Sri Lanka

NGO & Community Participation in Setting up the Nanasala for targeting the poor and vulnerable and improving government accountability in Sri Lanka

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Executive Summary

Sri Lanka, has repeatedly demonstrated high resilience to maintain an acceptable 5% annual economic growth despite heavy blows of 20 year civil conflict and most recent tsunami devastation. Country has responded to telecommunication and ICT developments positively since early 1990s. The most recent state lead, World Bank funded eSriLanka initiative was considered as a 'path-breaker' in the realm of introducing ICT as a holistic, overall country development approach.

Nevertheless, 23% poverty head count was regarded as high in a country having per capita GDP reaching 1000US$ mark. This indicates the challenges against mega programs like eSriLanka at passing the benefits into 33% of population who were not connected to the electricity grid, 2.5million people living in the areas of direct military activity, hundreds of village communities who were not connected to motorable road network, over million farmer families who were struggling to shift their livelihood under stagnating national agriculture.

NGO sector in Sri Lanka was regarded as dynamic and effective at reaching the poor. Donor community and Government rely on the NGO to deliver the resources especially in the poverty alleviation sector. In the wake of digital-divide issues, the NGO sector activities were limited to the pioneering engagements of national NGO – Sarvodaya. Key components such as telecentres and hundreds of village information centers of the Sarvodaya model had helped widespread outreach of rural poor. Yet, under the macro-infrastructural deficiencies, such initiatives could not unleash the full potential of ICT technology to empower poor communities to the desired capacity.

eSriLanka initiative was designed to strengthen these macro-scale gaps, by setting both infrastructure and policy. The 6 major programs try to build up the countrywide enabling ICT environment. Within it, Nanasala – the telecentre models of eSriLanka, were designed to build up rural ICT accessibility across the country. In order to reach rural poor and vulnerable communities, e-Society program was designed to work through grass-root institutions. Overall program design demonstrates a high emphasis to maintain equity and accountability by respecting the ethnic and cultural diversity of the country.

Paper discusses in detail the pre and post-eSriLanka environment. Though the time stands premature to discuss the impact of eSriLanka while it was in mid implementation stages, paper had made an attempt to recognize the appropriateness of the design with special reference to NGO and community participation. It also try to provide an insight into the innovative approaches made by eSriLanka by promoting multi-stakeholder partnerships between private-public and NGO sectors to reach the mega-goals of empowering citizens of Sri Lanka.

List of Abbreviations

ADB – Asian Development Bank
AR&TI – Agrarian Research and Training Institute
CBO – Community Based Organization
CEIF – Community Environment Initiative Facility (of Environment Action 1 Project)
CWSSP – Community Water Supply and Sanitation Project
eSriLanka – 'eSriLanka' ICT initiative of the Sri Lanka government
GO - Government
ICTA – ICT Agency of Sri Lanka
IRDP – Integrated Rural Development Program
JTF – Janasaviya Trust Fund
NDTF – National Development Trust Fund
NGO – Non Government Organization
PWC - Pricewaterhouse and Coopers Pvt. Ltd.
SANASA – Sakasuruwam ha Naya Ganudenu Pilibanda Samupakara Samithiya
Sarvodaya – Sarvodaya Shramadana Sangamaya of Sri Lanka
SEEDS – Sarvodaya Economic Enterprises Development Services program.
UNDP – United Nations Development Program

NGO & Community Participation in Setting up the Nanasala for targeting the poor and vulnerable and improving government accountability in Sri Lanka[1].

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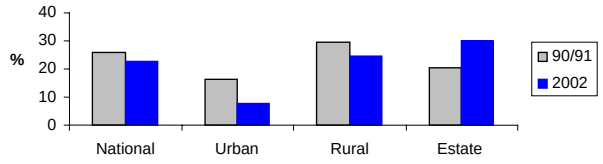
Sri Lanka was regarded as a nation of high resilience owing to its sustained economic progress under adverse shocks. Recent response to devastating Tsunami and over 20 year old civil conflict could not deter the 5% average annual economic growth rate. The engine of growth had been the service sector (55% of GDP) where progress in telecommunication sector contributed significantly (World Bank, 2005).

The country performs well to meet a number of Millennium Development Goals set out for 2015. In particular, it was reaching universal primary enrollment according to current figure of 96% school enrollment. Gender equality in education was achieved at all levels. Infant mortality fell from 45 (in 1975) to 12 per 1000 (by 2001) and maternal mortality remains in par with middle-income countries (23 per 100,000 live births) (World Bank, 2005).

Yet, Sri Lanka was lagging behind in reducing the incidence of poverty. The poverty head count ratio fell only 3 percentage points (from 26.1 to 22.7%) between 1990 – 2002. Over the last decade, poverty incidence in Urban areas was halved while rural poverty declined only by less than 5% (Fig. 1). Sharp regional differences of poverty was observed where Western Province (where Capital was located) records 11% while rest of the provinces vary from 21% (North Central Province) to 37% (Uva province) (World Bank, 2004).

