learn from other institutions. That is why it organises a number of conferences and workshops every year.

Workshop Design

The basic objectives of the workshop include knowledge sharing and interactive learning among the workshop participants, the villagers, and the staff and volunteers of MSSRF. It was designed as a travelling workshop so that the participants have an opportunity to visit various project sites in Pondicherry and Dindugul district to gain a first hand understanding of the impacts of ICT led endeavors and interact with the villagers through focus group discussions and multi-media presentations from various volunteers managing the knowledge centres. For the most part the discussions were held in an informal setting. Formal presentations by the volunteers and staff focused on processes, lessons and impediments involved with various ICT projects. The participants, in turn, shared with the village communities, volunteers and MSSRF staff the conditions in their parts of the world and the kind of ICT-related development work they were involved with. On the whole, the workshop provided ample opportunities for a free and friendly cross-cultural exchange of knowledge and experience at the grassroots level.

Day 1

30 October

Prof Subaiah Arunachalam (Arun) welcomed the participants and gave an account of the origin, purpose and expected outcomes of the workshop. He said that ICT today has become an acceptable idea and emphasized on the importance of taking everyone on board in the fast expanding information society to make it equitable. Arun spoke on the experiences of MSSRF in integrating ICT with the existing development



programme and on the linkages established with the local communities on this account. He outlined the importance of South-South exchange, and explained how the exchange of skills, experiences and knowledge among the participants would be mutually beneficial. He thanked the workshop sponsors, GKP, for their generous support.

Following this Ms Rinalia Abdul Rahim, Executive Director and Ms Kwan Liow, Deputy Executive Director of GKP were introduced. Ms Rinalia gave an overview of GKP, its history and purpose. She outlined the core activities of GKP which include (i) promotion of partnerships and linkages between NGOs, public, and private organizations, (ii) facilitation of knowledge sharing (iii) collaborative initiatives with partner organizations, and (iv) provision of service to the member organizations. She also talked about the positive impacts that ICT related projects had in terms of poverty reduction, empowerment of women and in governance area. She detailed on the criteria for securing membership with GKP and the expected contributions from member organizations.

A video taped welcome address by Prof. M S Swaminathan, chairman of MSSRF was played, where he detailed on the genesis of the Rural Knowledge centre projects of MSSRF, the impacts of those projects and the importance of learning from each others' experiences through the South-South exchange workshop. He regretted for not having attended the workshop in person because of his prior commitment elsewhere and wished the workshop success.

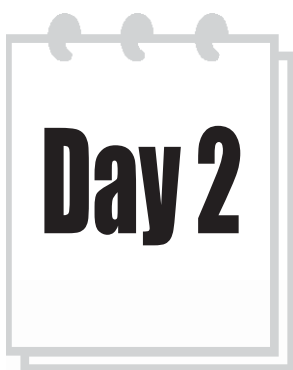
This was followed by a detailed presentation by Dr. Velayutham, Executive Director of MSSRF on the Foundation's various on-going programmes and their overall impact on the livelihood of the poor and rural communities.

Dr K Balasubramanian (Bala), Director of the JRD Tata Ecotechnology Centre, MSSRF explained the process of the workshop, the agenda, logistics and expected



outcomes. He encouraged participants to introduce each other (picking the partner of their choice), breaking from the normal self-introduction tradition in order to create an informal and friendly atmosphere among the participants. Such informal introductions helped break the ice.

This was followed by individual presentations by the participants on the organizations they work with, the ICT led projects of those organizations and their impacts. Bala spoke about the need to link the macro and micro level aspects of development and how this could be achieved through the use of ICT. He touched upon various aspects related to ICT that facilitate development. He distributed individual cards to jot down each individual's thinking on how ICT could be used as a useful tool in the development process, and what are the expectations of every participant from the workshop. Each of the idea was taken up for discussion. The afternoon session ended with a video film on the South-South Exchange that took place the previous year, 2002.



