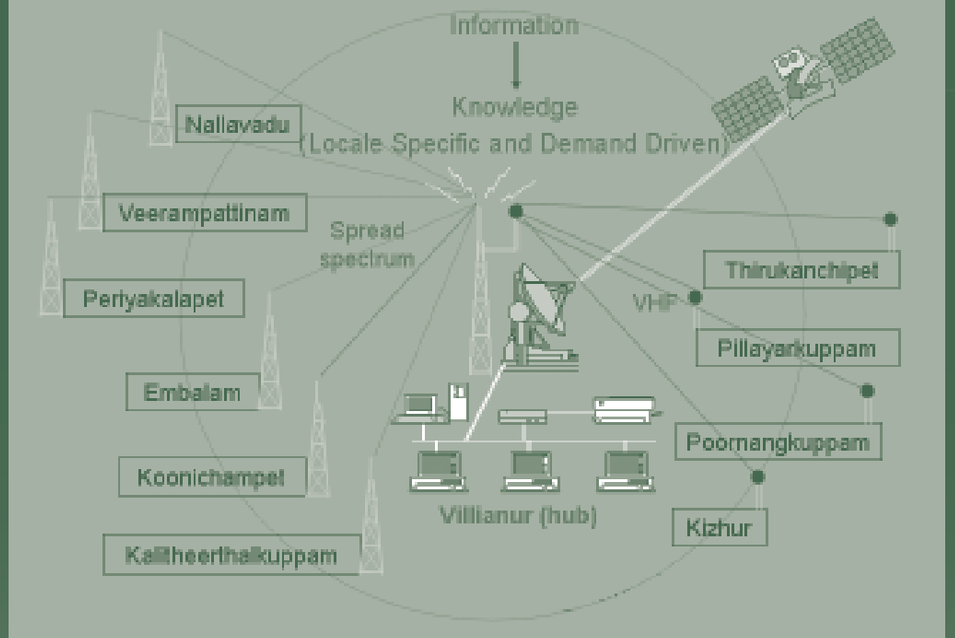
Hub and Spokes Model - Village Knowledge Centres



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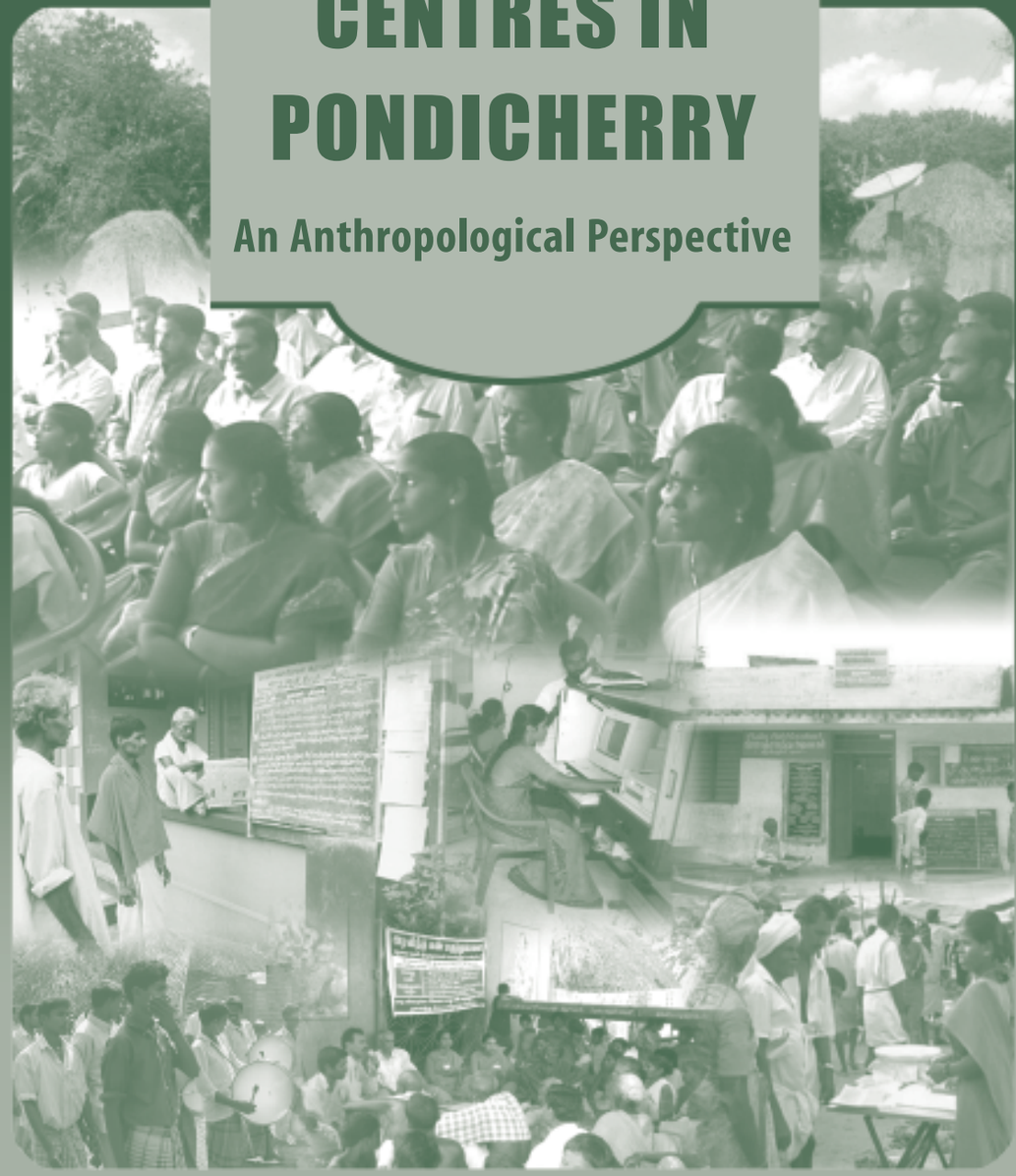
VILLAGE KNOWLEDGE CENTRES IN PONDICHERRY

An Anthropological Perspective



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MSSRF/MG/05/19
December 2005

L. Vedavalli

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Foreword

In January 1992 MSSRF organized an Interdisciplinary dialogue on methods of taking the benefits of Information Technology to our village communities based on a pro-poor and pro-woman orientation to technology dissemination. The dialogue resulted in the development of a programme for setting up Village Information Centres to be maintained and operated by local women and men. Later, the concept of information villages was further developed so that they become "knowledge villages" based upon the principle of participatory knowledge management with local communities. In 1998, with support from IDRC of Canada and later also from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), Village Knowledge Centres were set up to begin within villages in Pondicherry. Unlike an information centre, the knowledge centre is an interactive one combining the traditional wisdom and ecological prudence of local communities with modern technologies.

The small Village Knowledge Centre programme initiated in a few villages of Pondicherry has now grown into a National Movement under Mission 2007: Every Village a Knowledge Centre. It is therefore important to look back and study carefully the lessons learnt from the VKCs of Pondicherry. Dr L Vedavalli, an eminent Social Anthropologist has undertaken such an introspective study, the details of which are contained in this publication. Dr Vedavalli has clearly brought out the strengths and weaknesses of the ongoing programme under conditions where many social problems relating to gender, religion, caste and class prevail. Also, the question of the long term economic sustainability of VKCs will have to be carefully studied.

We now have a Right to Information Act, which makes it obligatory on the part of Government to provide the information a citizen needs. Also, modern agriculture is becoming knowledge intensive. Hence VKCs are a must for ensuring knowledge connectivity throughout out country. Dr Vedavalli's findings and analysis will be very helpful to ensure that the knowledge revolution benefits all members of a rural community.

I am grateful to her and to Mr S. Senthilkumaran, Programme Director, Information, Education and Communication for undertaking this timely study and for getting the results compiled in the form of the present book.

M S Swaminathan

Acknowledgments

I am extremely grateful to Professor M. S. Swaminathan for giving me the opportunity to undertake this study, and for his constant encouragement and valuable guidance.

My sincere thanks to Mr. K. G. Rajamohan and his team in Pondicherry, for sharing their knowledge and experiences about Village Knowledge Centres. Special thanks to Ms. P. Pakkialatchumy for her valuable insights.

The useful suggestions and support of Mr. S. Senthilkumaran are gratefully acknowledged. Special thanks are also due to Dr. R. Rukmani for her advice and critical inputs. For their untiring help and encouragement, I wish to thank Ms. Sylvia Snehalatha, Dr. V. Arivudai Nambi, Dr. R. Rengalakshmi, Mr. S. Malarvannan and Mr. S. Sekar. Thanks also to Ms Asha Ramani for editing the draft.

My heartfelt thanks to the villagers - women and men, young and old - who sharied their knowledge, experiences and views. This study would not have been possible without their dynamism and enthusiastic participation.

L. Vedavalli

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Village Knowledge Centres in Pondicherry
An Anthropological Perspective

1. The Study

This study has been essentially carried out to understand the ongoing activities of the Knowledge Centres in Pondicherry from an anthropological perspective. The study also aims to understand the possibilities of further improving the quality of life of the people in these villages through the Centres. The study involved fieldwork of over two weeks during April-May 2004.

The preliminary visits to the ten Centres in the Union Territory of Pondicherry were helpful in studying the functioning of the Knowledge Centres; the information and content they provided; and the information normally used or sought by the user community. An effort was made to include the volunteers managing the Centres and also the users who were present at the Centres at the time of the visits. Specific efforts were made to get the viewpoints, both of the volunteers and individuals from the community, about the usefulness and reach of the programme. This was done mainly by going around few villages like Embalam, Veerampattinam, Poornangkuppam and Periyakalapet, and talking to a few men and women of different age groups and also by visiting some houses. This was done essentially to study the impact of the Knowledge Centres on the community in general, and on women in particular.

An attempt was also made to gather the responses and reactions of the people about these Centres and the usefulness of the content - whether it met the needs and demands of the local communities. Our study also helped to get a broader idea about the kind of information sought by the men and women. The potential of the volunteers and the Centres could be gauged to a certain extent. It also brought out the limitations of the Centres and the volunteers.

Information was generated through unstructured interviews and participant observation. Case Studies were conducted with some of the volunteers and individuals (users and the beneficiaries of both sexes) from the villages. Unstructured interviews helped to a great extent in obtaining a broader idea about the general impact of this programme on the community.

It must be mentioned here that since the study is still in the preliminary stages, the attention was more on generating qualitative information from different stakeholders. Information was gathered covering various aspects such as utility of the Knowledge Centres, perceptions of the volunteers, users/non-users from different villages where the Centres are located, etc. The purpose, as mentioned earlier, was to get an idea of the kind of impact it has made on different sections of the villagers. This methodology was used to evolve and develop a basis for a further in-depth and detailed study.

2. Information Villages

Genesis

Information Village Research Project had its genesis in an interdisciplinary dialogue held at the M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF) during the year 1992, titled "Information Technology: Reaching the Unreached". One of the important conclusions of the Dialogue was that information and communication technology (ICT) could have a great role to play in the developing countries, with particular reference to sustainable agriculture and rural development. It was felt that ICT has the ability to take the generic information and convert it into local specific. A small beginning was made in 1997 by MSSRF when it embarked upon a programme that would use access to information as a key to holistic rural development. Information Village Research Project was launched with financial support from International Development Research Centre, Canada, on an experimental basis, in the Union Territory of Pondicherry in South India, in January 1998. Pondicherry was formerly a French colony, which came under the Indian Government in 1954. Later, in 1962, it was organised as a Union Territory.

To start with, the project set up Information Shops to link the villages. This has been done with a view to determine whether ICT can impact the rural livelihoods. It is essentially a people-oriented project. Therefore, rural people's involvement in the use of ICT was considered important, so that its benefits could reach the targeted population, i.e., the rural people, both women and men. Bottom-line grassroots approach, and gender-sensitivity are two important principles of the project. Another significant aspect of the project is that the generic information found in the networks, including the Internet, should be local specific. The Information Shops later came to be known as Village Knowledge Centres. This was done to emphasise the need for focusing on local specific, demand-driven information, and for training local women and men for adding value to information. Since value-added information is knowledge, the Centres have thus come to be called Village Knowledge Centres. The Tamil language, which is also the local language of this region, is used for all operations of the Village Knowledge Centres. Tamil script is used in the computer applications.

Identifying villages in Pondicherry and establishing rapport with the villagers was relatively easy, although the project did encounter some difficulties in due course. It may be mentioned here that MSSRF was familiar with the Pondicherry rural areas through its earlier programme - the Bio-Village Project, that aims at Community Asset Building based on biological technologies. The Information Village Project is expected to complement the former and derive benefits from the linkages. The project also had the support and encouragement from the Pondicherry Government. The region had a reasonable telecommunication infrastructure, with an urban tele-density of 20.

The project, which started with two Centres in the villages of Kizhur and Mangalam, now has ten Centres. The project encountered some problems during the course of its growth when it had to close down one of the initial Centres (Mangalam) that was located in a private house. Here, entry was

restricted: socially underprivileged section of the population did not have access to information. The managers also misused the facilities of the Centre. Two other Centres were closed down for similar reasons. A senior staff of the project mentioned that the closing down of the Centres had a positive aspect - it helped them realise how important community ownership was for the successful functioning of the Knowledge Centers if the benefits had to reach the people.