Figure 1 Poverty Head Counts for Sri Lanka 90/91 - 2002



Source: (World Bank, 2004)

Table1 Unequal growth among regions

	Population share %	GDP growth %
High active	29	16.4
Medium active	46	10.3
Low active	25	8.7

Source: Central Bank Annual Report, 2002

Once the 9 provinces of Sri Lanka grouped into 3 regions based on economic activity (taking Western Province as High, next four as Medium active, and rest as Low active), High Active region showed 16.4% of the GDP growth, while Medium and Low regions remaining 10.3% and 8.7% respectively (table 1). Such disparities were attributed to the sluggish growth of agriculture, regional disparities in

[1] Author acknowledges the ICT Agency of Sri Lanka, IT Unit of Sarvodaya, Prof. Rohan Samarajiva of LIRNEasia and Mr. Chanuka Wattegama of UNDP, Sri Lanka for the close cooperation extended at the compilation of required information to synthesize this paper.

education facilities, persistent weaknesses in the infrastructure, in addition to the cumulative negative effect of civil conflict (World Bank, 2004).

Twenty year old civil-conflict remains unresolved despite the cease-fire since 2002. Most of the poverty and development statistics in North & East region remain dismal; child malnutrition 46.2% (against national figure of 29.4%), maternal mortality 81 per 10,000 (against 23 of national average), school drop out 15% (against 4% of national figure) (World Bank, 2004).

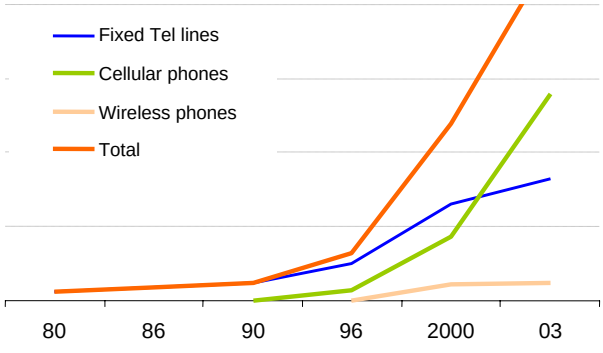
Amongst others, poor performances of the agriculture sector (decline from 30% GDP share in 1980s to 20% in 2000) give a heavy blow to the poor as about 40% of the poor comprise of agriculture households (involved in crop cultivations, livestock and casual agricultural labor). Persistent slump of the rice cultivations in particular intensifies this pressure (World Bank, 2004).

Unemployment remains as high as 8.4% (2005) in which 15-24yr youth group represent majority 65% (Central Bank, 2004). This reflects a combine effect of high dropout rate at later part of secondary education together with limited absorption capacity of University system. Universities can admit only about 6% of the successful secondary leavers (12,000 out of 200,000) (Greenberg, 2002).

Rural poor in the context of ICT for development

Telecommunication sector in Sri Lanka reported to make commendable progress since the regulations of 1996. Service sector being the biggest contributor to the national economic growth (contributes 55% of the GDP in 2004), telecommunication as a sub sector plays a significant contribution. Fixed telephony growth rate was consistently among the top 10 in the world. However this growth was not satisfactorily distributed countrywide, hence economically lagging provinces further remained poorly connected to the telecom networks (figure 2 & 3).

Figure 2 Progress of the telecommunications sector

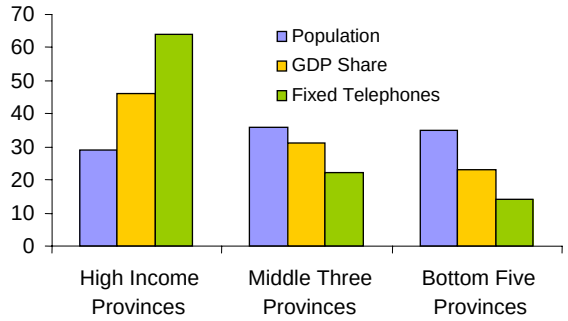


Source: Central Bank of Sri Lanka Annual reports (multiple issues)

Fast growth of the mobile network had offered new options to rural sector, yet the cost, quality and connectivity issues of these services were skewed. In the absence of affordable connectivity (fibre or micro-wave) over 150,000 mobile users in the conflict affected North & East areas were depending on expensive satellite links (Samarajiva, 2004).

Since the introduction of Internet to Sri Lanka in 1995, number of Internet accounts were estimated to be grown up to 125,000 by 2002 (Wattegama, 2004). Nevertheless, the growth rate of Internet penetration appears slow comparing to the Sri Lankan response to the TV, at its introduction in 1979. High cost of hardware equipment, inconsistent telecommunication connectivity, high cost of electricity, lack of sufficient training & promotions have contributed to this slow diffusion of Internet, while making it further limited to urban areas[2] (UNDP, 2004). It was estimated that the rural user has to incur an additional cost of 0.6US$ per hour, than the urban user to access Internet (Wattegama, 2004).