31 October, Pondicherry

The workshop team proceeded to Villianur, 13 km west of Pondicherry, where the hub of the cluster of Knowledge centres is located. All the local centres in the Union Territory of Pondicherry are electronically linked to the Villianur hub. MSSRF staff made presentations on the organization of the centres and the various services provided by the hub. To start with Mr. Senthil Kumaran, the Associate Director of the Informatics Division of MSSRF, gave the history of the village knowledge centres, conceived by MSSRF in 1992 immediately following the international dialogue on



Information technology held by MSSRF. He also detailed the participants about how informatics play a role in empowering rural poor, the various technologies that are employed at the hub and the centres and the plans for the future, specifically on the efforts to tie up with WorldSpace radio and Oneworld International to launch the Open Knowledge Network. This was followed by a presentation by Mr Rajasekara Pandy who talked about the process, specifically on the usefulness, response and objectives behind the publication of 'Namma Oor Seithi' the local newspaper published for the people and by the people. Mr. Rajamohan spoke about the various mechanisms by which Women's' Self Help Groups are being organized and how effective they are. Mr. Gobu spoke about 'Community reach'.

In the discussions that followed, MSSRF staff answered many questions from the participants. Rinalia wondered why it took six years to implement the project even though it was thought of much earlier. She was curious to know if convincing the donors was a factor. MSSRF staff attributed the reasons for a delayed take off to some inherent weakness of the organization/ system. For example, there were inadequate facilities, infrastructure and networking. Mobilizing funds was not perhaps the key factor. Mobilizing people and making them understand the purpose and benefits behind the project took time. Nelli, Kwan and Kazanka Comfort were keen to know about the level of women's involvement in the dialogue and the efforts that had gone into generating awareness and prioritizing people's needs. People are more receptive to new ideas if they see the value in it and women's involvement in the dialogue was more intense than that of men. The discussion focused around the financial viability, production and management of the content, motivating factors both at individual and community levels, and the response of the private and



Government sectors to the initiatives of MSSRF. Rinalia emphasized that in order to remain sustainable it was important to promote entrepreneurship among the village groups rather than relying on funds from external source. Kazanka Comfort welcomed the idea of including math and gender related topics in the educational CDs developed by the Centres.

In the afternoon the participants visited Emabalam knowledge centre. This village has a population of around 7000 and essentially the people of this village are agriculturalists. Milk production is one of the primary income generating activities of this village. Women volunteers who managed the knowledge centre and the representatives of the temple received the participants. This was followed by a presentation focusing on the genesis of the centre, its purpose, the strengths and weaknesses of the centre. One of the volunteers explained that the Embalam Knowledge Centre took shape specifically on the basis of a demand from the village community, especially from the local women. This centre operates within the temple premises authorized by the village temple trust. MSSRF provides all the technical support. It was mentioned that the village was relatively big and hence the reach was not complete, though conscious efforts were made to make the benefits available to the entire community. Footing the electricity bill is a major problem for the centre. Till recently the temple trust was mobilizing the resources for this and henceforth decided that the centre should share 50% of the electric charges. On the positive side, the centre was considered as a lynchpin in providing information related to agriculture, small industries, health, education, and employment. Some of the highlights of the centre include the help extended to more than 100 people in providing eye care through Aravind Eye hospital, securing loans for widow remarriage through governmental agencies, training imparted to the community on conflict resolution and counseling, essentially for family disputes.



In the follow-up discussions Kazanka Comfort mentioned that she was very happy to see all that has been happening at this village and asked about how the centre facilitated the medically needed assistance for their eye care. In reply to this one of the volunteers explained that the contact with the Arvind Eye Hospital was very useful and without much effort they could facilitate an eye camp for 100 people. Also it was mentioned that the references from the local knowledge centre for eye related treatment at Arvind hospital is valid and honored. Kazanka was curious to know about the widow remarriage program. The beneficiary of the widow's remarriage assistance explained about the mechanisms through which she obtained the loan and the social implications related to widow's remarriage. Some of the other questions posed to the volunteers include what was the motivating factor behind demanding a centre at Embalam, how the volunteers manage their time between household work and the centre, and the details about the most sought out information at the centre.

Nelli from Samoa asked about the usefulness of SWOT analysis and raised a question about the process through which they identified their problems. She was curious to know if MSSRF had a role in identifying the problems. One of the volunteers mentioned that the problems were identified as a group and in consultation with the local people and MSSRF had no role in it. Joseph from Kenya asked about the impact of ICT on their business and how they have benefited from it. Usharani, one of the volunteers explained that in the days prior to the establishment of the information centre people used to carry the produce to the town to sell their products at the mandis (market) and had to stay there overnight and watch out for the best price, if the price on the day they bring the produce did not suit them. Now they have an option to carry



their produce only when they feel they have the right price by checking up the prices at the centre.