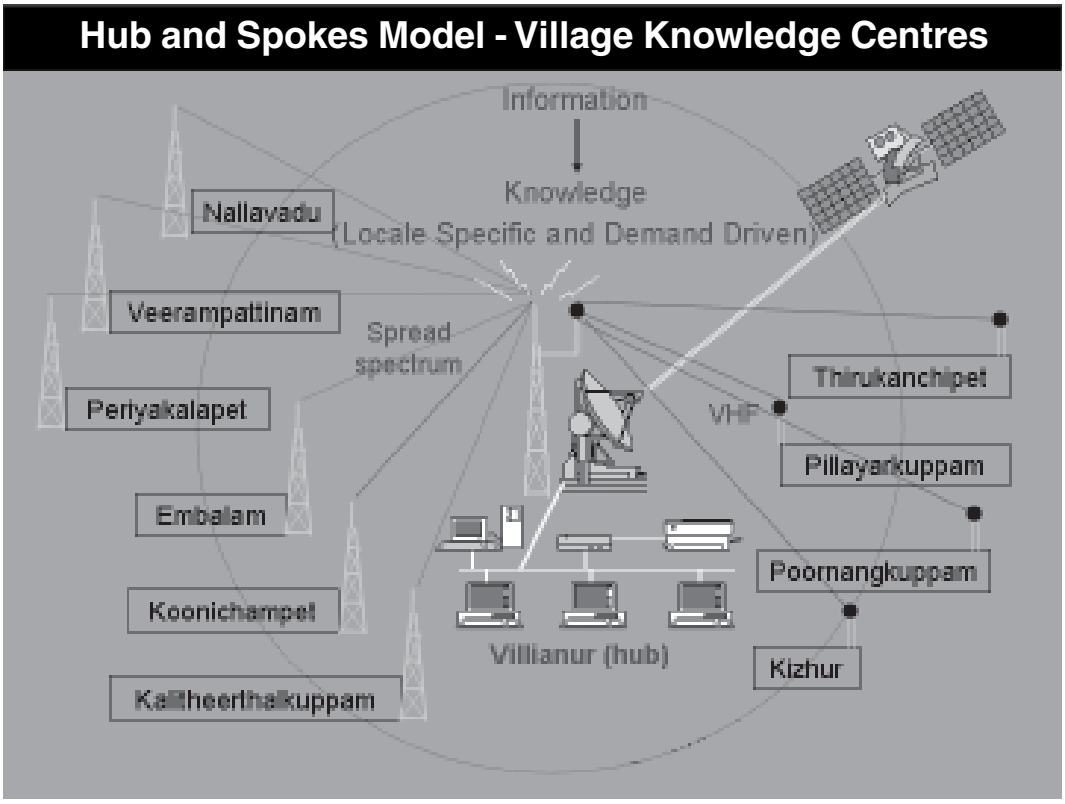
These experiences taught the project staff to be careful in choosing a village to set up a Knowledge Centre. A participatory rural appraisal (PRA) was conducted in 13 villages. This was done to ascertain the interests of the local people, their information needs, and to find out their traditional channels of information. PRA also helped examine issues related to the logistics such as fixing a common space (rent free) to run the Centre, electricity charges, and volunteers to manage the Centre, etc. The main intention was to involve the local community in the ownership and responsibilities of running the Centre. After identifying a village, A Memorandum of Understanding is signed with the village elders to this effect, and is renewed whenever necessary. Since its inception, the project's stress has been on community ownership.

It was mentioned during a discussion with the project Associate Director that there was a demand for voice data- wireless/phone and that initially, database was not used. He said, that since there were no phone facilities in the rural areas (one phone for 500 people), there was a demand for voice data. In the beginning, the idea was to give only agriculture-related information. It is interesting to learn how the essential role of the project as a provider of information to the rural communities, gradually took on the role of a facilitator also. As it has just been mentioned, the villagers were initially given information related to agriculture and local specific needs. Then, people began to look for Government entitlements. Subsequently, the community began to ask for linkages. For example, when information about training on animal husbandry was given to them, the people wanted to know how to approach the department and what were the formalities. The project slowly started playing multipurpose roles as facilitators, organisers, etc.

Village Knowledge Centres

The Village Knowledge Centres of the Information Village Research Project function on the 'hub and spokes' model, as depicted below:

It is a network of ten villages with computers, printers, telephones, very high frequency (VHF) duplex radio devices and other accessories. It has e-mail connectivity through a dial-up telephone service that facilitates both voice and data transfer. Villianur* is the head quarters of the project. It is also the Block Development headquarters. It is a very busy commercial area. Villianur is the 'hub' of the information network, and the sub-Centres, or the Village Knowledge Centres, are its 'spokes'. This has the necessary telephone equip ments with which the staff works on the information that is uploaded in the network. It is also the Value Addition Centre from where the staff retrieves useful and relevant information from the Internet on topics such as health, agriculture, educational opportunities, Government policies/schemes, the weather and so on. Such information is disseminated to the rural people. As an example mention may be made of a bulletin called "Farmers Diary". This Diary consists



* The project headquarters has been shifted from Villianur to Pillayarkuppam during May 2005,wich also functions as the hub of the information network.

of information on agriculture and animal husbandry given by individuals, research stations, agricultural university and magazines. The staff at Villianur collect the information and send the same under the name of Farmers Diary to the sub- Centres. Other media of communication are also used - like printed information, in the form of a community newsletter, namely, *Namma Ooru Seidhi*, posters, and rural yellow pages in the local vernacular language. Two Knowledge Centres have been provided with a Public Address System. The staff at Villianur hub includes two social scientists, one field person and one content manager, in charge of the Open Knowledge Network (OKN) content. There are two persons employed on daily wages.

This project, that commenced in1998, acts as a focal point, not only in terms of giving various knowledge content or sharing information, but it is also in the forefront in providing or organising training, services and other necessary inputs to the rural communities. There is even a plan of linking the Farm Clinics of the Department of Agriculture with the Villianur hub so that this information will be useful not only to the people of Pondicherry, but all over the world.

It is interesting to mention about a new initiative of the project, namely the Open Knowledge Network. This is done in partnership with One World International. It is still in the experimental stages. The aim of this experiment is to provide information to the poor by creating a network that would connect the poor world over. This may, in one way or the other, contribute to the integration of local/indigenous knowledge into the project.

It may be mentioned here that sub-Centres depend totally on the hub-Centre for technical input as well as for other support. Any technical default or failure, affects the sub-Centres. For any technical help and infrastructure, the sub-Centres look to the support of the Villianur Centre. They seek the help of the hub-Centre for any information, clarification or for any new information that is not available with the hub - Centre.

The Knowledge Centres have been set up to facilitate development of the rural communities in the Union Territory of Pondicherry. The Centres are based on the concept of community ownership. The community is responsible for finding suitable locations for the Centre and also for identifying volunteers to operate and maintain it. Even at the outset, it has been made clear that

MSSRF would not take the responsibility for the above, and it would only give technology support and necessary technical and other inputs/support. The volunteers appointed by the community are responsible for the operation of the Knowledge Centres, and the community, for the overall maintenance. Knowledge Centres in the villages such as Nallavadu, Embalam and Koonichampet have come up in response to the villagers' demand.

Table 1 provides details of the Knowledge Centres in ten villages, with details such as population of the villages, number of volunteers in each centre, and the locations. The number of volunteers available to serve the people varies widely across the Centres.

Table 1. Details of Village Knowledge Centres: Location, Year of Inauguration, Population and Number of Volunteers

Sl. No.	Name of the Village	Year of Inauguration	Population (Approximate)		
			Male	Female	Total 1
1	Kizhur	08-09-1998	497	470	**967**
2	Embalam	05- 01-1999	2400	1600	**4000**
3	Veerampattinam	04-04-1999	3190	3100	**6290**
4	Poornangkuppam	06-08-2000	2516	2563	**5079**
5	Pillayarkuppam	06-08-2000	2400	2100	**4500**
6	Thirukanchipet	05-12-2000	270	277	**547**
7	Kalitheerthalkuppam	20-02-2001	3570	2490	**6060**
8	Nallavadu	05-12-2001	1850	1780	**3630**
9	Koonichampet	22-01-2003	2650	2350	**5000**
10	Periyakalapet	04-07-2003	NA	NA	**2500**

The Centres are thus run and maintained by the local men and women. The identified volunteers have been trained in basic computer skills (like word processing) and maintaining the Centres. They have also been trained (in hardware) in handling basic, day-to-day technical problems. The volunteers are encouraged to use their training in computer applications to generate income for the Centres. Various training imparted to the volunteers are delineated in Table 2.

Knowledge Centres facilitate information/knowledge empowerment and technology empowerment by providing access to a variety of information, thereby enabling the community to develop in different areas like education, employment, government schemes and in developing and enhancing computer skills and so on. Use of Tamil language in all the operations, and using Tamil script in computer applications, serve the purpose of the Centres, i.e. promoting the use of Knowledge Centres and encouraging interactivity between different information systems and their intended beneficiaries - the rural population.

Table 2. Computer Training (Software and Hardware) imparted to Volunteers of Village Knowledge Centres, Pondicherry

Sl. No.	Training Details
1	Windows 95/98
2	MS Word
3	MS Excel
4	MS PowerPoint
5	MS Access
6	Adobe PageMaker
7	Adobe Photoshop
8	Visual Basic
9	VC ++
10	HTML Coding
11	Recording Voice
12	Zip/Unzip
13	Data Transmission in Wireless

3. Findings of the Study

3.1 Services and Benefits

The project aims to deliver demand-driven information, and emphasises interactivity. It is believed that providing information needed by the community will ensure the sustainability of the Centres. Provision of information can become a potent force, which has the capacity to transform the community, both socially and economically.

Services generally provided in all the Centres include information on government schemes/training, employment opportunities, weather forecast, health, and market rates of products like paddy, vegetables; gold and silver. Information on phone numbers/addresses of essential services like fire

service, hospitals/nursing-homes/clinics, veterinary hospitals/clinics, electricity and various government offices/departments, are also provided. The rural yellow pages also serve this purpose. Telephone facility is available in most of the Centres. Printed information like the Tamil bi-monthly Newsletter, *Namma Ooru Seidhi* (News from our village) launched in February 2002 has been used to disseminate information. Another important service available is a Tamil daily newspaper, which is most sought-after by the community. One can get an idea about the kind of services rendered by the Knowledge Centres from the pamphlet prepared by the Veerampattinam Knowledge Centre in order to raise awareness among the people. A copy of the English translation is appended at the end of the report.

The project enhances networking and sharing of information/knowledge. It provides avenues for linking with government departments, non-government organisations NGOs, academic institutions and experts. The project has directly or indirectly contributed to skill and capacity development of rural women and men. It may be mentioned here that the project has developed a multimedia Compact disc (CD) on micro enterprises. The villagers can start an enterprise according to their choice and get benefited.

In this context it must be mentioned that earlier, in terms of receiving and delivering information, the villagers depended on traditional communication technologies. Access to mass media was negligible

நம்ம ஊரு செய்தி

வெளியீடு : ம.சா. சுவாமிநாதன் ஆராய்ச்சி நிறுவனம்

செய்தி நாள் : 1-4-2002 புதுவை செய்தி எண் - 4.

கரும்பு விவசாயிகளுக்கு ஓர் நற்செய்தி கரும்பு நாற்றங்கால் மானியம்

விபரம்

புதுவை யூனியன் பிரதேச எல்லைக்கு உட்பட்ட பருதிகளில் கரும்பு நாற்றங்கால் பயிர் செய்துள்ள விவசாயிகள் தங்கள் பயிரிட்டுள்ள, பதிவு பெற்ற கரும்பு நாற்றங்கால் பயிரிலிருந்து சர்க்கரை ஆலைகளின் அனுமதி சீட்டின் பேரில் 2002-2003 ஆண்டு அரவைப் பருவத்தின் நடவு கரும்பாக வழங்கும் விதை கரணைகளின் அடிப்படையில் இந்த ஆண்டும் நாற்றங்கால் மானியம் வழங்கப்படவுள்ளது.

மானியத்தொகை

இத்திட்டத்தின் கீழ் ஒரு ஹெக்டேர் நடவுக்கு விதை கரணை வாங்கும் விவசாயிகளுக்கு ரூ.1000 மானியம் வழங்கப்படும்.

விண்ணப்பங்கள் கிடைக்குமிடம்

தட்டாஞ்சாவடி கூடுதல் வேளாண் இயக்குநர், பயிற்சி வழி தொடர்பு திட்ட அலுவலகத்தில் பெற்றுக்கொள்ளலாம்.

விண்ணப்பிக்கும் முறை

பூர்த்தி செய்யப்பட்ட விண்ணப்பத்துடன் விதை கரணை வழங்கப்பட்ட விவசாயிகளுக்கான சர்க்கரை ஆலை கரும்பு அதிகாரிகளின் சான்றிதழுடன் புதுவை தட்டாஞ்சாவடியில் உள்ள கூடுதல் வேளாண் இயக்குநர், பயிற்சி வழி தொடர்பு திட்ட அலுவலகத்தில் சமர்ப்பிக்கவேண்டும்.

விண்ணப்பம் வந்து சேரவேண்டிய கடைசி நாள்

கரும்பு நடவு பல காரணங்களால் தள்ளி போவதால் விண்ணப்பங்கள் சமர்ப்பிக்கும் தேதி நீடிக்கப்பட்டுள்ளது. அனைத்து கரும்பு விவசாயிகளும் 15-4-2002 க்குள் விண்ணப்ப படிவங்களை சமர்ப்பிக்க வேண்டும்.

தொலைபேசி விசாரணை சேவை எண்கள்

197 – தொலைபேசி எண் விசாரணை (Enquiry)
198 – தொலைபேசி பழுது பதிவு சேவை (Fault Phone)
180 – வெளியூர் தொலைபேசி பதிவு (Trunk Booking)
174 – தற்போது நேரம் அறிய (Time)
131 – ரயில் நிலைய விசாரணை (Railway Enquiry)
1951 – மாற்றப்பட்ட தொலைபேசி எண் அறிய (Changed Telephone)
1500 – கேபிள்களுக்கு உண்டாகும் பிரச்சனை (Call cable faulty)
1501 – கட்டண தொலைவின் யூனிட்டை அறிய (Unit Meter reading)
1502 – வர்த்தக பிரிவு விசாரணை (Commercial Enquiry)
1503 – கட்டண ரசீது தகவல் அறிதல் (Bill Amount)
1504 – உள்ளூர், வெளியூர் தொலைபேசியை பூட்டும் முறை (Locking system of Local and STD)
1097 – HIV பற்றிய தகவல் அறிய (எய்ட்ஸ் நோய் கட்டுப்பாடு அமைப்பு)

among these villagers. The community depended largely on radio and television - which were and still are mostly sources of entertainment. Access to newspaper was limited. Ezhilarasi aged 27 and Anitha 20 years old, women volunteers from Kizhur and Poornangkuppam Knowledge Centres respectively, mentioned that only a few households in their villages could afford to purchase newspapers. Information was exchanged or shared through oral communication, which again did not have a wider reach. It is mentioned in some of the villages that the local *Panchayat* leaders or local political leaders were sources of information. It was largely confined to a select few, like their close relatives, friends or neighbours. Some male members felt the government staff - like the extension staff - is not normally successful in passing the information to a larger section of the community. Hence there was a lack of scope for knowledge/information empowerment. As a result, people were not aware of government-aided programmes/schemes, market situations or rates of agricultural products and inputs, educational and employment opportunities and other important information. Earlier, most of the villages did not have even telephone connections.