Figure 3: Provincial share of population, GDP share and fixed telephone lines (Percentage)



Source: Central Bank Report, Sri Lanka & World Bank (2004)

Infrastructure impediments such as absence of country wide Internet back-bone, and electricity further intensifies the disadvantaged position of the rural poor. Despite the dramatic improvements in rural access to national electricity grid since 1980s providing access to 74% of households, cost of electricity was regarded as high in relation to other Asian countries (World Bank 2004).

On the other hand, English as a medium of public school education had been eliminated since 1950s until 2001, which had contributed to the low English language skills of the rural community distancing them from English dominated Internet. Furthermore the attitudinal reluctance of majority adult community to embrace new technologies, further decelerate the ICT penetration as a whole (Shrestha & Amarasinghe, 2001).

Table 2 Proportion of primary children mastering Language and Numeracy skills, 2003

Skills	Overall	Urban sector	Rural sector
Local language skills	37	51	34
English language skills	10	23	7
Numeracy skills	38	52	35

Source: National Education and Evaluation Center, University of Colombo

ICT education and computer literacy

Despite high literacy rates in Sri Lanka (92%), degree of computer literacy remains very low. Introduction of ICT into the highly regarded school system in Sri Lanka had taken over 2 decades. Despite a variety of efforts initiated since 1983, national scale introduction of computer education to public school system yielded from 1994, by establishing 300 Computer Resource Centers. By 2004, only 228 out of 9887 schools in the country had computer units. With variety of programs introduced at University level,

[2] The most recent impact of eSriLanka based VSAT provisions were not taken into account.

including the most recent external degree spectacle of BIT (Bachelor of IT) introduced by UCSC (University of Colombo, School of Computing), it was estimated to graduate around 20,000 students in computer science in 2004 (UNDP, 2004). It would take more time for these initiatives to impact upon rural sector.

Several sustained media initiatives expected to have made a considerable impact to generate rural awareness on ICT [3]. *Antharjalayai obai* (Internet & you) the weekly radio program run by National Radio Station (SLBC) and TV program (*Anthrjalaya Obe Niwasata* – Internet to your home) of National TV (*Rupavahini*) (1999-2000) continued to generate much interest among the general public and students. Monthly magazine of *Wijaya Pariganaka* have successfully supported the student community to come to terms with new subject (UNDP, 2004).

Community preparedness for ICT

Study carried out to test the adaptability of different community age groups to the new technologies had presented differences between the North and South[4] of the country. Among the relative ranking, youth, men & women of North were ranked as 'high adaptors', comparing to the South - ranked as 'moderate adaptors'. Particularly 94% of women in North identified against 46% women in South as highly adaptive category. Such results indicate the geographical and ethnic influences over the adaptation to ICT (Sarvodaya, 2004).

On the other hand, community in general were not in a position to quickly recognize the opportunity window offered by ICT services. As a pilot study, opportunities of free access to telecentres were offered, by distributing free access vouchers, preceded by a systematic promotion to communities at three rural townships. During one month long study, youth were the contenders to gain the most advantage. Only less than 10% adults (including women) were ready to take up free vouchers. They were not ready to risk their limited time on an uncharted technological experimentation, as they were occupied with household and livelihood demands. On the other hand, majority adults recognize ICT as an educational tool for their children, rather than an economic opportunity to uplift their livelihood (Sarvodaya, 2004).

As observed with 177 Village Information Centers (VICs) maintained under Sarvodaya around the country, rural community were not fast consumers of new information. Their information demands were mostly for general information rather than for value added information (Box 2) (Kapadia, 2005).

NGO as a development institution in Sri Lanka

NGO in Sri Lanka was regarded as a vibrant sector. They increasingly gain the wider recognition as a passionate, dedicated and effective channel to reach poor people in

[3] Impact made by these programs on rural community was not scientifically documented.
[4] There was a drastic ethnic difference in the two townships under study, where Jaffna was dominated by Tamil community, where as Nuwara Eliya was by Sinhala.

particular. For instance, poor in Sri Lanka gather the required information for their livelihood issues; such as health, water, security, housing etc. primarily from informal networks fabricated by kinships, friendships, culture & locality (Schilderman, 2002). NGOs demonstrate the ability to understand such intricate phenomenon, and build up effective connections to these informal networks.

Since mid 1980s most of the major donor projects such as JTF (lately NDTF), CWSSP, IRDP, CEIF had been designed to collaborate NGOs with centrally coordinated government own institutions, where ground level implementations vested upon NGOs. Such government – NGO collaborations had been evolved from direct government coordination of IRDP project in 1980 to quasi-government institutional arrangement of JTF (NDTF) towards 1990. Model had further been improved & adapted by CWSSP, CEIF etc towards 2000 (ADB, 1999).

Yet, NGO sector at large was recognized as a relatively fragile institution. Geographical presence, sectoral interests, experience and expertise, track record, financial and human resource capacity were the indicators used by many studies to measure the scale of NGOs, in the absence of clearly defined parameters. Accordingly, NGOs, who's functions were limited to a single village were mostly acronym as CBO (Community Based Organization). The resourceful ones, who maintain their offices with a trained staff over several years, maintaining proper records & accounts, and influence multiple communities were recognized as NGOs.