To a question from Kwan from GKP about what kind of support that the women volunteers get from their husbands, the women volunteers were unanimous in saying that without the support and encouragement of their husbands and their families they would not have achieved what they have achieved so far! In response to a question from Usharani, a volunteer of the centre, about the operational aspects of a similar centre in Nigeria, Ms Kazanka replied that women participation was still very limited and that the centres attracted a mix of youth, men and women. She also mentioned that her centre was more focused on micro-credit facilities for women.

Day 3

1 November, Pondicherry

Veerampattinam is a large coastal village and inhabited by the fishing community. The total population of the village is around 6300 of which 92% are fishermen and 3% agriculturists. The participants on their arrival at Verrampattinam were given a warm welcome. The meeting took place at the local temple. Elumalai, one of the educated youths of the area, serving as a volunteer for the past 4 years at the village, knowledge centre, gave a brief introduction to the genesis and activities of the centre. He told that this centre was equipped with many sophisticated equipments used for weather prediction and essentially dedicated to cater to the information needs of the fishing community. The presentation focused on the technical details of acquiring, processing and broadcasting the weather related information. He explained how MSSRF staff



at villianur accessed the US Navy database and provided forecast of wave heights in the pondichery coast, an important component in assessing the roughness of the sea. This information has been very vital and instrumental in saving many lives. In response to a question about the accuracy of the weather related information one of the volunteers said that the predictions were 100% perfect and appreciated MSSRF's efforts for providing this service. A SWOT analysis report was presented. In this report the support extended by the local panchayat to the centre was listed as the strength. One of the problems mentioned include the degree of dependency on the hub centre at Villanur. Inadequate resources and lack of market links for their produce was also mentioned as a problem. Volunteers informed that the centre has been extremely useful in providing employment opportunities related information. It was also mentioned that one of the village youths, Mr Prabhakaran had undergone training in Cochin in optimising fishing techniques through the information provided by a website called shipnet. Participants from Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda and Bhutan explained how the Self-Help Groups (SHG) in their regions function and were curious to know about the business models adopted at Veermpattinam. At the end of the session the participants toured the centre's facilities and interacted with the school kids, who make use of the educational resources at the centre.

From Veermpattinam the visiting team proceeded to Thirukanchipet, considered to be a very backward village. This village has a population of 1000 people, mostly landless labourers belonging to the scheduled caste (dalit) community. Sakthivelan, a graduate working as a volunteer at the centre made the presentation explaining the role of the local youth association in establishing the knowledge centre. He mentioned that the information on labour market and welfare schemes of the government was sought after the most. The introduction of the Bijli vehicle, an environment friendly, battery-operated van



used for passenger transport is a recent addition to the village. It was mentioned that MSSRF facilitated the interest free bank loan for about Rs.100, 000 for the villagers and helped train Ms Malarvizhi, a local woman volunteer, to acquire driving skills and a driving license. One of the staff of the MSSRF explained the social implications of the project going beyond the revenue generation effort. This was discussed in the light of the upper caste people using the services of the socially deprived dalit community. The participants had several questions on the cost-benefits of the Bijli vehicle, the nature of information sought by the local people, and the various training programmes run by the centre. In response to a specific question from a participant Ms Malarvizhi, a volunteer, explained that with the establishment of the SHG, life has changed so much and they could lead a debt free life. She also explained the significance of the transport facility and put forth a request to MSSRF to facilitate the issue of right to land for the local people. At the end of the session the participants had an opportunity to personally see the Bijli vehicle, photograph and interact with the driver.

The next stop for the day was Kalitheerthalkuppam. This is a village of milk producers and it houses the largest milk producers cooperative in Pondichery. The volunteers explained the efforts of the local community in mobilising the resources for constructing an independent building for the centre. This being an agricultural village its information needs are mostly related to agriculture and market prices for the produce. It was pointed out that the centre is very useful in providing information related to governmental schemes, in facilitating the possibilities of taking up the grievances of the villagers to the concerned authorities, and helpful to students seeking admissions in schools and colleges. One of the volunteers informed that the entire accounts of the milk cooperatives is processed through the computer at the centre. In the follow-up conversations, one of the



participants, Ms Kamini from Malaysia suggested that it would be helpful to advertise the locally available skills in the community newspaper periodically so that it would facilitate some employment opportunities. Ms Satyawati from Indonesia outlined the importance of value addition to milk products.