It may be pointed out here that computers were unheard of among a greater part of the population in these villages, and the people had never even seen one. Thanks to the Village Knowledge Centres. There is a general feeling among the volunteers and other villagers (particularly among the users and those who have benefited) that the Knowledge Centres have been instrumental in making people not only aware of the information, but also about their rights to use the same.

Ezhilarasi, a volunteer from Kizhur, brought to our notice that earlier the students and others were not aware of the educational and economic opportunities. Many could not avail of the opportunities due to lack of information at the right time. She says that in her village only a few used to get newspapers, and only three houses had telephone facility. It is also stated that the students who were

seeking employment did not know where to get applications and how to fill them. By the time they could finish the process, the last date for submission of application would have been over. Now, not only do the Knowledge Centres provide this information; but they also provide the applications and assist in the process. She says, she gets the application forms from Villianur, and makes copies, which are distributed to those who require them. Either she, or the applicant, gets it typed at the Centre itself. Whoever is interested can submit the application at the right time. Similarly, for the other community members, the Centre tries to reach out whenever the government schemes/training are announced. There is a notice board outside the Centre where important announcements are displayed everyday - like important headlines from the daily newspaper, weather forecast, government schemes, employment and educational opportunities. She also conveys messages through persons who come to the Centre or visit her house. The members of self-help groups formed by her in the village are also kept informed.

a. Educational Services

School teachers and tuition teachers use the Knowledge Centres to improve arithmetic and science skills of the children by using educational software on the computers. Gnanasekar, 24 years old, a volunteer in Poornangkuppam, who undertakes tuition for school children, mentioned that the children are quick to grasp the subject when explained with a computer. He says it was very effective and that the children still remember the life cycle of a butterfly, which he showed to them some months ago. School teachers use the Centres to type out question papers and some use it to improve their computer skills. Work related to the village *Panchayat* is carried out here - like the village or temple accounts, *Panchayat* letterheads and typing of letters.

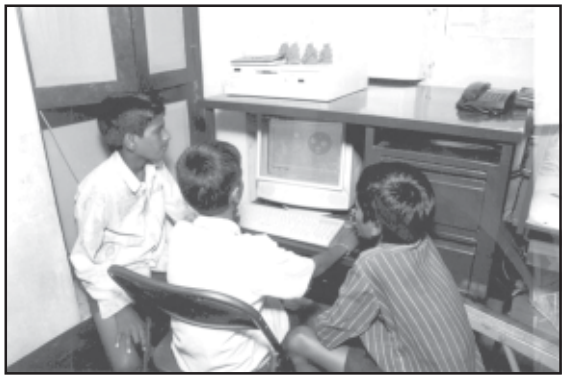
b. Employment and Income Generation

Knowledge Centres have enabled many young men and a few women get employment in government and private sectors. Information regarding vacancies in a particular sector is conveyed to the community using the available infrastructure facilities of a Centre. The Public Address System plays a crucial role in the two fishing villages. In other Centres, the details are written on a bulletin board kept outside the Centre and sometimes passed on to the community through word of mouth. *Namma Ooru seidhi*, the community newsletter, also plays a major role in this regard. Jayanthan aged 18 and Ezumalai aged 29 from Veerampattinam pointed out that many young men (around 15 persons) from their village have found employment in defense, police force and fire service. A few have got into private companies.

For income generation, the Centres take up activities like DTP and Photoshop editing. Two Centres take up CD writing. Using their skills in PageMaker, the volunteers take up work to develop letterheads, invitations and visiting cards. Internet services are available in seven Centres. The Centres also offer training courses in basic computer applications (BCA). Another popular attraction is the video games. These are popular with children below the age of 12. During the holidays the Centres are packed with children. One middle-aged man in Kalitheerthalkuppam commented that the children had to be coaxed into making way for others. Such is the demand for video games. A very nominal fee is charged for them (some of the Centres like Thirukanchipet and Koonichampet do not charge). It has been of great help to Higher Secondary and Secondary school children, who use the online services to know their exam results. The Centres render service to students from other villages also. The volunteers mentioned that when the examination results are announced, the Centres are fully packed with students. A sum of Rs 2/- (as a service charge) is taken for every result or mark list that is downloaded. It is of great help to students staying in the villages. It not only saves on travel time of going to Pondicherry, but also saves money and avoids needless anxiety.

c. Skill Development

The project offers great scope for skill development in computer applications. It has enabled many rural people, especially the youth, get exposure to computer applications -about which we will be discussing briefly in the following pages under the section dealing with 'Impact'. The volunteers, mainly the women, and others who have developed their computer skills from the Knowledge Centres, mentioned that they had never even dreamed of working on computers with ease, and that they would now be teaching others. They feel they are indeed fortunate to have free access to the technology. Truly, for most of them, it would have been a distant dream. Their families cannot afford to send them to computer centres. Even if they had the facility, they would not have got the perfection and competency as they got from learning in the Knowledge Centres. Some of the women, like Danalakshmi aged 39 and Selva Rani aged 36



years from Embalam said that they had never seen a computer before. They had a vague idea about it. They imagined it would be like a Television. Ambica who is 27 years, from Kalitheerthalkuppam said that she had seen a computer earlier in a school. She was curious about it, but thought, "Where will I get a chance even to touch it?" But today this young woman, who is in her late 20s, is competently training school and college students in computer applications!

The Knowledge Centres have not only produced many computer literates but have also enabled them to get employment with the training they got at the Centres. It has been mentioned earlier that the Centres impart training in computer applications, but do not award certificates. It was learnt from Periyakalapet that two young women (not from that village) secured employment based on their computer skills. One of the male volunteers mentioned that these days the employers normally do not give importance to certificates; but rely on a person's work efficiency. He said that when one of his cousins, who was trained at the Centre, applied for a job, she was given work that involved different computer applications. He said that the girl worked with such ease and confidence that she got an immediate appointment. He commented that whoever gets training at the Centre would be more efficient than the ones who get training in big computer institutes, as the Knowledge Centres provide an atmosphere conducive to learning, and sharing of knowledge/skills. Access to the systems is not always difficult, and the trainers are very approachable; and they can also learn from friends.

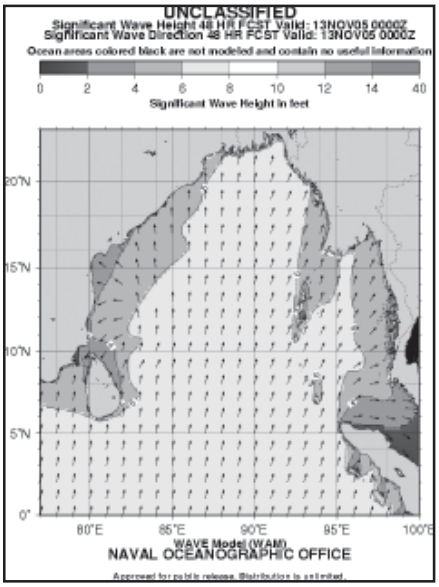
d. Weather

Services related to weather forecast are of great use to the rural communities, especially to the fishing community. Significant is the information on wave heights that provides a 12-hour prediction for wave heights in the Bay of Bengal. The images are downloaded from a U.S. Navy website and the same is delivered to the Centres of Veerampattinam and Nallavadu. This helps the fishermen make appropriate decisions before venturing into the sea for fishing. Veerampattinam Centre receives information on potential fishing zones, such as depth and water temperature, from the Indian National Centre for Ocean and Information Services (INCOIS). The general weather forecast helps the farmers in choosing their agricultural activities such as transplanting and harvesting.

e. Specific Interventions - For Fishermen

The content and other services offered at the Knowledge Centres benefit the rural people in their day-to-day lives. Extension of infrastructure such as wireless and the Public Address System are crucial in this process. The Centres with the Public Address System use

it to maximise the dissemination of information. The system plays a significant role in disseminating information like government schemes, weather report, employment opportunities and so on. It is an effective tool in reaching out to the entire community. Not even a single house misses the information conveyed through this system. In Centres like Embalam, the women volunteers have taken up this responsibility willingly, and convey the messages to people living in and around their respective houses, and to whomsoever they come across in the village. In other Centres too, the enthusiastic and committed volunteers, in their own way, try to reach out the community to the extent possible.



As it has already been mentioned, the benefits of the Knowledge Centre are evident in the usage of the Public Address System available in villages like Veerampattinam and Nallavadu. In the former village, we could talk to a group of five women in order to ascertain whether they were aware of the Centre set up in their village, and their perceptions about it. As in any other village, they referred to it as the 'Computer Centre' as the school children learn to use the computer there. Then we enquired further whether it was of any use to the community in general. They immediately responded by saying, "Certainly, it is of great use to us". When asked how, they said that it keeps them informed about government schemes/ plans, weather information, other important news/messages and so on. They mentioned that they find this system very useful as it benefited the community. They are able to utilise the government schemes and employment opportunities. It was mentioned that prior to this, various government schemes did not reach the community as it does in the present times. Earlier, the communication was very poor, and only a few influential persons benefited by them. The *Panchayat* members would convey or pass on the information only to a limited section of the community, more particularly, to those who were close to them. One woman namely Sarojini, aged 55, said that it is a great boon to their village as everyone is aware of various

programmes and schemes. She said that the same message would be repeated three to four times, so that everyone would get to know of it. She and others said that even if the messages were not clear the concerned persons would go to the Centre and get clarifications. Or they would ask the volunteer in charge of the Centre when they see him in the village. They were full of praise for the volunteer, and appreciated his patience in clarifying all their doubts, and the care and interest he bestows on the Centre. They also mentioned they would ask other boys who frequently visit the Centre for details or doubts. They boys would oblige, they said. One of the women, Savithri, 40 years of age, said that in case there was any internal fight in the village, people are warned to take precautionary measures - like staying indoors so as to not get affected by the fight. They can also avoid involvement in the police interrogations by not going to the scene of rivalry.

The fishing community in the above two villages have greatly benefited by the flashlight and siren units provided by the project. A discussion with the volunteers and the other community members, both women and men, brought out the value and importance of the new facilities. The women and men in Veerampattinam and Nallavadu said that the installation of the flashlight in their villages is a great boon. They said that it not only enables the fishermen to find the right routes, it also helps them in many ways - by saving time and fuel, and guiding them to take a right direction. Most importantly, it helps avoid psychological tension. Earlier, they used to lose their way in the seas during nights, particularly during rainy and cyclonic weather. In another fishing village, Periyakalapet, young men and women said that their community benefited quite a lot when the flashlight in their village functioned well. They pointed out that they could really see the difference after the installation of the flashlight. Unfortunately, however, for three months it has not been functioning, as the unit was damaged during a thunderstorm. The people are affected by the absence of this facility.

Another communication channel that is of use to the fishing community is the siren. The *Panchayat* leader of Nallavadu said that it enables the fishermen to get up early and go fishing. It reminds the community about their work schedule. It enables them to take the bus on time. In case there is any urgent announcement to be made, the siren helps to bring the people to assemble at a particular place. In general, this facility serves the interests of all age groups starting from school going children, who either have to take a bus or attend to any work. It may be mentioned here that only few Centres like Nallavadu, Veerampattinam and Embalam have this facility.

The services of the Knowledge Centres for weather forecast are very significant. It is of great use particularly to the fishing community. They pointed out that unnecessary loss of life has been prevented because the fishermen could now avoid venturing into the sea if weather predictions are not favourable for fishing in the deep sea. Earlier, many fishermen lost their lives by venturing out in bad weather since the weather forecast and warnings from the Fishing Department reached the community too late.

f. Services through Linkages/Partnerships

Using the contacts with the intermediary information providers,the project organises and conducts training programmes by inviting experts from different fields. Knowledge Centres encourage people to take advantage of various training programmes given by government departments like District Rural Development Agency (DRDA), Rajiv Gandhi Veterinary Hospital, non-governmental organisations like Sustainable Agriculture and Environmental Voluntary Action (SEVA). It also helps rural people by organising health camps with the help of Jawaharlal Institute of Postgraduate Medical Education & Research (JIPMER) and eye camps with Aravind Eye Hospital in Pondicherry. It is learnt during the interactions with the volunteers and from few Case Studies (of women and men) that the project has facilitated some women and men at grass root level to get training relevant to their livelihoods (like livestock management conducted by Rajiv Gandhi Veterinary Hospital) and for income generation (like rope-making by DRDA). Many have acquired training in tailoring, rope-making, and pickle preparation and in the preparations of incense sticks and phenyl and in decorative artifacts using seashells and coconut shells. They are also encouraged to take part in agricultural fairs, where they could exhibit their products for sale.

Following are a few examples of the kind of services provided to the rural communities with the help of the linkages/partners:

Health Services

It has been mentioned earlier that the project, through its various linkages/partnerships, tries to serve rural communities. With the support of Aravind Eye Hospital, Pondicherry, a movement for preventable blindness has been initiated. The Knowledge Centre volunteers, trained by the hospital staff to detect long sight, short sight and cataract, take active part in these camps. Through this initiative, around 175 persons were prescribed spectacles and 15 underwent cataract operation. The volunteers maintain contact with the hospital and whenever a need arises they do not hesitate to approach the hospital staff for assistance. If someone approaches the volunteers for eye-related problems, they either take the concerned persons to the hospital or direct them to go the hospital by providing necessary details. A reference from the Rural Knowledge Centre is enough to get an appointment with a doctor in the hospital, said Shakthivel aged 25, a volunteer from Thirukanchipet. The patients are not generally made to wait, he added. It is learnt from the volunteers that the Tuberculosis Research Centre (TRC) and National Tuberculosis Control Programme (NCTP) have agreed to help create TB-free zones in the rural areas of Pondicherry. Shakthivel and a few volunteers have

undergone training to identify people afflicted with TB. The training was given by the TRC. It is mentioned that NCTB will provide free medicines for the patients through the Village Knowledge Centres and send a senior medical intern to monitor the programme. However, incidences of TB seem not to be a common phenomenon in the rural areas, mentioned Shakthivel.