In the absence of reliable records on the actual no of functional NGOs, various estimates suggest the figure to be between 30,000 – 50,000, in which majority were expected to be CBOs. For instance, two national NGOs collectively work with 11,400 CBOs; where Sarvodaya, which was regarded as the largest and oldest NGO in the country, functions with about 4000 CBOs (Sarvodaya Shramadana Societies), whereas SANASA[5] was reported to deliver credit through 7400 (primary societies) CBOs. All these CBOs were registered under multiple government institutions[6] hence counted as NGO in less defined multiple records.

The reliable number of medium scale NGOs were estimated to be between 300 – 500 (UNESCAP, 1998). Despite this shear number, the sector keeps growing, where more CBOs becomes NGOs, while existing NGOs keep expanding their working capacity.

Accountability and transparency of NGO sector was regarded as high among the established NGOs. Most of them maintain their audited accounts and good institutional rapport. Yet required room for improvement in accountability and efficiency found to be hampered by the absence of appropriate legislation. Hence, except for few NGOs, most

[5] SANASA (Sri Lanka Federation of Thrift and Credit Cooperative Societies) was a corporative movement in Sri Lanka with the beginning of first cooperative society as early as 1906.

[6] NGOs were variously registered under different government bodies (Different ministries, such as Ministry of Social Services, Ministry of Environment; Registrar of Societies; Divisional Secretariats) and also under several parliament acts.

were restrained from carrying out major projects due to limitations in technical capacity, managerial capabilities & resource absorptive capacity (ADB, 1999).

Most of the NGOs were development NGOs, demonstrating the skills of poverty reduction, water and sanitation, child education & nutrition, women empowerment, youth skill development, micro-finance, human rights campaigning, environment conservation etc. With regard to ICT, NGO sector skills were limited to usage of office based applications for their own administration. Approaches such as telecentres for community development were confined to Sarvodaya until recent times (Samaranayake, 2004; Wattegama, 2004; Mendes et. al., 2003).

Along the history, major donor projects had become the trend setters in NGO sector, with the influence of their funding and capacity building programs. Such projects, improved the institutional and human resource capacity, while introducing new thematic areas into the NGO sector. For instance JTF (NDTF) influenced the trend of micro-credit, CWSSP promoted the water and sanitation skills, while CEIF promoted environmental conservation aspect. Along this trend, eSriLanka initiative remains as the latest to enhance 'ICT for development' skills among the NGOs.

Community based ICT interventions before eSriLanka

Pre-eSriLanka era of ICT for community development was dominated by 2 ICT projects; Multipurpose Community Telecentres of Sarvodaya, and Kothmale Community Radio project (Samaranayake, 2004; Greenberge, 2002). The Sarvodaya telecentre project had started with a 1 pilot telecentre in 1997 as the pioneering ICT for community development initiative, since had evolved into multiple project elements, including 31 telecentres and 177 Village Information Centers (VIC) by 2004 (Sarvodaya, 2005).

The key elements of Sarvodaya engagement

Telecentres – were established at rural townships, mostly at Sarvodaya coordination centers, where infrastructure and security were assured. One telecentre act as an ICT hub for several hundreds of Sarvodaya-active[7] villages. Youth leaders of the progressive CBOs (Sarvodaya societies) from recipient villages were given a special training on ICT. In return, they were expected to start VICs in their villages which would function as information hubs. Telecentres feed information to VICs on demand, and also work as rural ICT capacity building centers for local community (Sarvodaya, 2005; Kapadia, 2005).

Community friendly character of the Sarvodaya telecentre model lies on its less dependence on the heavy cost elements (Kapadia, 2005), such as lesser concern on on-line connectivity (which was inherently expensive), heavy dependency on volunteer youth (instead of expensive human resources), strategic integration into complementary

[7] Sarvodaya was reportedly active in 15,000 villages across the country. Broad spectrum of community development activities (eg Preschool education, Community health, Biodiversity, Micro-credit) were carried out in these villages. ICT was integrated into this package of activities.

community development activities (eg Micro-credit) (Gerster, 2004). The revenue model relies on limited offering of low cost training services to local community.

However, the innovative component of Sarvodaya program lies in the VIC which facilitates the outreach to poor communities living in extreme rural pockets (Box 2). VICs cannot be regarded as telecentres as they were primarily equipment free. Yet, they create the first link for the poor – traditional – disadvantaged communities to align with the mainstream ICT developments (Kapadia, 2005).

More importantly 'telecentre - VIC' combination could overcome the infrastructure, economic and social barriers inherent to the rural sector, and sustain with less dependency on donor funds, while effectively stimulate the disadvantaged communities to interact with ICT (see Box 1) (Kapadia, 2005). As a result, some VICs have gradually started to become mini-telecentres on their own. For instance, 34 VICs (out of 177), could build up their own capacity by adding at least one computer. All such computers either bought by themselves by mobilizing village society savings or by community-initiated fund raising (Sarvodaya, 2006).