Day 4

2 November, Pondicherry

The concept of Biovillage was initiated in three villages of Pondicherry during the years 1991-1993 and later extended to 19 more villages. One of the earlier three villages is Pillayarkuppam. The Biocentre at Pillayarkuppam village has been functioning as a service and information centre, providing necessary facilities for the effective functioning of the Biocouncil, a representative body of 130 SHGs of the area. Majority of the Biocouncil members are women. On their arrival the participants were welcomed by the Biocouncil members. Mr. Rossario, staff of MSSRF, gave a detailed introduction on the concept of Biovillage, its relevance and the outcome of the project. In his words, biovillage is an integrated approach that helps synthesize sustainable resource management and livelihood security of the people having capacity building as an important component. He highlighted the design and implementation of various training programmes such as mushroom cultivation, fodder production, horticulture and floriculture practices, and vermicompost production and credit management and how the SHG members benefited from them. He also gave an overview of the role the Biocentre plays in facilitating linkages with government departments and nationalized banks for the SHGs. Later Mr. Alphonse, another staff member of MSSRF and a former bank manager, explained the concept of 'community banking' and the various



processes through which banking assistance has been extended to the micro-enterprises of the SHGs. This was followed by sharing of experiences by each of the bio-council members. They talked about the functional aspects of their SHGs, the status and outcome of their micro-enterprise ventures. This was followed by an intensive interaction session involving the participants and the Biocouncil members. There were several questions about specific enterprises and their feasibility. Ms Satyawati of Indonesia was curious to know what empowerment meant to the young and the old. She said “Gender empowerment is to do with culture and it is very sensitive in our part of the world”. Nelly from Samoa shared her experiences in bringing young and the old together. She informed that the old women are more relying on the younger ones for informational needs and it was a positive sign. She also posed some questions to the Biocouncil members about the time and effort it took them to convince their husbands to join the SHGs and the Biocouncil, and how their husbands reacted when there was no income out of the enterprises during the initial phase. Lakshmi, one of the Biocouncil members, responded to this by saying that her husband willingly let her join the SHG and stood by her. She told that the husbands see the micro-enterprise venture as an opportunity for additional income that can reduce the economic burden of the families. She gave some examples. She also emphasized that the trend was changing today and there was enough democracy within their families to voice their opinion and take a collective decision on matters pertaining to family welfare. Kamini from Malaysia gave an account of her organization’s experience in formulating projects specifically targeted at the senior citizens. She informed that the senior citizens are trained in asset management skills and advertising and it has paid rich dividends. Another area that her organization was focusing was to strengthen networks of the young and old.



Kazanka Comfort from Nigeria wanted to know the cost of training and the processes through which SHGs are initiated. Mr. Alphonse replied that the training was not free of cost and that they charge Rs. 20 as anything free wouldn't work. He informed that more and more middle aged people were coming forward to the fold and it was an encouraging trend. Regarding the formation of SHG, he explained that the PRA exercise was very helpful to identify a homogenous group, in terms of social and economic status. A good facilitator or moderator is the key factor. It took some effort to identify and create the first SHG group and the success of this had a ripple effect. In response to a question from Ruchita of Toxic links, Delhi, on the usefulness of ICT in the training programs, the Biocouncil members pointed out that information on new technologies, which are available through ICT, are provided to the visiting farmers and other villagers. The computer network is used by villagers to share information about their value addition activities and to find new market avenues. Kamala Rani, one of the experienced members of the Biocouncil, underlined that finding market for their produce was a problem faced by SHGs.

At the end of the session there was a brief session of music and dance in which the participants and the Biocouncil members enthusiastically participated. It goes to show the instantaneous rapport built between the two groups! After that the participants toured around the various demonstration plots of the Biovillage project and exchanged ideas with the staff of the Biovillage project.

In the afternoon the participants drove to Dindugul, 250km west of Pondicherry to visit other project sites in the area.



Day 5

3 November, Kannivadi

Since 1996, MSSRF has been working with a group of villages around Kannivadi in Dindigul district of Tamil Nadu. This is a semi-arid region with a range of dry crops, horticultural and floricultural crop varieties. The majority of the farming households are small and marginal farmers. MSSRF is involved with training and capacity building, and field demonstration work in this area.