Animal Husbandry

Animal husbandry is another area where the rural people benefited by participating in a training programme. With the help of Rajiv Gandhi College of Veterinary and Animal Science, Pondicherry, around 300 cattle-owners were trained in managing and maintaining the livestock. It is very encouraging to note that the training they received was of great use to them. This is probably because they owned cattle as a main source of income. After the training, they could take care of their livestock in a much better manner than before. They knew about the basic health problems, and how to prevent or control diseases, and avoid infection by following hygienic practices, and so on. One of the women said that they were taught to take care of their cattle just as one would take care of their children.

Database on Below Poverty Line

All Centres maintain a database on the details of Below Poverty Line (BPL) families. The Government of Pondicherry provides the information. This data is crucial to the village communities. It enables them to apply for loans, subsidies and any other special benefits/entitlements announced by the government for the people living below the poverty line. The availability of this information saves time and money. The people have easy access to the data.

Table 3 gives an idea of the network partners/linkages of the project, and the services provided/utilised.

g. *Namma Ooru Seidhi* – Community Newsletter

The community felt that other knowledge-based infrastructure like local newspaper and particularly the newsletter – *Namma Ooru Seidhi* - available in the Centres, are generally put to better use. *Namma Ooru Seidhi* is a real hit among the villagers. It reaches a wider section of the population. It is so popular that people ask for it in case they do not get it on time. It is distributed free of cost. The demand for this newsletter is such that people often throng the Centre to collect their copies. It covers various aspects ranging from employment opportunities, interesting local news and advertisements, traditional medicines, useful inputs related to agriculture, cooking and so on. This newsletter also gives an opportunity to enhance the capacity of the rural people to contribute or share their experiences

Table 3. Services through Network Partners/Linkages

Network Partners/Linkages	Type of Institution
Rajiv Gandhi College of Veterinary and Animal Sciences, Kurumampet, Pondicherry.	Educational Institute (Government)
Aravind Eye Hospital, Thavalakuppam, Pondicherry	Hospital (Private)
SEVA- Sustainable Agriculture and Environment Voluntary Action	NGO
Motilal Nehru Government College of Polytechnic, Lawspet, Pondicherry	Educational Institute (Government)
SAHODARI, Nellithoppe, Pondicherry	NGO
Family Welfare Consultancy Centre, Reddiarpalayam, Pondicherry	NGO
Azim Premji Foundation	NGO
Coconut Farmers Association, Ariyangkuppam, Pondicherry	NGO
Directorate of Education for All	Educational Institute (Government)
District Rural Development Corporation, Pondicherry	Government
I – Tutor Organisation	Private

(for example, any innovative agricultural practice, traditional method of seed treatment, herbal medicine and so on) and information. Most importantly, it has helped in increasing awareness about the Knowledge Centres, not only in the villages where they are located, but also other areas. Sumathi aged 30, one of the volunteers in Embalam Centre, said that she takes a copy of this newsletter whenever she visits her mother's village, which is near Villupuram, a town near Pondicherry. Many find it helpful to learn about local medicinal prescriptions for minor ailments, and to know the kind of welfare schemes allocated to the people of Pondicherry. It has helped raise the general awareness among her villagers, mentioned Sumathi.

3.2 Special Features

The project has contributed both directly and indirectly to the opening up of new possibilities for the Centres to organise and network skills. The Centres act as the *fora* for various government departments and NGOs to make use of the volunteers in networking with local communities. The Knowledge Centre at Embalam plays a significant role in providing information about various schemes. Many volunteers in the Embalam Centre mentioned that it has given them increased access to government departments and services and in disseminating the knowledge to others in the village, particularly to those who stay close to their houses and the self - help group members. As the word spreads, the villagers, mainly women, approach them for further details. The volunteers themselves take the women to the government departments and help the eligible persons enlist for the benefits of the welfare schemes. They take extra efforts to find the eligible persons like the disabled, young widows, those who are in the below poverty line category and others. They do it with interest. It is evident that they really enjoy doing this kind of work. They take pride in that. It has really enhanced their self-esteem and improved their self-confidence. The Embalam Knowledge Centre plays a significant role in providing information about various schemes and spreading awareness among the people. It brings people closer to the *bureaucracy*. The volunteers take personal interest in delivering the message and identifying the right persons to take advantage of the schemes and benefits. This has been well documented and also confirmed by our direct interaction with various persons in the village.

It will be useful to mention how various stakeholders use the Knowledge Centres and utilise the benefits. The volunteers have become popular, particularly in the Embalam Knowledge Centre and they have become facilitators/agents to carry out government programmes - mainly by the health department and veterinary department. This base and its contacts with the local people serve as a big asset. This has an impact on the morale of the volunteers with little pecuniary benefit. During our visit to the village the volunteers were engaged in collecting details of household members affected with elephantiasis, based on age and sex. This had been

carried out to adopt preventive measures and prescribe medication. In addition to this, they were also requested to collect information about other specific illness or diseases - like heart disease, hypertension and diabetes. These details were collected to facilitate proper, timely treatment to those in the household who needed the same. The women volunteers said that the health department would entrust them with the job of distributing medicines to the villagers. They mentioned that they have to be very careful while giving the same. They had to ensure that the members took the medicine for three consecutive days. Even though the work demanded a lot of time and energy, the volunteers executed it with enthusiasm. The monetary benefit for this work was not much - as they were paid Rs 75/- only. As the information was meticulously collected, they felt that it could be used by the Knowledge Centre as a data base for vital details such as total number of households, total population based on age and sex, and more importantly, health problems. They took the whole effort in the right and positive perspective. Such information could also be updated on specific aspects of any particular village.

It is also mentioned that the volunteers collect farm insurance dues from the farmers of Embalam, based on the list provided by the agricultural department concerned, and pay the same in the nearby village, Karikalampakkam. In addition to this the volunteers have also been asked by the temple trustee to collect parking charges for vehicles that come to the temple in the evenings on Fridays. It is also said that the volunteers in charge have to deposit the same in the bank. The volunteers (two persons on every Friday) take turns to carry out the work. One of the volunteers mentioned that the temple trustee told them that they would be paid a total sum of Rs 500/- for their services, which was to be divided equally between them. The volunteers carry out their work with enthusiasm. Though at times they feel the increase in workload, they seldom complained. For them it is also a matter of great pride when others look up to them for advice and assistance in carrying out certain tasks.

In the Embalam Centre, the volunteers said that if any officer from the government sector or any other institutions visits the village, they would be directed to the Knowledge Centre by the community because the general impression is - "*Ange pona theriyum*" - meaning, "If you go there, you will know". Similar opinion was echoed in other Centres also. Women volunteers said that in the beginning, when they set off for work in the Centre, people would make sarcastic comments like, "*Paiya Thookeettu Kalambittanga*" (meaning "They have set off with their bags to the Centre"). Now most of them have come to realise that these women provide valuable service to the community. Even now, sometimes they hear a few comments like, "They must be earning a lot at the Centre, and getting some benefits," and so on. But the volunteers do not pay heed to such comments. Volunteers understand that such misguided comments are only natural in the milieu of a village.

It is also mentioned by one volunteer and the local *Panchayat* leader in Nallavadu that since its inception, the Knowledge Centre has been facilitating the work of the Fisheries Department by fostering friendly relations between the department and the community. According to the *Panchayat* leader there is a close interaction between the Centre and the Fisheries Department. He and others present said that concerned people from the department would keep the Knowledge Centre informed of new schemes / subsidies and relevant community-specific information. The Centre in turn transmits the same to the people using the Public Address System. This is true of the Veerampattinam Knowledge Centre also. Ezhilarasi, from Kizhur, said that when bank officers and other government staff visit the Centre, she makes use of the opportunity to approach them for assistance whenever a loan has to be sanctioned without much difficulty or to send self-help group members for training in tailoring, pickle preparation and so on.

It is interesting to note that the volunteers and a few men in Koonichampet, who form a dynamic group, use the Centre as a focal point to develop and maintain linkages with different institutions. This group, which also belongs to a Youth Club, namely, *Ilam Purakkal,* established in 1998, has been involved in activities to improve their society. One of the men, instrumental in bringing the Centre to this village says, the Centre has strengthened not only their earlier linkages but also helped to create new linkages and network. It has given them a direction, he added. Linkages with few institutes like Science and Technology and Science Forum have been created. It has been mentioned that a school teacher namely Chandrasekar aged 29 years and Dharmasivam 36 years of age working in a mill (who were primarily responsible in getting the Centre to this place) took efforts in this direction with a support of other volunteers and well-wishers. Through these networks, it was possible to increase the general awareness about the environment, and a video screening of rare planetary movements was also carried out. The volunteers said the villagers watched the video with great interest. Using the contact with the Pondicherry Science Forum, a one-day camp was organised where the school children, both boys and girls, were shown simple scientific experiments using locally available materials. The children enjoyed participating in the camp. They have also organised an awareness programme on the importance of breast-feeding, and training programmes on Human Resource development and personality development, by enlisting some experts. A one-day programme on free legal counseling was conducted in the village. Annexure 2 gives us an idea of the type of network the Knowledge Centre has built up.

There is a general feeling that the Computer Centres (as known to the people) are reliable sources of information. It must also be mentioned that the reliability or credibility of any information received from the Centre, to a certain extent also depends on the contacts a particular Centre has with the government departments.

3.3 The Impact

The project has the potential to make an impact on a wider scale among the community and society. Though this is yet to happen, it has already influenced various aspects of their lives. The primary

objectives of the project are rural development and strengthening of livelihoods, and bringing about food security .The perceivable impact of information and communication technology as such is seen among the younger generation. Most of them, particularly, in Veerampattinam and Periyakalapet, use information technology to explore opportunities for higher studies or to seek jobs outside their villages. The training they get at the Centre acts as a catalyst for higher education and employment. Many, particularly among the fishing community in Veerampattinam, have obtained employment using information on employment opportunities accessed through the Knowledge Centres. A few young boys from this village, and from Periyakalapet, could seek higher studies outside Pondicherry, in places like Kerala. There are individual cases of farmers being directly benefited by the Centre. At the community level, there is overall awareness of the various government schemes, their rights and entitlements to several benefits. Another area that needs mention is the vastly improved bargaining power in the market. Farmers can now wait for better prices and thus avoid losses.

Perceivable also is the impact on the younger generation - mainly boys and young men. It has fostered greater interest and improved computer application skills. Many surpass even their seniors who taught them. It has created a healthy atmosphere of learning and sharing, where children and elders learn computer skills together. The seniors teach the juniors. The newcomers to the Centres learn by observing others working on the computer. Many of the users who were present during the author's visit to the Centres said that they picked up the skill merely by observing. They mentioned that they sought help from seniors and volunteers if they had any difficulty in understanding the commands, or in handling any problem while working on the system. It has undoubtedly helped in bringing out their creativity and potential. Ezhumalai, a 29-year-old volunteer from the Veerampattinam Centre from the time of its inception, says that many of them, who were very diffident and hesitated to enter the Centre, have now become confident. He pointed out to two such boys and said that now he himself takes their help in case he gets some doubt. He said that some of the boys take up voluntary work at the Centre after school hours and teach newcomers. They also help him in conducting certificate courses, and in project work. (They refer to any dissertation or report-typing work as 'project work').

The student community, particularly, has benefited greatly through the Knowledge Centres. Their confidence and learning abilities have vastly improved. The volunteers at the Centres like Periyakalapet, Koonichampet and Veerampattinam mentioned that the exposure to computers and the guidance from MSSRF have helped them and other youngsters bring out their potential. Prabhu, aged 19 a young man who has completed his schooling and now aspires to become an aircraft engineer, says that the Centre has helped many students improve their thinking and communication skills. He says that MSSRF has shown them how to apply such information and computer skills in order to serve and benefit the society.

Visible impact is seen among the youngsters who have acquired computer skills. It has motivated many youngsters. The young boys say they are much better in computers when compared to their classmates. "They envy us when we work very fast with much ease" they remark. The teachers are

also appreciative of them. The youngsters, particularly in these Centres, feel proud to talk about their computer skills. "We feel very confident of ourselves. With this we can really get into some jobs," they said. But they were quick to add that they would continue the learning and will go for higher studies - either in computers or any other subject. They said that the training they received at the Centre would be of great use in whatever subject they choose, as computer knowledge is essential in all fields. A woman volunteer, namely Prabhu Vani, 23 years of age, and others expressed their gratitude to MSSRF for making them competent with computers as they would never have to feel out of place or embarrassed when called upon to work with the systems.

It is interesting to find that these young men did not stop with the basic training given to them by MSSRF; but have further strengthened their computer skills on their own. Some volunteers have not only strengthened their skills but also acquired more knowledge about computer application following basic training at the Centres. A few youngsters like Prabhu, Paridhi aged 22 and another student in Periyakalapet decided to take a course in computer hardware. They said it would help them attend to technical problems at the Centre and also in getting employment. They also intend teaching capable persons so that they can handle the difficulties in their absence. They mentioned that as far as possible, they do not disturb the project staff in Villianur when there are any technical problems. They try to solve it themselves, or take help from a local hardware engineer.

Youngsters in Veerampattinam have been greatly enthused to develop their computer skills. They have been able to use Internet facilities very effectively. We saw a 15-year-old boy who had just finished his schooling, help two college students with their project work - one on musical instruments and the other on the city of Agra - by downloading necessary and relevant material from the Internet. When we visited the Centre, he had almost completed the search and he was organising the material. He said he culled out the information/content and relevant pictures needed for the project work. The boy, Jayanthan, said that he had never imagined that he would be doing this kind of work - that too in his own village - with free access to the infrastructure. He shook his head in disbelief at the very thought of his feat at such a young age!

Most of the volunteers (especially the women in the Embalam Centre) and the users whom we met, mentioned that they never expected to be working with computers. Young boys and girls said they never thought they would have the facility to learn computer applications in their villages. The college students at Periyakalapet pointed out that though they had only heard about the Internet and e- mail services, they never imagined that they would be using the same and learning other computer applications so soon - that too in their own village.

As already mentioned, one could find evidence of the changes the information and communication technology has brought upon the youngsters. Various avenues to technology empowerment have opened up - not only for men - but also for women. Major beneficiaries, though, are mainly the men. However, some women have also benefited by the Centre in Periyakalapet. Two of them have secured good jobs in a nearby industry and a hospital. (Prabhu Vani who has been a volunteer at this Centre,

has a job in the hospital). A few young girls like Poonkuzhali, a 14-year-old from Periyakalapet, and Jayanthi an18-year-old from Koonichampet, have acquired computer skills. Jayanthi is now a volunteer, and Poonkuzhali has taught DOS, Power Point and other computer applications to a few of her schoolmates. Poonkuzhali wants to become a computer engineer.