Box 1 Catalytic effect of VICs

Bogahawele Shramadana Society serves 232 members (75 families) in a village of 145 families. Village located in a hilly area, of Nuwara Eliya district, which holds the poorest estate community. Under the facilitation of Sarvodaya, they had constructed their entry road on their own (shramadana), formed active children, mothers and youth groups, established gravity water scheme etc. It had been a practice to maintain the village family records, development needs, activity reports etc in paper files.

Recently, entrepreneurial chairman of the Society managed to buy a computer, and his son (student), subsequently developed village information data base single-handedly. Now they can track village information over few clicks.

(Kapadia, 2005)

Kothmale Community Radio Project

Kothmale Community Radio project had earned global attention as a pioneering Radio Browsing experience. Project had been implemented by Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation in Kothmale valley located about 250km away from the capital. Project attempted to incorporate ICT into community radio, where small telecentre was established at the radio station welcoming the local participation. Main objective of the project was to run a daily 2 hour interactive radio program, where program presenters responded to listener's requests (made by telephone or postcards) browsing the World Wide Web. Radio program had been broadcasted to about 8000 people living in 3 major townships (David & Liyanage, 2005).

Observations on Community participation

Having had both projects - Sarvodaya telecentres and Kothmale community radio project, functional in similar passage of time, a recent study had reported the observations made on the community participatory patterns in two projects over a 5 year time span. Interestingly, both projects had observed similar dynamics, where majority adults & women limited to stay as observers (named as 'non-starters') while limited number of youth (age of 20-30yrs, who had completed their secondary education, and remain unemployed) had engaged with the projects proactively & consistently. Named as 'Super Users' they had been the early users to master the technology and to maintain close ties with the project. Such users had helped anchoring the project into local settings, until project had gained community acceptance (David & Liyanage, 2005).

With the sponsorship of eSriLanka initiative, Sarvodaya had been involved in designing a subsidy voucher, as a remedy to break this weak participatory pattern and stimulate mass community participation. Test results highlighted 5 fold enhanced participation at three tested Nanasala. Though 80% participants were still comprised of youth, vouchers could significantly improve the gradual increment of women participation, even surpassing men at one district (Jaffna) (Sarvodaya, 2004: Liyanage & de Silva, 2006). Vouchers could provide important leads to increase adult participation, such as the importance of providing diverse services tailored to meet adult needs, employing diverse promotional approaches targeting wider cross sections of the community, importance of addressing cultural and regional sensitivities (Sarvodaya, 2004).

Critical problems in two approaches

Both projects had suffered the macro-structural deficiencies such as the absence of Internet back-bone, absence of local language content etc. which had limited the available options to offer to the community. Sarvodaya telecentre project avoided provision of Internet[8] to avoid the unbearable cost. Kothmale project had managed to sustain Internet provision under variety of donor and state assistance, yet continue to face difficulties at project replication[9].

Two way communication was not satisfactory, rather skewing to information down-streaming. Community demands emerging through the telecentre network for broader level services such as progressive farmer information could not be accommodated satisfactorily. For instance, one telecentre (at Gampaha District) had attempted to establish an on-line support system for the farmers, by forwarding the farmer requests to the state run agricultural research station (AR&TI). Initial positive engagement of the state institution could not continue as the demands started building up[10]. Limitations of the ICT oriented information intermediary capacity of the state institution had been one impediment.

[8] Telecenters offer Internet on demand, using dial-up telephone connections which were expensive and less smooth.
[9] Project was being replicated in another 3 locations (David & Liyanage, 2005).
[10] Personal communication from SITU, 2005.

Box 2 VICs – a rural information service model to inspire village youth.

VIC – Village Information Center is an information hut located in a community friendly location, within a particular village. They are owned by the village society, and would be established on a donated location – mostly in the vicinity of community halls, village banks etc. Managed by a trained youth volunteer leader handpicked by the village society (a registered CBO).

Four VICs were taken into a recent study, in which 2 VICs were observed to be belonged to very poor communities, not having proper access roads or electricity, and not a single fixed phone or a mobile phone in entire village.

Information were in paper; some were filed and some were pinned onto the notice boards. Such information were gathered from variety of sources; ranging from Sarvodaya telecentres to government offices, magazines and newspapers.

There were 59 information sub categories under 5 main categories available at VICs, which were varied among each other.

Type of information	No. entry categories	Examples
Village related	9	Village maps, resource maps
District related	9	Public transport, demographics
Government related	18	Welfare services, application forms
Social information	6	Women's rights, good family life
Economic development & agriculture	17	Crop cultivation practices, Market information

One VIC in the study, found to be located within an economically progressive village, thus managed to upgrade into a self-run computer training center equipped with 6 computers funding from village society earnings.

This type of upward progress had been the dream of all the VIC leaders as observed in the study.

(Kapadia, 2005)

Community interaction at telecentres, in particular for information services, remains below the potential. In average, most of the telecentres receive less than 10 people in

average per day (excluding computer training[11]). This was mainly attributed to the absence of local language software – in particular Sinhala language, absence of locally relevant content material (including off-line material) etc. The circumstances pushed the telecentre operators to promote computer skill development as the primary engagement of the operation, consequently further discourage the adult participation at telecentres.