The first stop was at the Pudupatti village. The SHG here runs a literacy centre. Here the participants have had an opportunity to learn about usefulness of ICTs. Incidentally this particular day was chosen to launch the local radio facility to this village. Bala, explained the significance of the community radio facility and the importance of locale specific content and location specific tools. He explained how the regular cable TV facility could be used effectively to communicate messages relevant to the local community. The participants viewed the relay. After that a senior citizen, a 70 year old lady, Ms Palaniammal was introduced to the participants. Ms Palaniammal stands as a tall example how ICT led literacy campaign has made strides in the rural life. Ms Palaniammal is a destitute earning her living through flower picking and some domestic labour in the village. She narrated her experience in her own words: “ I did not know how to read and write as I had no formal education. Till recently, I was using my fingerprints for my signature. When I was called to join the adult literacy program I was very hesitant and apprehensive. I was not sure if this would benefit me. But I was willing to try. The instructor Muthiah is a good teacher. He teaches me with the help of the computer. I repeated whatever he wrote. In



due course, I could get a good grasp of it and started reading and writing. Now I am learning to write in English as well”.

Ms Palaniammal wrote her name in English in a piece of paper. This was such a touching experience for everyone. In response to a question on how literacy was going to help her, the septuagenarian replied that now she could count coins and read bus numbers. She said, “ Now I am independent and I can board buses on my own. It has made travel easier and I could keep track of my money”.

She added, “ For progress you need education. How will you be independent if you can’t read and write”? For another question from Nelli from Samoa on whether she intends teaching others she replied that she was already doing that and she had encouraged a young, partially blind girl to take up to studies and she is teaching her alphabets.

Rediar Chattiram Seed Growers Association (RSGA), Kannivadi, is an active association involving more than 1000 farmers and landless labourers. RSGA was developed as a grassroots institution with the intervention of MSSRF in this area. The federation of SHGs of this area also finds a place in this association. This association has totally transformed into an autonomous development agency, playing an active role in the development activities of the region.

The visiting team was received by the members and president of the RSGA. Mr. Shanmuganathan, President of RSGA, was introduced to the participants by Bala. Mr. Shanmuganatham gave an overview of the genesis of RSGA, which was primarily started as an agency to supply good quality seeds for the farmers and how this has transformed into a formidable force in the area over the years. He gave an account of the difficulties that RSGA has faced and how they had overcome them. In his presentation he mentioned that RSGA was involved with



a variety of activities including micro-enterprises, precision farming, enhancing market linkages, extension activities and capacity-building activities. The highlight of the achievements is the successful completion of a project on sustainable agriculture and value addition through horizontal transfer of knowledge, supported by Commonwealth of Learning (COL) and they have gone into the second phase of the project now. Mr. Shanmuganathan told that integration of ICT had strengthened the RSGA in terms of its identity and purpose. He said that they felt proud that the hands that only held hoes could use computers and this was a big revolution in their lives. He also emphasized that roles had been reversed as many extension officers and governmental officials got trained at the centre on various aspects related to farming, market information, etc., and sought expert knowledge of the volunteers at the RSGA. He also outlined the importance of the local fortnightly newspaper, 'Seithi Solai', run by the villagers and how the information published in this was helpful to the people of the area including farmers, students, and business communities.

Later two women volunteers of the centre took the team to the weather plot established with all modern equipments used to gauge rainfall and process and predict weather related information. The participants were given hands on experience in terms of the various technical details involved in gathering weather related information and the operational aspects of various instruments. This is established with the generous support of COL and Columbia University. This facility, believed to be one of the state of the art facilities available in the country, is linked to the National Centre for Medium Range Weather Forecasting. This facility is very unique and has been helpful to the farming community of the area.

Following this there were some questions about some functional aspects of



RSGA. Ms Satyawati of Indonesia asked about the kind of property right regime that RSGA had and sought details about the kind of database that RSGA had on best farming practices and the direct beneficiaries of the database. Initially, the property rights rested with RSGA and the intranet database was shared by four knowledge centres operating within a 20km radius. Ms Kazanka Comfort was curious to know about the dispute that RSGA had with one of the multinational seed companies, the Indo-American Seeds, on non-payment of fees and how this was settled. In response to this the president of RSGA said that this was settled amicably and immediately with timely negotiation. The representative from Proshika, Bangladesh, spoke about the application of similar ICT tools in his region. In reply to a question about the replication of such models in other regions, Bala replied that they were looking for conducive opportunities to carry this forward to other regions and already attempts had been made to replicate this model in Tanzania as an outcome of the South-South Exchange workshop held in 2002.