At this stage it may be difficult to give exact numbers, but it appears that male members outnumber females. A quick glance at the user register, and the visits to the Centres, clearly bring out this aspect.

Some of the elders we met pointed out that these Centres are significantly changing the lives of the students and the youth - irrespective of the sex. They said that this would enable them to improve the quality of life to a greater degree than what was achieved by their parents and grandparents. The rural youth had better opportunities to improve their abilities and scope for employment, and could act with greater confidence.

One of the frequent visitors to the Embalam Centre felt that the Knowledge Centre should not give importance to video games and that in fact it should discourage this activity. He regrets that the Knowledge Centres are either knowingly or unwittingly spoiling the young children. It has created an impression among the children that the Centre is a place for fun and play. They do not realise that it is a place for learning. He also said that the volunteers at the Centre should improve their skills in computer applications like Photoshop which will help them earn income. He also expressed concern about the sustainability of the Centre when MSSRF withdraws its support.

Empowerment of Women

The project has contributed toward social and knowledge empowerment of the volunteers who operate the Knowledge Centres. It is yet to impact other sections of population, particularly the women. Interactions with women volunteers, particularly in the Centres at Embalam and Kalitheerthalkuppam, clearly revealed that the project has undoubtedly helped them get over their inhibitions and improve their self-confidence. The women are no longer confined to their homes and their villages. They are moving out of their village boundaries and interact not only with women but also with government officials who are mostly men. They do not expect anyone from the household to accompany them to the nearby town or to any other place. They take part in meetings and large gatherings, and share experiences with the audience with ease and confidence. They have become capable of obtaining benefits of government welfare schemes for their villagers and offering counseling to their friends and relatives in solving/tackling household problems. The volunteers, either directly or indirectly, are influencing other women in the villages, particularly the self-help group members. The self-help group members have attended various training programmes organised by the project with the help of other organisations and institutes. The volunteers motivate them to attend the training programmes for their benefit. This reflects a dimension of their social empowerment. Economic empowerment, though not visible among these women, seems to have gained atleast a small momentum by providing services like typing applications, taking printouts, charging for video games etc.

The volunteers themselves are able to assess their improvement in decision-making. Some of them mentioned that their ability to think and decide has improved a lot. They are able to make their own choices and decisions. Earlier they used to depend on the men even if they had to go shopping or attend a wedding. The men used to accompany them. Now they know their priorities. Not only are they in a position to do things on their own without expecting their spouses or brothers to accompany them, they are also in a position to decide for themselves. One of the volunteers at Embalam Centre pointed that in case there is a wedding of a relative and she feels she does not have to go, since she has other important work, she would stay back and ask her husband to attend the wedding on behalf of the family. Her husband also does not object to this since he knows that she has some other work to concentrate upon. Before she was exposed to VKC and self-help group activities, she would have had no choice but to accompany her husband. But now, in case it is an important function, she would go on her own - at a time convenient to her.

Some women volunteers mentioned that the exposure and work experience in the Knowledge Centres have not only reduced their dependence on their husbands; it has also largely contributed to an increase in their self-esteem and confidence. Kasthuri, 37 years old, from Embalam said that her daily earnings from the Knowledge Centre enabled her to buy flowers or meet any other requirements such as buying books or pencil/pen for her school going children. She does not have to wait for her husband to get them. Barring a few exceptions, the rest of the women expressed similar views.

Amirtham, aged 37, mother of four daughters, says, "*Ennai patthiye enakku theriyavillai"* - meaning that she was not aware of her own strength and potential. She was not confident enough to handle even the daily household accounts and this used to irritate her husband. Now she is able to maintain accounts and plan the budget. She says her husband appreciates her and encourages her in her activities as volunteer at the Knowledge Centre, and also a leader of the self-help group. She is a confident woman now, and she not only contributes to the household income by selling her home-made pickles, but is also in a position to train others in pickle-making. She prepares around 26 varieties of pickles. Her preparation of pickles varies according to the season. She sells her pickles at home and during agricultural fairs. She says that there are regular customers for her pickles. She advertised her products in the newsletter, *Nammavur Ooru Seidhi*. According to her, this newsletter gave an opportunity to convert her potentials/interests into action/performance. Seeing her advertisement, some persons who were diabetic or had other health problems, enquired whether she would be able to prepare pickles according to their requirements - with reduced salt, less oil, without preservatives, and so on. At the same time they were particular that the pickles should not get spoilt. Amirtham caters to such persons' needs also. People from five-ten kilometers distance come to her house to buy the pickles. She says proudly that those who have tasted her pickles suggested that she sell the same in Pondicherry market on Sundays. She is contemplating the idea, and looking out for suitable places.

Amirtham also helps her village people by getting financial assistance from a French welfare organisation. She came to know of this through someone who visited the Knowledge Centre for Internet browsing. Nearly 25 needy persons (like the disabled, and young widows) from her village have benefited

by this. She helps the community through other ways also, using her contacts with government departments, NGOs and so on.

Selva Rani, 36 years old, a volunteer from Embalam, says that she and the others feel proud to be addressed as 'madam'. She says that with little educational background (middle school) when she is able to type or take printouts, she feels happy and proud. "Who would have sent me for computer course spending Rs. 3,000/- or Rs 4, 000/-?" she wonders. She said that she used to have very low self-esteem; now she is somewhat better. She says she still has a long way to go.

Indira Gandhi, a woman aged around 30 years with two children, who recently joined the Knowledge Centre as a volunteer, mentioned that as a child and teenager, she used to be very docile and timid. Her father was an important person in the village. So she and her younger sister were never allowed to interact freely with others in the village. She had studied up to the 8th standard. Today, she is totally a changed person. She is one of the self-help group leaders. She has become bold and articulate. She earns an income through tailoring, and by selling knitted tablecloth and stuffed toys. She has taken up an agency for cosmetic products by Hindustan Lever, which is another source of income for her. Her husband, who works in a mill, encouraged her to take up this agency, which she has been doing for the past three months. She says that the income from tailoring is sufficient to manage her day - to - day household expenses. She teaches other women to knit and make stuffed toys,

Indira Gandhi is proud to say that she is no longer a submissive person. She has become aware of her rights and responsibilities. She has become so bold that she dissuaded her brother from selling their ancestral house. She was upset with her brother when he did not bother to inform her and her younger sister about his plan. She says he felt that it was not necessary to inform the sisters. When her brother wanted to go ahead with the sale, heedless of her objections, she decided to take the matter to the court. "The case is in the court now," says Indira Gandhi. Similarly, she objected to a sale of another piece of land by her brother. She intervened, and stopped the buyer from registering till she and her sister were paid their share of the sale proceeds.

Indira Gandhi also attends to other problems and gives necessary help. She tries to extend support to her friends and relatives in the village. She says if there is any problem in a house, she helps them sort out the problem amicably. In extreme cases, she takes them to Arunodayam, a non-governmental organisation that is involved in providing family counseling services. She has also helped a man whose drinking problem caused distress in his household. She was able to take him to a de-addiction facility. Presently he is under medication, says Indira Gandhi.

Indira Gandhi was very humble when she said, "If I have clarity in thought and actions now, it is only because of the *Seidhi Maiyam* (Knowledge Centre). She says that by merely observing one of the meetings of the self-help group members in the Centre, she changed her thinking and perceptions. She said that during the meeting, led by one of the project staff, women's empowerment was discussed elaborately. That one meeting was sufficient for her to come out of her protected upbringing. She says it was by

chance that she got an opportunity to listen to the discussion. She had gone there to find a veterinary doctor as her cow had a health problem. She is happy that her husband supports her in all her activities.

It has already been mentioned that the Embalam volunteers are self-help group leaders. They are a dynamic group, who inspire other volunteers in other Centres. Prabhu Vani, a volunteer from Periyakalapet, and another young woman from the village, said that they could not believe themselves when they heard volunteers from Embalam (who had been educated only up to middle school) relate very clearly, without any inhibitions, about their work during a volunteers' meeting. They pointed out that even though they themselves were college-educated, they could not say a word in the meeting. "We felt ashamed of ourselves. Those women from Embalam were really a source of inspiration to others," the young women remarked.

It may not be out of context to mention about the role played by the Mangalam Society - a pioneer in forming self-help groups in Pondicherry to create awareness among women about their rights and responsibilities. The volunteers from Embalam have a base in Mangalam Society. It was revealed from a few of their Case Studies that this society gave them the necessary moral support besides creating awareness of their rights and responsibilities through intensive workshops. It helped bring out their strengths and weaknesses. It gave them the opportunity to express themselves. Through these workshops, the Mangalam Society made them realise how they should let go past unpleasant memories that would affect future performance both at home and outside. The society also arranged for family counseling sessions with another non-governmental organisation called Arunodayam. It was during one of the meetings of self-help group organised by this society that they came to know about the concept of Knowledge Centres. The volunteers pointed out that the Mangalam Society encouraged the self-help group members to take the responsibility for running the Centre.

Mangalam Society has played a crucial role in spreading awareness among the women. It was strengthened by MSSRF; it facilitated and enhanced the volunteers' self-confidence and motivated them to work outside the house, commented Amirtham and Danalakshmi. Amirtham mentioned that if the Mangalam Society had made them aware of their rights and responsibilities, and given them confidence, the Knowledge Centre served as a *vadikal,* providing the opportunity to relate to realities. Till then they were unaware of their capabilities and strengths, pointed out one of the volunteers. It is mentioned that MSSRF motivated them to come out of their house and work among the people. They are exposed to the outside world and are able to do a lot of things on their own - not only for their families, but also for the community at large. They said they are proud of their development and feel happy that they are able to serve the society. This shows their empowerment dimension, and the raising of awareness levels.

Amirtham says that through Mangalam Society and MSSRF, her standard of living has improved. Her social awareness (*samuga unarvu*) and confidence have also increased. She is able to serve the society and motivate others. With four daughters to nurture, her life would have become miserable without the support of Mangalam Society and her participation in Knowledge Centers. Today she and her

husband are not worried about their four daughters. She says she has realised that one does not require college degrees to get employment. “I am very clear now. Without that (high educational qualification) one can easily earn and be economically independent. They don’t have to be slaves for others. This social awareness has saved my household from societal ridicule (as she has four daughters). We withstood it. My husband has always been supportive,” said Amirtham.

The volunteers at Embalam Knowledge Centre are active, not only in their own village, but also extend their services to the neighbouring villages where the Knowledge Centres are located. They have helped to form self-help groups in these villages. They also impart training to the women in pickle making, phenyl/soap oil preparation, rope-making and so on. They charge a nominal fee for the training. The volunteers make use of this time to talk about the Knowledge Centres and its services. They share useful information with them - like the latest government schemes, traditional medicine for minor ailments and such other things. The volunteers mentioned that it gives a tremendous sense of fulfillment when they teach others. It enhanced their self-esteem. The volunteers felt that they are immediately recognised wherever they go - to banks (in connection with self-help group accounts) or to any government departments. The bank officers and government officials attend to them immediately, and extend all possible assistance. It was heartening to observe Amirtham proudly explain how well they are treated in a bank or in a government office.

The role of volunteers in Embalam and Kalitheerthalkuppam can be seen in other spheres also, like in family counseling. They try to sort out the problems between husband and wife or between a daughter-in-law and the parents-in-law. Sometimes they take the concerned persons to Arunodayam. It is also learnt that the Embalam volunteers have been instrumental in providing speed-breakers near a school that was close to the village temple. Usha Rani, aged 35, one of the most dynamic personalities, has helped to form a self-help group in Chennai, where her younger sister resides. She says that whenever she goes to her sister’s house, she would help the group members in maintaining accounts and gives guidance.

Prabhu Vani from Periyakalapet feels proud to be associated with the Knowledge Centre. She says that even though she comes from a conservative society, her role as a volunteer at the Centre is recognised by both women and men in her community. She said that she never used to talk to men, as it was the social norm in society. But things have changed for the better. The elders and neighbours approach her if they need any clarifications. They treat her with respect, she added. She also mentioned an incident where she was given an immediate appointment when she went to meet the Director of a nearby hospital (to give the Rural Yellow pages book). She said she felt honoured when the Director met her and showed great interest in the activities of the Knowledge Centre. Prabhu Vani mentioned that after her meeting with the hospital Director, a few women have been employed there. Incidentally, Prabhu Vani also has recently got employment in the same hospital as a secretary to a senior doctor. She says her experience at the Centre helped her get the job, and the staff treat her with respect. Credit goes to MSSRF, said Prabhu Vani. She says she will continue to serve as a volunteer since she works at the hospital in shifts. She and her friends in the village want to serve their community with

the Knowledge Centre as a focal point. But they do not know where and how to begin such a big task. They feel that the project could help them cross over the societal restrictions regarding female members. It appears that the prevailing social conditions in a few villages do not engender social empowerment of women.

In Kizhur, a woman volunteer's activity is restricted to the Centre only. Working within the Centre, which also happens to be at her residence, she extends support and help to maximum extent possible. She says although she does not move out of the house, she has gained confidence after working as a volunteer in the Knowledge Centre. She says that the bank officers and other government officials come to the Centre. She mentioned that she feels important when they offer assistance regarding the schemes or benefits. She says it gives her confidence, and helps improve her self-esteem. It is interesting to note that she was instrumental in forming some of the self-help groups in her village. She encourages others particularly the youngsters, and the women, to get benefited by the facilities available at the Centre. She writes down any new information that is sent from the hub Centre, and also on her own, she notes down interesting or useful content. She takes help from the users who visit the Centre or the self-help group members to pass on messages to others. She follows it up through the same persons, to find out whether they made use of the information or benefited from the government schemes. She does everything by remaining within the Centre. We must mention here that she was hesitant to go with the author also.

It is interesting to observe the male members, like Shakthivel from Thirukanchipet, remark that the Knowledge Centre has brought about a change for the better. Shakthivel explained that prior to his joining the Centre, he was a reticent person (in spite of being an educated man) and that many people in his community did not know him. But after he started interacting with the Knowledge Centre, he has been involved in undertaking survey work (like conducting eye camps through Aravind Eye Hospital, Pondicherry), which has brought him closer to the community. Today if someone needed any information, they approach him for details.