Changing ICT landscape after eSriLanka

Background of eSriLanka project

eSriLanka initiative – the Sri Lankan state lead ICT program, was officially announced in Nov. 2002 as the 'e-SriLanka: an ICT Development Road Map', origin of which roots back to the multi-stakeholder discussions took place in 2000 – 2002 within the context of Competitiveness Initiative funded by USAID (Samarajiva, 2004, World Bank 2004b).

The vision statement of eSriLanka states: 'to harness ICT as a lever for economic and social advancement by taking the dividends of ICT to every village, to every citizen, to every business & to re-engineer the way government thinks and works'. In order to translate this vision into action, six major programs had been implemented; 1. Re-engineering government, 2. Development of information infrastructure, 3. ICT human resources capacity building, 4. ICT investment and private sector development, 5. e-Society, 6. Development of technology architectures and security standards (ICTA, 2005).

Among the six broader themes, there were two programs namely 'Nanasala' (telecentre) program (covered under 'Information infrastructure') and e-Society program remain relevant to the context of this paper.

Implementation of eSriLanka initiative was rested upon a newly created, private sector flavored, government owned, autonomous implementing agency known as – ICT Agency[12] (ICTA). ICTA was given the policy level directions by a steering committee appointed by the Government, which was chaired by secretary to the Prime-minister[13] of Sri Lanka (World Bank, 2004b).

In the absence of a model to follow, eSriLanka initiative was identified as a path-breaker in the realm of introducing ICT as a holistic, overall country development approach (World Bank, 2004c). Due to this same nature, stakeholder participation and partnership development demonstrates a non-traditional perspective, parts of which had been taken into discussion within this document.

[11] Peak participation was reported as 40 per day for Nuwara Eliya telecentre, in which majority was for Computer skill development (Sarvodaya, 2004).

[12] ICTA was established under a new act of parliament of Sri Lanka, and registered as a Private Company under the Companies Act to maintain administrative flexibilities. It works under a policy frame work specified by a Cabinet Sub-committee and functions under a Board of Directors, appointed by the Government (eSriLanka, 2005. website)

[13] This was being shifted from Prime minister's office to the President's Office, at the moment of writing this paper.

Key elements of the Program Design

Nanasala project:

Nanasala[14] – (global knowledge center) in technical terms a traditional telecentre, were having different models adapted to match the target socio-economic context. There were 4 types of Nanasala models within eSriLanka initiative, namely a) Rural Knowledge Centers, b) e-Libraries, c). Distance & e-Learning centers (DeL centers), d). Tsunami camp computer kiosks (ICTA, 2005) (Box 3).

Rural Knowledge Centers were traditional telecentres, located at rural and sub-urban locations, e-libraries were small version of telecentres mainly established at religious locations, DeL centers were advance ICT facilities established at few hand picked townships, and Tsunami camp kiosks were a version of telecentres located specifically at internally displace camps in tsunami affected areas.

By design, these 4 models attempt to reach multiple community groups across diverse locations. For instance, e-libraries target adults with diverse cultural backgrounds while 'tsunami camp Nanasala' targets the displaced vulnerable community. On the other hand, models try to match the context specific demands; such as 'advance ICT facilities' at urban setup through DeL centers, while less sophisticated ICT accessibility at rural Nanasalas. Yet, all four models together provide a concerted network to provide ICT accessibility and to build up capacity of public at large.

At the service supply side, Nanasala operators were given extensive training following standard modules which includes subjects such as community participation, entrepreneurship. All the centers were provided with minimum of 2 computers, VSAT based 24hr on-line connectivity. Availability of local language content, soft ware services, hard ware support systems, e-governement services etc were being addressed by the other 4 broader programs of the eSriLanka initiative that were not being taken to the discussion in this paper.

eSriLanka had demonstrated high degree of accountability and transparency at the crucial setting up process, with regard to Rural Kowledge Center model of Nanasala[15]. Process involved with initial site selection, community awareness raising at the prospective sites, competitive bidding process to select owners and finally setting up of Nanasala.

[14] Initially known as Vishva Gnana Kendra (VGK: Universal Knowledge Centers) during the inception of eSriLanka initiative, had been changed to new name – Nanasala with the change of the political regimes.
[15] The information given in this paper is for the Rural Knowledge Center model. There can be variations for other three models, which could not be verified due to the limitations in available documents.