The participant from Cameroon asked about the necessity to bring the project to this specific place. Bala replied that to a large extent it was a need driven endeavour and the needs of the villagers and MSSRF's program goals matched. He said initially they wanted to set up the centre at Hosur but changed their mind considering the proximity to the market centre and the perishability of the produce. This was followed by presentations from members of the federation of SHGs from different places. They explained how they help in maintaining the website <www.oddanchatrammarket.com> .This website provides information on prices of vegetables and stocks in the local market. The participants could get a first hand knowledge on how ICTs have been well integrated with the daily lives of the farmers and landless labourers and the enormity of the reach of information through ICT technologies. They were quite impressed by the



knowledge and skills of the volunteers in using computer aided technologies and the response from the local community.

In the afternoon the team visited the premises of a cottage industry involved in the production of *Trichoderma viride* at Chokalingampudur. This is run by a group of women belonging to the Elayathendral SHG. Ms Angel, one of the key members of the SHG explained the various production processes and the market potentials. She said that she had been trained in Tamil Nadu Agricultural University (TNAU) on the production aspects and scientific details. This training was facilitated by MSSRF. Bala informed that so far there was only one multinational company, supplying this and now they have a competition. This particular facility has a tie up with Evergreen Biotech, a biotech company and they are planning to expand the production soon. The participants had several questions related to the production process and the viability of the project. After this Mr. Laxmikant, a participant from Maharashtra, organized a small prayer meeting to bless the volunteers of the Elayathendral SHG and showered them with flowers.

The next stop was at Sevenakaraianpatti, where a paper factory was run by the Jhansirani Women SHG. The Jhansirani SHG is established by a group of downtrodden women belonging to the dalit community (the untouchables of yesteryears). They are landless agricultural labourers with no permanent source of income. Bala introduced the members of the SHG who run the paper unit and gave a brief report on how this very project came into existence. The paper produced here is made out of the pseudo-stem of banana. One of the major crops of this area is banana and hence there is good potential for this industry. Members of the group narrated the history of the factory and explained the hardships they had to undergo during the starting phase of the



project. They said that they were subjects of ridicule then and that their sheer determination and labour have carried them forward to a stage where they have become very nearly self-sustaining today. It was reported that the business turn over for the year was around Rs.4, 00,000 and the SHG had repaid a loan of Rs. 65,000 to the lenders and the unit was able to generate 1,500 labour days in a year. They are diversifying their product range from just paper to fancy paper bags, Christmas cards, etc. MSSRF is involved with identifying partners. The members proudly shared the news that their unit has been certified by the Tamil Nadu Pollution Control Board (TNPCB) as the 'most environment friendly industry'. They also took pride in informing that they are on email and all their accounts are maintained on a computer. The members themselves negotiate the price with the buyers thereby eliminating middlemen. Following this there were several questions related to the production process and the use of technology from the participants. Nelli from Samoa asked about the specific problems they faced in establishing and running the unit. Members explained that they had enormous pressure from the community and the people of the village ridiculed them, specifically on their visits outside the village for training purposes. No one in the community believed that they would pull through this venture. As regards the technology and production there were multiple problems, the most daunting one was the initial fear to use technology. This was coupled with some problems that arose on the quality front. Finding market for their product was also a big problem but there was enough support from MSSRF in this front. To a question about maintenance issue the members answered that they were capable of handling minor problems on their own. To a question from a participant from Bangladesh about the social status of the members, the answer was "It had certainly improved." Nelli from Samoa promised to find market for the products in Samoa, where many international



conferences and meetings take place and she assured them to get back to the members shortly on this.

From Sevenakaraiapatti the visiting team proceeded to Dharmattupatty village, where the participants witnessed the production of *Trichogramma parasitoid*, a biopesticide by the Kavikuyil Women SHG. The members of the SHG demonstrated the various aspects involved in the production process. The technology behind this was also explained to the participants. It was noted that the environment friendly nature of trichogramma biopesticide has potential to fetch international markets. The volunteers have gained skills in the technology to the extent that they could produce the trichogramma cards with 90% parasitization rate. Bala informed that there is a great demand for this technology in the US and MSSRF would explore those avenues. The women volunteers said that the demand for their product was increasing and they were getting more orders from outside sources.