Case Studies of some of the volunteers reveal that they have proved their competence in managing the Centres and in gaining respect among the community. They have carved out a niche for themselves in the village.

The Volunteers: Abilities and Attitudes

Volunteers' abilities and skills have influence over the kind of information used or sought by the users. It has evoked curiosity and interest in new software technology. In Periyakalapet, the volunteers have installed new software called Wave Editor. They use sound mixing and editing. They mix audio with songs. The young volunteers said that they learnt to operate it themselves after they watched this software being used in one of the Tamil serials. They requested for web camera facility for video conferencing. This would be a source of income, and at the same time it would be of great use to the community as some men from their village are employed in places like Singapore and

Malaysia. The relatives can talk to each other. They take the responsibility for managing technical problems of the Centre. They seek help from the project staff only for major problems - like the one they faced recently due to a thunderstorm, when the entire electronic infrastructure was damaged. As it has already been mentioned, a few young men are undertaking a hardware-training course in this village.

In the Centres of Veerampattinam, Koonichampet, Nallavadu, and also in some others, Photoshop programme is used for photo editing. They said it helps increase or bring out one's creativity. In another Centre in Kalitheerthalkuppam, a person from the same village - who works in Chennai as an assistant art director in the field of cinema - said that skill in this software can help people find jobs in advertising agencies.

The users in Periyakalapet and Veerampattinam asked for an enhanced Internet speed. They said that the capacity could be increased from 4-6 GB to 10-20 GB - as this would enable them to save important documents. They also felt that the speed of Internet could be increased. A volunteer in Periyakalapet said the present speed is so slow that it discourages the users from making full use of this facility,

During the interactions with the volunteers, we learnt that most of them, particularly the men, are able to handle day-to-day hardware and software problems. They seek the project staff's help only when their efforts fail. It has already been mentioned that in few Centres there are young men who are undergoing hardware training, and there are also a few who are already well experienced in that line. It is also observed that women volunteers are not quite comfortable with this kind of work. They mentioned that they do not want to take any risk while working with electricity. Danalakshmi and Usha Rani mentioned that they are afraid of electric shocks. This is a common fear among the women volunteers in almost all the Centres. They have a mental block. This could be due to their social and cultural upbringing.

Volunteers and the users in Nallavadu and Periyakalapet expressed their desire to know the details in Tamil, regarding higher education, and employment opportunities related to fishing. In two of the Centres, the users often ask questions that lead to sharing of technical information, and seeking more information from Villianur Centre relevant to the location and occupation The *Panchaya*t leader from Nallavadu suggested that information on fishing technologies adopted in other parts of India and the world over, would be of use to them - as it would expand their knowledge about their fellow fishermen.

Prabhu Vani, the woman volunteer from Periyakalapet, wishes that benefits of the Knowledge Centre should reach the community - especially the women - in some form or other. She has already motivated two of her friends to visit the Centre and work as a volunteer for atleast 2-3 hours. But she realises that this is an uphill task that will take time to actualise, as there are societal hurdles for women. She mentioned that the project promised to conduct an eye camp in her village, with the help of Aravind Eye Hospital, Pondicherry. She has already made a list of participants for the eye camp. For some unavoidable reasons, the camp has not yet been organised, said Prabhu Vani. She says people could be

easily reached by organising such camps. This would also enhance the credibility and respectability of the Knowledge Centre, and people would eventually come to know of the other services available at the Centre.

It should be mentioned here that eye camps with the help of Aravind Eye Hospital have already been conducted in most of the other villages that have Knowledge Centres. The Periyakalapet Centre came into existence only two years ago. But the volunteers here are taking interest in helping the students and others. The young volunteers are extremely motivated; they pass on the information, particularly about employment opportunities and government schemes, to a neighbouring village. They hand over the information to the *Panchayat* leader - who puts it on the notice board outside the village temple. People from the village have benefited through this information. Youngsters at the Center said that two persons have got employment in a private company/factory, and a few could avail of government welfare schemes. The volunteers at this Centre and in other Centres too, have greater clarity about serving the community and such a spirit has to be sustained.

Almost all volunteers were unhappy because the villagers do not effectively use the content available. They said that persons from neighboring villages request details regarding the market for paddy, pulses and input availability in the agricultural departments. It is essential to reach a wider audience in order to realise the goal of the project. The volunteers and the project staff share this view. The volunteers themselves came up with certain ideas on how one could achieve this. The communities have to be aware of the type of information/content the Centres provide, and whether they are useful information, relevant to their locality and the people. They mentioned that this could be achieved by using another communication tool - the street play - where all the aspects and activities of the Knowledge Centre could be brought out through an enacted episode. In Centres like Veerampattinam, volunteers themselves have taken efforts to spread awareness about the Knowledge Centres among the community members by distributing printed pamphlets giving details on information and services available (See Annexure 1).

From our interaction with the volunteers and the other users, it was clear that the content must be regularly updated. They also preferred to have more content and information related to the major occupation of the respective communities. In Poornangkuppam they expressed a need for more relevant and local specific information. For example, Gnanasekar aged 24, who was a full time volunteer until a few months ago, and now working in a firm in the near-by town (he still works during leisure at the Centre), and few young men, and a frequent user of the content in the Centre - all pointed out that since their village is primarily dependent on cultivation of vegetables grown under irrigated condition for their livelihood, it would be of great use if the content is more on horticultural crops and related agricultural practices. They also expressed a need for printed information on the crops. If knowledge about latest developments in agriculture is provided and conveyed to the community it would be of great value. They said that they would like to cultivate new vegetables like carrot, beet, and beans in their lands. One of them had already tried carrot after getting the know-how from the Centre, and the yield was good. They were specifically interested to learn more about organic methods of cultivation.

They are aware that vegetables cultivated in the organic way would not only get them more income, but also help in minimising the damage to the soil. The person who had tried carrot cultivation mentioned that through his attempt, two other farmers also cultivated the same.

The woman volunteer from Kizhur village expressed the need for alternatives for chemical fertilisers and pest/disease control methods, since a young boy, interested in agriculture, had requested the information. She also mentioned that he wanted to know about herbal extracts in pest control. The boy, who was also present during our discussion, expressed concern about the loss of beneficial insects, birds and plants. He also mentioned that traditional knowledge related agriculture should be documented, and included in the content. It is interesting to note that though this volunteer does not normally move out of the Centre, could identify a right and eligible person, and make sure that the information reaches him/her. She also follows it up for further action.

Though some of the men volunteers have found employment elsewhere, they continue to help with the Knowledge Centre's activities. They maintain a close contact with the Centre. They are a source of great support to the present volunteers and the users. Because of their experience, if villagers approach them for details or any help regarding the information, they are willing to help. They come to the Centre during their leisure time. They teach computer applications to the new volunteers and also how to tackle any problem while working on the computer and to find any information for the villagers. The newly appointed woman volunteer namely Karpagam, aged 26, in Poornangkuppam said that Gnanasekar (who was a full time volunteer a few months ago) helps her with the computer, and receive messages from Villianur. Similarly, Bhoopalan aged 33 from Thirukanchipet extends all possible assistance to the present volunteers and users. He evinces great interest in the development of the Centre. He feels sad that the benefits of the Centre have not been fully utilised by the community. He says that the efforts should be taken to bring the Centre and various government departments closer to each other.

During the fieldwork, it was evident through interviews that the volunteers (also some of the regular users and village elders) are interested in running the Centres and serve their communities through its activities. A few of the volunteers have clarity and commitment about community service. It was encouraging to listen to Prabhu, a young boy of 18, who said that he and his friends (one of them is a volunteer) have a desire and motivation to equip the Centre with a self-sustaining base, and were willing to generate resources on their own, in the absence (or constraints) of MSSRF's support. This was more specifically for minor infrastructure needs that would arise. He said that the setting up of a Public Address System would be of great help to the community in his village. He mentioned that they would be grateful if a mike and an amplifier are provided by the project. They would be willing to raise local resources for other accessories like the speaker, added Prabhu. This clearly indicates their commitment to the cause.

There is a wide margin of difference between women and men using and profiting from Knowledge Centres. The volunteers feel that by taking some effective steps, this gap could be narrowed down. In

general, women's access to the Knowledge Centres is much lower than men. Even in the Centres run exclusively by women, women users are not many. The volunteers themselves pointed this out. In Periyakalapet it was mentioned that 99 percent of the users are only men. If women have benefited by the Centre, it is largely due to the efforts of the volunteers themselves - who take the responsibility of reaching out to the needy and eligible persons to benefit through various government schemes and training programmes.

3.4 Social Constraints in Access to Services and Technology

a. Gender

Local customs and perceptions often hinder access. Access to technology/information alone does not promise participation or learning. It largely depends on the social support that promotes adoption. Lack of social support hinders development and utilising of benefits. We happened to speak to one of the leaders of a new self-help group in Periyakalapet, who pointed out that even though there were many college-educated young women in her village, they were unable to improve themselves due to family and societal restrictions. She said that the fishermen's community expects women, even the educated ones, to remain home, without any social interaction. She mentioned that the society expects young girls and women to confine their activities within the house. Society does not mind if women go for jobs outside the village. She also mentioned that their livelihood demands that women go out to other places to sell fish. This is accepted because it is taken as part of their economic activity. Only in the case of other activities like going to Knowledge Centre to learn computers, or for any other reason, particularly where men are present, the society imposes norms and rules on the freedom of young women. If they go to some other institute in a different place, society does not say anything. There is opposition when women take part freely in social or any village level activities. The families attach importance to these societal response and reactions. In order to avoid criticism and ridicule, the young women themselves implicitly follow the conditions. Internalisation has been so strong that women seldom break away from norms.

Poonkuzhali, a 10th grade student from Periyakalapet, who is very articulate, felt sad that young girls and women have not been given enough opportunity to use the Knowledge Centre. When asked what could be done about it, she said, "Set a time slot for women," and added, "Probably a woman volunteer like Prabhu Vani (the present woman volunteer) could encourage more persons to come and utilise the Knowledge Centre". When asked how computer education would help married women who stayed home, she spontaneously replied, "They will be a source of inspiration to their children and will give them the satisfaction of knowing something useful." She mentioned that the society imposes restrictions on girls and women. She could learn many computer applications, as her two brothers had earlier been volunteers. Presently, her third brother is a volunteer.

It is interesting to note that a few young women graduates from Periyakalapet showed great concern for the development of their community. They also expressed their desire to improve their abilities and skills using the Knowledge Centre as a focal point. One of them mentioned that they could start a

Literacy Programme. Unfortunately they are unable to translate their interests and ambitions into action because they are held back by the prevailing social conditions and norms of the society. They pointed out that the society creates a block to their socio-economic development. These young women also agreed with what the self-help group leader said - that the society does not say anything if the girls went out for jobs outside the village. It may be mentioned here that spouces of the two women are in Singapore. Presently they are under the care of their brothers and parents. The brothers feel responsible to their siblings' welfare. They do not want their sisters subjected to any criticism or ridicule. The young women and the woman volunteer suggested that MSSRF project staff from Villianur - the hub-Centre - should convene a meeting involving the self - help group members and interested women. Later, as a means of awareness creation, and to encourage women to participate in the Knowledge Centre activities, they should organise another meeting with other villagers, along with women. This shows their motivation and interest to make use of the technology for their self-development, and also of the community in general. They have the interest and the potential, but remain unable to access the technology.

There is a disadvantage when a Centre is managed mainly or only by either women or men. It prevents the opposite sex from coming to the Centre and freely participating in its activities. In Centres like Periyakalapet, Koonichampet and Nallavadu, where men volunteers dominate, it becomes a hurdle for women to access the Centre. The present volunteers in the Centres of Thirukanchipet and Veerampattinam mentioned that atleast some women used to drop in and ask for some information when Paliniamma (aged 40), Malarvizhi (35 years old) and Shanthi (29 years) (in Thirukanchipet) and Lakshmi (aged 26) (Veerampattinam) were around. Shanthi and Lakshmi said that quite a few women used to come to the Centres (where they worked earlier for sometime) to get information about health, market rates for vegetables and training details given by government departments like District Industrial Corporation (DIC). Since the Centres no longer have any women, hardly any woman comes. Only girl children - below the age of 12 - visit the Centres. Whereas, in the Embalam Centre, which is entirely run by women, it appears that elderly men do not like to visit. Sunder, a middle-aged school teacher who makes best use of the Centre to teach the children, said that men hesitate to come to the Centre to ask for information from women. Sunder added that the men often request him to get the required and necessary information for them.

Problems also appear in the Kalitheerthalkuppam Knowledge Centre, which has two female and one male volunteer. Here the problem expressed by the volunteers is different from the reasons given above. It is also of social nature, but slightly different from the earlier ones. Here, the village women hesitate to visit the Centre if they see the village elders or other men near the Knowledge Centre. Ambica mentioned that out of great respect for the village elders - who are also often temple trustees, women do not go in front of them or talk in their presence. She says that even after being exposed to many meetings conducted by MSSRF and organising self-help groups, she herself does not feel comfortable in the presence of village elders. She says it is all due to the upbringing and cultural

norms in the villages. In order to facilitate women to use the Knowledge Centre, it has been decided that a particular time would be allotted exclusively for women users. Ambica said that this would be implemented after the school vacation because the women would not be able to come when children are at home. Moreover, during the holidays, the children would besiege the Centres!!

b. Caste

Another social dimension that restricts participation of the community is the caste factor. This emerged very clearly during the visits to Embalam and Koonichampet Knowledge Centres. The Centre at Embalam is situated in the main village, which is inhabited by higher castes people. The Centre is adjacent to the main temple. The Dalits - who normally live on the periphery of the main village - do not seem to make use of the Centre. Informal discussions with the users and volunteers revealed this (The volunteers mentioned that due to its distance, the people from the other end of the village hardly come to the Centre). In Embalam, the caste differences are not quite obvious. But in Koonichampet, the social distinction between 'high' and 'low' caste seems dominant. Since the Centre is situated in the Dalit area, people from the main village do not wish to come here, mentioned Chandra sekar and others. But they said that the youngsters would come. They pointed out that the Tamil newsletter, *Namma Ooru Seidhi,* is given at the Milk Co-operative Society for distribution in the main village. Some tension seems to be there between these two sections of the community ever since the Centre came up, because the *Panchayat* people of the main village wanted the Centre in their locality; but could not be obliged. It may be mentioned here that the visit to the Centre was for a very brief period. Therefore further details are not available.