Box 3 Nanasala models of eSriLanka initiative

Rural Knowledge Center:

- Type: fully fledged Multi-service community telecentre
- Services: Internet, email, telephone, fax, photocopy, computer training
- Other services: act as a hub for information services
- Location: rural & sub-urban community access
- Business model: fee based services
- Target no: 200 (50 in South, 50 in North & East; 100 in the rest).

e-libraries:

- Type: small scale telecentre
- Services: Internet, email, telephone and computer training (off line)
- Other services: books & periodicals based library service
- Location: places of worship, village community centers, public libraries
- Business model: mostly free and few paid services (for sustainability)
- Target no: 800 around the country

Distance & e-learning centers (DeLs):

- Type: advance ICT training center
- Services: Video conferencing, multi-media computer lab and training facility
- Other services: information sharing and learning opportunities, interactive multi channel network for domestic and global distance learning (e-learning) facilities.
- Location: Key urban areas outside of Colombo (Capital)
- Business model: fee based service
- Target no: 4 centers (North, East, South & Central provinces)

Tsunami Camp Nanasala:

- Type: small computer kiosks
- Services: computer services, vocational skill development, database services.
- Other services: Information on health & education, supporting rehabilitation & reconstruction of affected communities, relief support coordination.
- Location: Camps of displaced people in tsunami affected areas.
- Business model: free of charge
- No established: 20 camps
- Special note: targeted for 6 months leaving flexibilities to continue depending on the camp life.

Source: ICTA Website (www.icta.lk) – Jan, 2005

Site selection

Selection criteria were planned at national level, with the participation of a working group comprising of private, public and NGO[16] sectors. Four main site selection criteria were a) Size of the population (2000 - 5000 people), b). Availability of a fixed market within a 5 km radius (as an indication of economic activity), c). Presence of a school with minimum of 300 students and d). Availability of electricity. This criteria combination implies the subtle balance attempted to be maintained between rural severity and economic soundness, in terms of reaching long term Nanasala sustainability (ICTA, 2005).

Extensive ground level surveys were carried out by hired third party consultants to identify the locations against the set criteria, which were again scrutinized by the working group to ensure optimal geographical spread (within North & South regions).

Participation & Ownership structure

By design Nanasala were owned by the individuals or groups of a particular community. At setting up process, community participation was given considerable attention following four step approach; a). Broader community awareness development, b). Provision of assistance to potential bidders for proposal development, c). Competitive bidding process for the ownership, d). Neutral evaluation of the proposals (ICTA, 2005).

Broadly planned community awareness meetings were organized at potential Nanasala sites deploying pre-trained trainers, where the details about upcoming Nanasala operations, their services and usage were extensively introduced to the local communities. And the communities were invited for the bidding process, informing application processes and the expected ownership models. Following the applications, the potential applicants were called upon for second round meetings, where they were given specific support on the proposal development (eg. issues of technicalities, revenue models). Final proposals were selected by a special committee appointed by ICTA (ICTA, 2005).

Nanasala ownership was more of a partnership between ICTA and village owner, than a participatory community model, which would run by a 4 year contractual obligation. Towards the end of the project, ownership will be transferred to village owner. Ownership can be single or a joint (allowing societies to bid as a legal entity), yet it has been designed to be essentially local. For instance owner shall be a resident inside or approximately within 10km of the proposed village (ICTA, 2005).

e-Society project:

Reaching the poor or vulnerable communities of eSrilanka was essentially accommodated under the banner of e-Society. The program tend to mobilize grass root institutions, through two programs; namely CAP (Community Assistance Program) mainly targeting

[16] Author had taken part in Nanasala planning working group as the representative of Sarvodaya.

CBOs, and Partnership Assistance Program (PAP) targeting NGOs, private or public institutions working at grass root level.

Designs of two programs attempt to meet the capacity and strengths of two ground level development institutions both at CBO level and at NGO level. For example, CAP program sets low eligibility criteria while limiting the available funds to 5000US$, whereas PAP program offers 10 times higher funds while setting stricter criteria of selection (ICTA, 2005).

Two programs specifically targets disadvantaged groups, women and youth in rural communities. More interestingly, eSriLanka attempts to reconcile with ground level deficiencies of computer literacy and ICT knowledge in general, through e-society. For example, only at this segment of eSriLank initiative, ICT was defined as 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' technology forms, where public address systems, community radio etc were identified as 'traditional' forms, while the computer, Internet etc. being identified as 'non-traditional'.

In order to mobilize these two programs ICTA capitalizes the collaborative expertise of one private sector institution (PWC) and one national NGO (SEEDS), a combination of private sector and NGO sector.

Impact of the approach

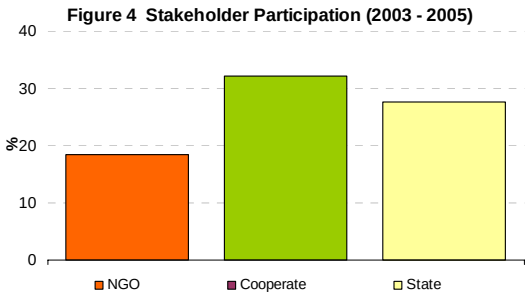
NGO participation

With regard to NGOs, initial phase of eSriLanka initiative was dominated by the participation of Sarvodaya than others, which was mainly attributed to the long standing ICT experiences of the organization. It has regularly participated in core planning discussions especially in the Nanasala planning process, and had been a one recipient of the 8 pilot Nanasala. Additionally, Sarvodaya works as a 'Full Service Institution' to support the facilitation of rural Nanasala setting up process. SEEDS (Sarvodaya Economic Enterprises Development Services) remain as the key partner to facilitate eSociety program.