In the evening the team visited the Samiyarpatti village where the adult literacy programme is in operation. Here the Poomani Men SHG demonstrated the use of ICT in rural literacy programme. There were various components to this programme and Ms Sridevi, an enthusiastic volunteer presented the achievements of the programme and the details pertaining to the development of content and substance. Samiarpatti has 133 women, out of which 66 have turned literate. Out of the 149 men 101 have become literate. She was emphatic in saying that without the computer and other ICT facilities this transformation could not have been possible in such a short time. She was confident that these would continue to create a big impact. She spoke about the special campaign on signature training for the villagers. Sridevi spoke of the efficacy of the touch screen computer used for teaching and the advantages in using



CDs. She explained how the curriculum is designed using the local materials that the people come across in their daily lives. She said that using touch-screen PC, CD writer and a digital camera, each family had developed learning material for the illiterate members of their family. This in essence is the key to success, she summed up. Kazanka said she was impressed by the efforts put forth by Sridevi and she would like to take what she learnt about the 'content creation' to Nigeria. The representative from Bhutan extended his appreciation and asked for the replication of copies of the CDs to carry it home with him in order to relay them in the national TV and discuss this with the concerned government authorities in Bhutan. To a question from Nelli from Samoa on why there is more involvement of women than men in the adult literacy programme, Sridevi answered that there was a special effort to integrate women as the number of women illiterates exceeded the men, moreover, men folk go out of the village more often than women.

Day 6

4 November, Thonimalai

The highlight of the travelling workshop was the visit to Thonimalai. Thonimalai, 7km from Kannivadi, is situated 1,200 meters above mean sea level in the Western Ghats. This falls under the Reddiarchattiram block. This place is mostly inhabited by the tribal groups called Paliyars and Pulayars. The path to Thonimalai is very undulated and rough without a proper road. The visiting team started early in the morning and drove to the foothills of Thonimalai. Everyone was provided with a lunch pack and bottled water and the entire team set out to trek the 5-mile path. Though the walk was



strenuous, the participants enjoyed it with ample opportunity to get to know each other. After 3 hours the team reached Thonimalai. The session began with the formal introduction of the members by Bala. The participants were asked to introduce themselves. The two volunteers who run the centre Ms Renuka and Mr. Baskar gave an overview of the Centre. The school premises where the meeting was held was built by the own efforts of the two SHGs operating in the area with the financial help provided by DRDA (District Rural Development Agency). The SHGs mobilized free labour to complete the school building, where 50 students study now. The volunteers besides explaining the activities of the centre demonstrated the video conferencing facility available at the centre. It should be noted that this centre was inaugurated by Dr M.S. Swaminathan from Kannivadi last year with the aid of the video conferencing facility. Renuka explained how the local community was trained in using digital cameras, computer, and specifically in using Tamil software. The focus of her presentation was on the 'content development' for the literacy programme. She thanked MSSRF for training her at Chennai and was very proud of her role as an instructor. She also shared her experience as a trainer for a literacy programme in Jaipur. A deaf and dumb boy trained to read and write at this Centre demonstrated his abilities to the participants.

The centre extends support for the local people beyond the literacy programme. The centre provides market information related to coffee, and horticultural crops. The community newspaper published by RSGA is made available to the centre and it is found useful by the local community in many ways. The presentation from the volunteers was followed by some informal discussion with the village group. There were questions about the most sought out information from the centre. Agricultural information and information related to best practices seem



to dominate the number of enquiries. In response to a question from the participant from Bhutan, on how women overcome the deteriorating job conditions in the area, and if they were willing to migrate, one of the women said, “it would be best to be in our own place.

There is nothing good about migrating out. If we could find alternatives it would be in our own interest to survive here”. The participant from Cameroon asked about the percentage of enrolment of female students in the school and the general status of women, and the women responded by saying that more and more girls took to education and women were not denied opportunities any longer. She went on to illustrate her own example and the struggle she had undergone to educate her three daughters beyond primary level. She explained how the SHG had come to her help in providing support for the education of her kids. The representative from Philippines appreciated MSSRF’s efforts in bringing education to the remotest area and the way MSSRF had used ICTs.

Day 7

5 November - Madurai

The visiting team drove to Madurai. This was essentially a day off for the participants and a visit to an ancient temple was arranged. The team returned to Chennai later in the evening.



Day 8

6 November, Wrap-up session, MSSRF

Bala and Arun spoke on the importance of ICT in poverty alleviation programmes. The negative impacts of the digital divide were discussed in their presentations and the call for providing information to everyone, at every level was reiterated. It was stated that the essential components of a good ICT programme are (a) a clear concept and vision, (b) committed group of people, (c) local champions, (d) good social mobilization, and (e) people who can bring international connectivity. They emphasized on the need for ICT enabled Knowledge centres to look beyond the traditional business models and think in terms of welfare economics models. Bala summed up the impacts of ICT on each of the project areas visited.