It is relevant to find out how to create an enabling environment for women and others to make use of the Centre - so that they would profit from the options and potentials of the Centre.

As suggested by few women in Periyakalapet, two or three meetings involving only women (like self-help group members and educated women) and the village elders could be convened. This may help in enhancing the participation of more members - particularly the women. Relevance and practical advantages of technology and the knowledge need to be discussed in the meetings. Efforts need to be taken to overcome the barriers for women, mainly those who show interest and have potential to improve themselves socially and economically. In order to help women to use and benefit from computer applications and using the content, they need to be given more encouragement. It came out clearly during the informal interviews with young women in Periyakalapet that they feel isolated in the use of Knowledge Centre. This reveals their interest and motivation for participation.

3.5 Economic Constraints

It is interesting to note that in Centres like Thirukanchipet, it is not the social conditions that prevent women to work in the Centre as volunteers. Their prevailing economic situation does not allow them to serve the Centre. The inclination and interest are there, but the Centre does not assure regular and sufficient income. As caretakers of the household, the women have to provide food and take care of

other home needs like children's education. Paliniamma, who did not even go to school, worked as a volunteer for nearly six months. She learnt to switch-on and shut down the systems. She used to help the children with video games and painting. She also enjoyed working in the Centre, but due to economic compulsion, she had to withdraw herself from the Knowledge Centre. She owned cattle, but there was nobody at home to take them for grazing. . Also, her son is studying in a school. She began to work for daily wages in order to earn money to meet her son's educational expenses and other household needs. Another woman had to leave the Centre because this was affecting business in the vegetable shop which she manages when her husband is busy with other activities. Her presence is crucial for the household to earn money. According to Shanthi, from the same village, the lack of economic benefit was also a reason - in addition to the workload at home – for her discontinuing her service at the Centre.

3.6 Priorities of men and women volunteers

During the informal interaction with the volunteers and users, and some of the villagers, there appeared to be a difference in their priorities. For instance, men volunteers in Veerampattinam, Periyakalapet, Koonichampet and Poornangkuppam, showed interest in strengthening the existing infrastructure and getting new ones. Apart from improving themselves with technical knowledge, they want to use the technology for the benefit of their community. This could be due to their college education and also due to their association with others in their village who are studying or working. Men also wanted education-related CDs. They wanted the speed of Internet to be increased. They also mentioned that a scanner facility would help to serve the community and also generate income for the Centre. Now they have to either go to the Villianur Centre or a nearby town for this facility. It delays the work, they mentioned. The men's interest is largely related to occupation and livelihood. A woman volunteer namely, Amirtham from Embalam felt that Internet services in Tamil would be very useful. She mentioned that since her village is primarily dependent on agriculture, the latest information - locally specific information/content - would benefit the community. Content should be updated, she added. Interestingly, women's priority was more on health and nutrition related information. Ambica, from Kalitheerthalkuppam, expressed a need for information on childcare and how to handle them at different stages of childhood. Women volunteers in most of the Centres showed interest in starting micro-enterprises. At Embalam, two volunteers wanted computers with larger memory space - at least for the system used for Open Knowledge Network.

3.7 Sustainability

Our discussions with the volunteers and few of the villagers revealed that they have a few plans to expand the scope of the Knowledge Centres, both from the point of view of providing information, and to earn income by running the Centre, in case MSSRF withdraws. Atleast six Centres are confident that they would continue to serve the community. From the sustainability point of view, the attitude of some of the volunteers - like the one in Periyakalapet - reflects positivity and goes to prove that local ownership will ultimately lead to sustainability. In Poornangkuppam, one of the men volunteers and

few college students mentioned that in future the Centre would definitely function and render necessary service to the community. But they added that few more years of MSSRF's support would be of great help for them to establish a firm foundation. (The other Centres also shared this view). One of them mentioned that they would like to set up a screen-printing unit in association with the Nallavadu Knowledge Centre. The youngsters felt that the income it generated would enable the Centre to run smoothly. It is still in the planning stage. They are not sure whether it would work out. They felt that project guidance and input would be of great help in this regard.

It may be pointed out here that volunteers at the Embalam Centre seem to be reluctant to accept any withdrawal strategy from MSSRF, and they want to retain the support from MSSRF in some form or the other on a sustained basis. Such possibilities need to be explored. In Kizhur and Thirukanchipet, the volunteers felt that the village community, particularly the *Panchayat* leaders, and other elders, do not show any interest in the functioning of the Knowledge Centre. They need to be involved since their participation is of utmost importance if the Centres have to function on a sustained basis.

An important observation made during the study is that there is no regular income for the volunteers. Though some of the Centers are confident of financing themselves, a regular and sufficient income for the volunteers would certainly contribute to the sustainability of the Centers. It has been mentioned earlier that economic constrains have compelled a few women and men volunteers to withdraw their services as volunteers.

Every Knowledge Centre has developed a niche in the community, and this should be allowed to continue. (Literacy, educational priorities - Periyakalapet. The college students look for new books. Koonichampet has developed good networking. There is a systematic documentation of all their activities carried out through various networks).

The volunteers and a few elders whom we met during our visit felt that long-term commitment on the part of MSSRF would ensure proper functioning and sustainability of the Centres. Everyone was greatly appreciative of the efforts and initiatives taken by the MSSRF. It is a promising initiative as far as they are concerned. They never imagined that their children would be exposed to computer skills. It has given them some confidence, and it has really improved their self-esteem.

In general, there is a feeling that these Knowledge Centres are a reliable source of information. Reliability or creditability of any information received from the Centre depends to a certain extent on the contacts the Centre has with government departments. The volunteers felt that the full potential of these Knowledge Centres is not realised by a larger section of the population. It offers a lot of scope to the villagers both the young and the old. It is found that not many use agricultural information available with the Centres. There are individual cases of those who have benefited, and continue to make use of the opportunity given to them. It is hoped that these people will influence others in this regard. Their application of the knowledge may motivate others. The volunteers and others who benefited from the communication technology would be good resource persons. They can also be a great source of

inspiration and moral support. The change, which has started with the volunteers, has a scope to spread to the community in general. In fact, atleast some, like in Embalam Centre, Periyakalapet, Veerampattinam and Koonichampet, are already playing a significant role in this regard. It would be of great use to the community - particularly the women - if the existing communication technology is put to use for the people with low-level of functional literacy.

3.8 Limitations and Challenges

There are many gains to the community. It cannot be denied that the rural community has benefited both directly and indirectly through the Knowledge Centres. Many have become computer literate. It has brought many government departments closer and many have secured employment (including a few women) either through the information they got or due to the training they had in computer applications. Many of the women and men have benefited through various government schemes and training. It has provided opportunities for technical empowerment of the volunteers and a few others in the community - particularly the male members. More importantly, it has enhanced the self-esteem and confidence of the women volunteers. They have become socially and economically empowered. They have gained the respect of the society. The Knowledge Centres have not confined themselves to the community where they are located. Its benefits have also gone far beyond the village boundaries. It has been brought to our attention that people from neighbouring villages also make use of the Centre. School teachers and bank employees have utilised these Centres to learn to use computers. However, there are areas that need attention and improvement.

One should be careful about the replicability of the success stories. Sustainability of the Centres is a major aspect that needs attention. The main question is how to make them self-sustained. Apart from the cooperation and support of the community, the financial sustainability is a major issue that needs to be given serious thought. One should be cautiously optimistic, as there are barriers and challenges.

Due to some socio-economic reasons, the project objectives or mandates regarding gender equality in the management of the Centre could not be achieved so far. The low level of literacy among women - when compared to men - seems to be another cause for the low level of participation. As we have seen, Embalam Centre is managed fully by women volunteers who are all self-help group members. We have seen that in Centres like Periyakalapet, although there are women graduates, the social attitudes inhibit or curb their progress. In Kizhur, there is just one woman volunteer who takes care of the Centre. She has been the only person managing it ever since the Centre started. It could be due to the reason that the Centre functions in the volunteer's house itself.

In Centres where women like Lakshmi in Veerampattinam, and Paliniamma and Shanthi in Thirukanchipet, worked as volunteers and were of great help - particularly in attracting more women users, they could not continue working because their services were needed at home. We have seen that Paliniamma has been forced to work for daily wages; she needs to provide for the family and her

son's educational expenses. It has also been mentioned that she does not have any other source of income to run the family.

A few men volunteers also find it difficult to render their services on full time basis, as the income from the Centre is not sufficient to maintain the family. Bhoopalan from Thirukanchipet, who was instrumental in bringing the Centre to the village, is unable to offer his services to the Centre after his marriage, because his family members urged him to find a job that would assure a steady income. He says now that he is married, he has to listen to the elders in the family. But he says he would continue to offer help in running the Centre, though he might not be able to participate in the meetings and other activities.

Generally there are very few Internet users, except in some Centres. But, the volunteers mentioned that the Internet could be put to better use if there is locally relevant Internet content. Language barrier is a major cause of under-utilisation by villagers. The volunteers in one of the Centres mentioned that lack of English knowledge is a major obstacle to Internet usage at the Centre. The volunteers at Embalam Centre feel that familiarity with the English language is important. Lack of it hinders accessibility to the information. Though the younger generation is more familiar with the English language, they would feel comfortable if the information is available in Tamil.

The volunteers and other frequent users regret that there is not much awareness about the Knowledge Centre, like why it has been set up here, what can be benefited from here or how it can be used, and so on. Everyone was concerned about the fact that the Centre was not used by a major section of the community. They said they would like to ensure maximum utilisation by maximum number of people. For this they felt the need for input and support from MSSRF. Awareness about the Centres needs to be promoted, felt the volunteers. They had some suggestions to enhance the usage of knowledge and the information in a better way.

There is a general feeling among the volunteers and those who visit the Centres often, like Sundar in Embalam, Chandrasekar and Dharmasivam from Koonichampet, Gnanasekar, Anitha, Dharmapalan a final year engineering student, Shanmugam from Poorangkuppam and Sudha aged 27, Indira 30 years old, Prabhu Vani and Prabu from Periyakalapet, Renganathan a final year B.Tech student and Sundaravadivel a 20 from Kizhur, Sezhian, a bus driver of 31 years of age from Kalitheerthalkuppam that there is a lack of awareness of the content available. Utility of these contents should be promoted in the community. It needs to be communicated to all sections of the community, they added. Although people are somewhat aware of the Centre and the fact that some villagers use the services, most of them do not know for what purpose it is used or can be used. There is a common misconception that the Centre is meant only for school children or 'educated' persons. According to one middle-aged woman from Kizhur, "Padikkara pullainga povudhu,"- meaning that normally only the students go to the Centre. As already mentioned, a glance at the users' register confirms this view.

The content should be more demand-driven and user-friendly. The Centres do play a significant role in the villages where they are located. Many have benefited in different ways and there is the potential

to continue the same for the communities/different stakeholders - the student community, unemployed persons, agriculturalists, fishermen and the general public. They could be effective in networking with various government departments, NGOs and private institutions like the Aravind Eye Hospital.

How are we going to reach a larger portion of the community for providing knowledge and skill empowerment, and also enhance their social and economic empowerment, particularly of women? It is important to consolidate the gains of the Knowledge Centres and at the same time it is important that the Centres are updated with more relevant information for the local community. With some direction and technical support, the Centres can develop further and make more headway in the community.

Technology is used, but by which section of the population? This question needs to be studied in depth. It is necessary to look into the details to know the extent to which the people have understood the objective/purpose of the Centres, or what they think about them and how they make use of the content and other communication infrastructure of the Knowledge Centres. All this needs to be explored further in order to assess the impact and the usefulness of the technologies for livelihoods of the rural communities.

The Knowledge Centres by themselves may not be able to initiate and implement changes. But it would be useful to try and know how these Knowledge Centres could be put to better use to improve or enhance lives of the communities. Or in other words, in what way these Centres could help the communities improve the lifestyle under the existing socio-economic conditions. It would be interesting and useful to explore the untapped potentials of these Centres and how it really could help the underprivileged sections of the society, particularly the women.

It would be useful to look into the existing and ongoing activities, and how these activities and initiatives can be strengthened, and reach out to a larger audience in the rural areas. It has surely created an impact on the people and many individuals have benefited by it. As we have seen, the community in general has been benefiting either directly or indirectly. The benefits need not always be tangible. One cannot afford to ignore the intangible benefits because they are also significant.

In order to reach a wider population and urge them to make use of the Knowledge Centres, the volunteers and the other users, or the ones who have benefited by the Centre in one form or the other, could document their experiences, and the same can be published in *Namma Ooru Seidhi,* as this newsletter has a wide coverage and people read it and share the information among themselves. Maybe, in this way, one could explain the advantages, opportunities available, and the utility value of the content and other communication infrastructure available at the Centre for overall improvement of the community. Frequent feedback from the volunteers and users can help in the learning and growth process of the project. It helps to strengthen the working or functioning of the Centres.

Social barriers restrict women's access and participation. One needs to pay attention to social aspects. They need to be understood in order to facilitate their participation. The social constraints, and in some cases, the low self-esteem of the women, circumscribe their ability to function.

Phones are disconnected in some of the Centres, as they could not pay the bills. The volunteers mentioned that they are not able to be strict about the time limits and also in expecting charges for the calls made. Few Centres do collect a standard rate but one could not be strict with the time limits. In this context, they said that the main reason for this is that, in the beginning, an impression was created among the people that all the services available in the Centre, are for free. Ezhilarasi mentioned that non-availability of phone connection is felt only when there is any emergency after 5 p.m. in the evening. During the day, she could manage by using the wireless phone in the Centre. If there is anything important she could contact Villianur hub-Centre through the wireless. She mentioned an incident when a fire broke out at night in a sugarcane field in her village. Through the phone she could contact the nearby fire service station. She says that the telephone will be of great help to the villagers. But she also realises the Centre's inability to pay the bills.

One has to be cautious about the content created by the volunteers for the Open Knowledge Network. No doubt this is a good initiative. One must be careful about the information shared through the Open Knowledge Network. Before it is being linked with other Centres, one has to verify the authenticity of the information - like details regarding the source, whether any practice mentioned is still used or not, the details of the herbs, availability and other relevant information. The local volunteers, in their excitement, should not collect information from various magazines, books and random bits of paper. They should be clearly instructed and guided properly. They must be told of the purpose for which it is collected. They may be made aware of the value of the indigenous knowledge, which may ensure collecting local facts/content.

Another area, which needs mention here, is the Potential Fishing Zone (PFZ) electronic bulletin board, provided by the Indian National Centre for Ocean Information Services. It was given to the Village Knowledge Centres recently – in January 2004. Fishermen feel that the data provided herein does not seem to prove right. Ezhumalai of Veerampattinam feels that research can be carried out, based on the information provided by the electronic bulletin, which displays the information on potential zones of fish aggregation, including latitude, longitude, depth, direction and distance from the landing centres/ lighthouses.

It may be pointed out here that minor technical difficulties are handled without much delay, though there is only one person who has to go round all the Centres to attend to electronic problems. Sometimes these problems are handled by giving instructions through the phone or wireless also. The cause for concern is the major technical difficulties affecting the electronic infrastructure - like the one that happened in Koonichampet where the tower was damaged due to lightning. The worst hit was the Periyakalapet when the entire electronic infrastructure was damaged. Replacement of the tower antenna and wireless radio takes a lot of time. It is mentioned that they are quite expensive and spare parts have to come from outside. This affects the performance of the Centre. Care may be taken to avoid such things in future by ensuring precautionary measures.

There are disparities in access and usage of the Knowledge Centres by various sections of the rural population. But it has made it possible for a change in the transmission of information and knowledge to a wider section of the community. It has facilitated the social and economic empowerment of both men and women. Skill development and empowerment (in computer applications) have taken place among the younger generation. Today, as compared to the earlier times, more people in general are aware about various schemes and training meant for the underprivileged and others. Credit largely goes to the Knowledge Centres, which have definitely brought a change in the transmission of information and knowledge. It could be reasonably assessed only after a detailed and in-depth study covering a wider section of the population.

The benefits of knowledge, information and communication may not have been equally distributed. It is also too ambitious to expect all the sections of the population to be able to access the information. These Knowledge Centres do help in disseminating knowledge and thereby enable many to make use of information and avail the benefits in different ways - like finding employment, to ascertain examination results, market rates of farm products, learning computer skills and so on. The question whether the Knowledge Centres have facilitated in improving the livelihood of the rural people cannot be assessed in a short time. It may be premature to conclude at this stage of the study, since most Centres need to be given some more time to bring about an overall change and overall development. Any development activity has its own strengths and limitations. Definitely it plays a significant role in helping the community in one way or the other. Once the study is completed, we will be able to give more concrete evidence to show the impact.

4. Conclusion

It is interesting to see that these villages are presently undergoing or witnessing a knowledge/ information revolution. It may be mentioned here that, barring Embalam, and to a certain extent, Kalitheerthalkuppam, the self-help groups can be potential collaborators in the spread and usage of information by way of their outreach. The feedback mechanism is very weak and in many ways this inhibits the potential contribution from the volunteers of the respective Centres. Overall system management (rectifying technical problems and replacing the infrastructure) is essential. From the point of view of sustainability, the positive attitude of the volunteers and the people go to prove that local ownership of the efforts will ultimately lead to sustainability. MSSRF can show the lead in such aspects to enable a greater reach over a larger section of the population.

An overall assessment of the Knowledge Centres - both in terms of its strengths and areas that need improvement - are given in a tabular form below.

Table 4. Strengths of the Village Knowledge Centres and Areas Requiring Improvement

Name of the VKC	Strengths	Areas to be Improved
Kizhur (Predominantly agricultural based village)	Disseminating information of government schemes, taking personal interest to motivate the youngsters and college students to improve their computer skills, to practice or workout their college/school work related to computer programming by installing the related software, encouraging and motivating the self-help group members to make use of the information available and to participate in training programmes conducted through the project and other institutions. Tries to cater to individual's specific need/ information if it is not available at the Centre, by contacting the hub-Centre. *Considering that there is only one volunteer, this Centre tries to cater to different sections of the society.* Neighbouring villages – particularly the student communities - benefit from this Centre.	The Centre *depends on one woman volunteer*. Social constraints and inhibitions of the woman volunteer restrict her interactions with the wider section of the population.Since the Centre is located in a private house (of the volunteer) it *inhibits the villagers, particularly men, from accessing the information*. Also, due to personal and social reasons, some do not come to the Centre. In general, there is no sense of belonging (of the Centre) among the villagers. Phone facility is disconnected, as the bills could not be paid. *Sustainability aspect has not been thought about so far*.
Embalam (Agricultural village)	Has a dynamic group of women volunteers who have a strong base in Mangalam Society, a pioneer in self-help group (SHG). They are a source of inspiration to others (women volunteers in other Knowledge Centres, and other women). *All the volunteers are leaders of different SHGs. Knowledge Centre acts as a focal point for various government departments and non-governmental organisations*. The volunteers are involved in the delivery of services,	*No male volunteers*. Men are not comfortable to use the Centre. Underprivileged section of the population also does not make use of the Centre. Video games seem to be major activity of the children and youngsters. Volunteers need to strengthen their skills in computer application to use the existing infrastructure facilities. Lack the motivation to use them. *Averse to handle any technical problems*. Fear electrical shocks. Not confidant to run

	especially in association with the health department in administration of polio drop programme, enumeration of house list with members affected with Filariasis, collecting and depositing of farm insurance dues of the farmers through the nearby agricultural department. *Using their contacts effectively in bringing the benefits of government schemes closer to their community.* Able to create and maintain contacts with important persons like a specialist in Dermatology, a Dentist and so on - and also persons like cloth merchants. Offer family counseling or take the concerned persons to the family-counseling centre. Have utilised the training (arranged by the project) in pickle preparation, phenyl/soap oil preparation, rope-making for income generation, and are also in a confident position to impart training for the same to women in other villages.	the Centre in MSSRF's absence. Need some kind of long time support/ association.Show a lot of interest in preparation of OKN content. Use indiscriminately the available information without verifying the authenticity.
Veerampattinam (Fishing village)	*Availability of Public Address System, focus light.* The former facility is of great significance and use to the community as it enables the entire community to be aware of the various government schemes, employment opportunities and daily weather forecast. Many have availed of the benefits of the schemes and got employment and sought higher education. *Volunteers evince interest in proper functioning of the Centre to serve the community better*. They have become competent to use the software and also to a certain extent in handling hardware	*Social customs and traditions restrict women's participation.* Presence of a woman volunteer would help to promote their involvement. Self-help groups are recently formed. They need to be strengthened and linked to the Knowledge Centre.

	also. *They are persistent in their efforts to get any facility or service or to rectify some problem from the project or from the hub-Centre*. Use the Internet facility for research work. Use Photoshop software efficiently. Helps women cooperative society in typing and accounting work. The Centre is instrumental in setting up the society in the village. Offers services like Life Insurance Corporation Policies to the community. *Has Village Panchayat support* and recognises the role of Knowledge Centres in improving the lives of the fishing community.	
Poomangkuppam (Agriculture/ mainly horticultural village)	*Committed volunteers*. Want to serve the community by up dating local-specific information (on horticulture) and share it with others. The exposure to the Centre's activities has encouraged the volunteers to go to the agricultural department to download information on horticulture and organic farming. *Discontinued video games as they felt most of children were occupied only with that*. Want to replace with educational CDs. They are confident they would run the Centre. They are of the view that their village elders would help in that endeavour. They *felt periodical meetings among the elders, volunteers and the project staff would strengthen the interest and commitment on the part of the villagers in maintaining and extending support to run the Centre*. The village *Panchayat* provides encouragement for this. The	*The centre is situated at the outskirts* of the village. So, many do not seem to know what is happening at the Centre (admits the volunteers). *Space is a problem. No Internet facility*. They expressed a need for it. *The volunteers have interest and commitment but lack direction*. The project could help them in this. Since it is quite a big village provision of public address system would help the people to avail the benefits and become aware of many government programmes and employment opportunities. Project staff interactions with the village *Panchayat* and the community may be improved

	newly joined volunteer shows a lot of interest in improving the functioning of the Centre. She is willing to work with the male volunteers. Her husband encourages her. Another female volunteer is young and dynamic. *There is understanding and cooperation between male and female volunteers.*	
Pillayarkuppam	Could not be assessed	*Situated away from the village. Occasionally people come to use the Centre.*
Thirukanchipet (A majority in the community are agricultural wage labourers)	Could not be assessed	*No coordination between the Centre and village Panchayat. Economic factor prevents interested women and men from offering their services as volunteers.* No contacts with the government departments.
Kalitheerthal kuppam (Predominantly Agriculture based village)	*Village elders (temple trustee) are supportive*. Volunteers take interest in disseminating the information and content. Women volunteers are self-help group members. They actively participate in activities conducted either by NGOs or government departments. *They are confident and recognised by the village elders. People benefit from welfare schemes. Men use the services related to their occupation-agriculture.*	Too many activities for women volunteers. At times feel the pressure of it (Though do not grudge about it). Playing video games is a major activity of the children. *Existing software like Photoshop could be used productively.* The users (mainly the youngsters) use it as pass time entertainment. Potential *economic benefit of it (if learnt to use by perfecting the skill) is not largely realised even by the volunteers, particularly women.*

Nallavadu (Fishing village)	Presence of encouraging community *Panchayat. Services of the Centre reach the people through the Public Address System, siren and focus light. Centre has good contact with the Fisheries department.* Volunteers and few men show keen interest in serving the community particularly the youth. *School makes use of the Centre to teach children*	*No woman volunteer at the Centre.* Society does not encourage women to participate in the Centre's activities. *Need to strengthen existing women self-help groups.*
Koonichampet (A majority in the village are agricultural wage labourers	Volunteers are active and have keen interest in the development of the Centre. *The Youth organisation is a motivating factor in encouraging the activities of the Centre. Has developed networks with institutions and organisations*. Uses the Centre as a basis for the overall development of the community.	There is some tension between two sections of population. *The higher caste people mainly the elders do not wish to use the Centre as it is set up in the Dalit area.* Women self-help groups are not functioning effectively.
Periyakalapet (Fishing village)	The *volunteers are dynamic*, confident and *committed to their work. Willing to find resources from different means to meet part of the expenses for infrastructure facilities* such as Public Address System. Show keen interest in community development. *Wish to encourage participation of women in the Centre's activities. Though recently established Centre is doing quite well in helping the community and also to the neighbouring village by providing useful information*. They disseminate information on government schemes, employment opportunities and such other important details regarding higher studies and distributing the Tamil newsletter *Namma Ooru seidhi*.	Strengths of the volunteers should be channeled properly by the project. *Social constraints restrict even interested educated women to use the centre.* Self-help groups are recently formed. Their numbers could be increased and linked to the Knowledge Centre. *Delay in rectifying/replacing some of the infrastructure facilities dampens the spirits of the community*. Certificate course could not be conducted during summer holidays. *Internet facility could not be used due to technical difficulties.* Repairing of focus light has not been carried out.

Annexure I

VKC INFOTECH

VEERAMPATTINAM VILLAGE KNOWLEDGE CENTRE

(Supported by M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation)

Dear Friends,

Greetings.

We are happy to list out the services rendered by Village knowledge Centre. The sharing of knowledge/ information and the marketing of products by our self-help groups has been invaluable. Please find below the list of services available in our centre:

A. INFORMATION:

1. Weather forecasting
2. Wave height (twice a day)
3. Price of vegetables
4. Gold / Silver – prices
5. Employment opportunities
6. Govt. related schemes
7. Fisheries / Aquaculture
8. Medicine
9. Herbal medicinal treatment
10. Eye treatment / testing (with the help of Aravind Eye Hospital)
11. Small scale industries - training
12. Address of Medicinal Practitioners
13. List of people below poverty line
14. Education
15. Phone numbers / contact numbers of Govt. offices and emergency

B. SERVICES:

1. Computer printout

2. Computer training
3. CD - writing
4. Laser printing
5. Screen printing
6. Internet browsing
7. Photo editing & scanning
8. Job work / project work
9. Internet to phone / local phone
10. Passport-size photo printing
11. Greeting cards (all varieties)
12. LIC - service ---------- Policies

C. SALES:

1. Decorative items made from seashells
2. Different varieties of pickles
3. Rural Yellow Pages book
4. Devotional songs - (Audio cassettes / CD)
5. Phenyl / soap oil
6. Incense sticks (aromatics)

Contact Address:

Veerampattinam Village Knowledge Centre

Temple Street (Panchayat Office Building)
Veerampattinam, Pondicherry - 7
Tel: 2601 573, 94433 74194

Annexure II

Details of Networking of Koonichampet Knowledge Centre with

Sl. No.	Institutions/Organisations	Activities Covered
1.	Rotary Club, Pondicherry and Koonichampet Rotary Village Federation.	10 houses were built for the villagers in 2001. 480 children were given vaccination for jaundice at concessional rate and a polio camp was conducted in the nearby town, Thirukanoor. Conducted a common medical camp - 480 persons benefited. 250 tree saplings were planted through Rotary Social Forestry Scheme in public places. Conducted eye camp in collaboration with a private eye hospital in Pondicherry in 2003 for children of Koonichampet Government School
2.	Pondicherry Science Forum	A film on Mars - latest research on the planet was screened and explained in detail to the villagers. A CD showing five planets coming on a same line was screened. Conducted a children's Science Mela. The major themes covered: how to learn science easily, scientific experiments, evolution of living organisms and so on.
3.	Nehru Yuva Kendra	Through self-employment training camp a one-day training was given to village women on preparation of food items. With the help of Rotary Federation and Nehru Yuva Kendra, 30 women were

		given training in tailoring. A seminar to help and 10th standard students appearing for common examination.
4.	Anthcom Network	A drama troupe was formed in the village. Training was given to village children in singing, dancing, doll-making, painting, acting, etc.,
5.	Rajiv Gandhi College of Veterinary and Animal Sciences, Pondicherry	Organised a one-day training camp for livestock management - particularly for intestinal worm treatment. Also gave medical prescriptions for common health problems affecting cattle.
6.	Pondicherry Government Mahatma Gandhi Dental Clinic.	During one-day dental health camp, 50 persons from this village benefited.
7.	Sastha Blood Testing Lab (a private lab in Villianur)	Blood testing for the villagers. Persons with hypertension were diagnosed.
8.	Department of Agriculture, Pondicherry	Under Tree Planting Scheme per house fruit tree saplings were provided to the houses in the village.