Following this a videoconference was organized to provide opportunity for the participants to interact with a group in Kampala, Uganda, who have been involved in another South-South Exchange workshop facilitated by IICD. The participants from both the workshops had many common things to share and learn from each other. A few of the participants at the Uganda workshop were participants of the South-South Exchange held in Chennai in 2002 and they were eager to know about the progress made since last year. After this participants were given a few minutes each to narrate their experiences and what they learnt from visiting various projects.

Ruchita, from Toxic links expressed that it had been a great learning experience for her. She said she was amazed at the effectiveness of ICT as a tool and learnt



that put to good use ICT could do wonders. She was especially impressed by the literacy programmes and how they could be used to facilitate breaking the barriers of time and space. She said she was also aware of the limitations in replication of such things.

Ahamed from Egypt said he was extremely happy to be part of the workshop. He said that there were good models that could be emulated, especially the business models of the SHGs. He said he was impressed by the ease and dexterity with which the rural masses handled technology and there was a need for sound cooperation between India and Egypt in the communication front.

Nelli from Samoa said she was quite impressed with what she had experienced during the week (of the workshop). She said that she had much sympathy for rural women and this visit had given her a sense of belonging. Though she thought SHGs were good models she was not sure if they would work in Samoa. She said she was in a high level committee constituted by the Samoan Government to review IT policy, which is about to take place in February/March 2004 and the message she carried from here would be helpful. She was a bit apprehensive about the SWOT exercises and their findings. She wanted MSSRF to revisit this. She reiterated the usefulness of having this particular network engaged and connected.

Karma from Bhutan was all praise for the efforts made by MSSRF to bring dignity to rural life. He was particularly impressed by the use of technology in providing the much needed market information for the farming community and he said he was returning home with more conviction that ICT is the best tool to bring development for the poor people. He also promised to bring what he learned to the attention of the local newspapers in Bhutan and share the experiences with them.



Faraza from Sri Lanka said it was a very useful learning experience for her and it was a wonderful opportunity to interact with the poorest of the poor. She was of the opinion that if the projects were planned to meet local needs they would be successful. She was impressed by the innovative way in which MSSRF was using ICTs. She summed up her experience in the following words: “exciting, enlightening, and exhausting”.

Satyawati from Indonesia said that the workshop was very valuable to her and it met with 90% of her expectations. She said that it was certainly a model of how Government–NGO partnerships could play a role in bringing development closer to poor people. She said she was quite impressed by the role ICT could play in providing basic essentials. She suggested that owing to the limitations of time and language she could not interact more intensively with the local people and had the number of villages visited were fewer it would have been more helpful.

Mia from Bangladesh, referred to the fact that India was emerging as a super power in ICT sector and he now knew why. He said he had been sending daily reports to his newspaper on the workshop and he would arrange to publish a special section on the workshop on his arrival.

George from Kenya thanked MSSRF and GKP for giving him an opportunity to participate in the workshop. He said he was amazed by the impacts of communication and certainly would share whatever he learnt from his colleagues and villagers with his counterparts in Kenya.

Le from Vietnam said it was very useful and it had helped to evaluate her own projects in Vietnam. She would like to replicate some of the models she



had seen in India and would propose to the Vietnamese government setting up similar programmes.

Kazanka Comfort from Nigeria thanked GKP and MSSRF for giving a first hand experience to learn from the poor. She listed the importance of assessing the needs before venturing into SHG activity as the foremost thing she had learnt. Another thing that impressed her relates to the relation between MSSRF and the government, which has greatly reduced the hurdles in implementation.

Laksmikant from Maharashtra said that his first hand knowledge on the operations of various projects had enriched his knowledge. He said he was going with a better understanding of the concept of ICT. Particularly he was impressed with the training aspects and he would like to use them for his organization.

Avis from Cameroon termed the experience of participating in this workshop unique. He made a special mention about how touched he was with the enthusiasm of the old women in Samiarpatti to become a literate. He said he also realized the importance of value addition to information.

Swapan from Bangladesh said that it was a very useful experience for him and he was intrigued at the level of impact that ICT was generating at the grassroots level. He was of the opinion that his experience here would add value to the project initiatives of Proshika in Bangladesh.

Joseph from Uganda said he was inspired by the commitment and rigour shown by rural women especially those who are involved with SHGs. The importance of assessment of needs is a key factor, which had been clearly demonstrated in each and every project the team visited.