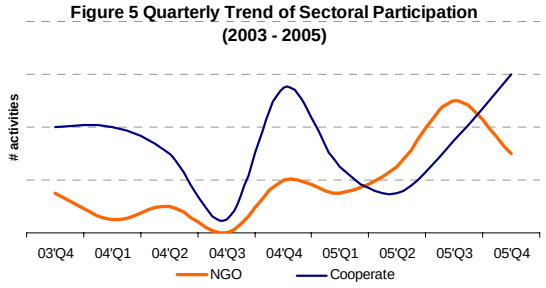
Nanasala and e-Society makes the major contribution to promote eSriLanka with other NGOs. Though, it was too early to comment on the impact of the eSociety program as it was still at early stages, the initial ground response to the program was optimistic. There were 247 EOIs (Expression of Interests) received by the deadline, as a response for calling proposals, in which 86 had been short listed. Applicants represented every province of the country including conflict battered North & East (ICTA, 2005). This high turn out of reportedly good quality[17] proposals implies the ability of the ICTA approach to catalyze the NGO sector which had been less responsive to grass root level digital divide issues, so far.

[17] Proposals were screened twice based on strict criteria, ensuring applicants organizational accountability, innovativeness, degree of ICT expertise etc.

The trends of partnerships



The web site of the eSriLanka program (www.icta.lk) provides an acceptable account of overall program advancement. A systematic analysis had been carried out over 90 entries from Nov, 2003 to 11th Jan, 2006 in the 'News & Events' link (www.icta.lk/insidePages/news&event/whatsnew.asp)[18] to study the a) stakeholder participation (NGO, private & public) in the eSrilanka initiative and, b) proportionate engagement into different program areas during the stated period.

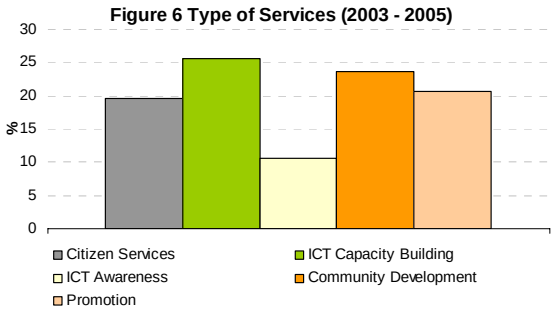


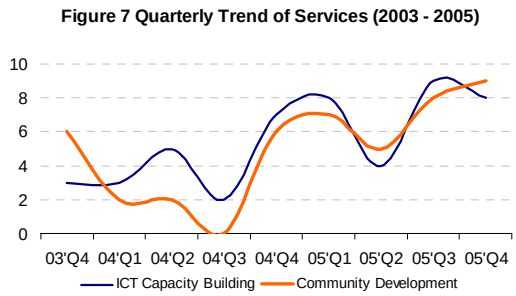
Out of all, 32% of the activities favored the corporate sector in terms of promotion, capacity building etc., 27% influence was on the state sector (eg skill development of civil servents, e-governance, institutional capacity building etc). Influence on the NGO sector was limited to 18%, as reflected with establishment of e-Society fund, setting up Nanasala, engaging at post tsunami relief cordination etc. (Figure 4).

Nevertheless, as implied by the quarterly progress of activities, there was a significant improvement of ICTA interaction with NGO sector towards the latter part of the program. The planning processes of Nanasala which occupied substantial time, might have kept the NGO interactions at low key level initially. Along with the rapid replication of Nanasala highlights a fast engagement of eSriLanka into the NGO sector starting from late 2004 (Figure 5).

This was further endorsed by the trends presented in type of services offered by eSriLanka initiative too. ICT Capacity building had been the main goal of 25% of the activities, while Community development represents significant 23% of activities. This even attention on both services continued over last 5 consecutive quarters (Figures 6 & 7).

[18] Multiple cross-checking with other related documents such as project announcements, progress reports & program evaluations had re-confirmed the reliability of timeliness, quality and uniformity of the content, to consider this link as a reliable source of data to get an analytical view into ICTA performances on multi-stakeholder participation.





Accountability & Governance

From the inception, eSriLanka initiative had been designed to ensure uniform distribution of resources across the regions giving more emphasis to the ethnic diversity. Such effort was demonstrated by high emphasis to establish equal number of Nanasala in South & North, establishment of e-libraries in multiple places of worship (temples, churches, mosques etc.), equal attention to both Sinhala and Tamil at local language material development. Nevertheless, the progress was still skewed, as observed with relatively slow progress in North & East sector, comparing to South. Site selection for North and East could be completed only for 40 placements, against 50 sites in South. Out of 70 established Rural Knowledge Centers (Nanasala), only 12 were established in the districts populated by Tamil speaking community (ICTA, 2006). And, the program was yet to plan out the strategies to reach Eastern provinces of the country, where the majority Muslim community lives.

Participation & social security

Participation and social security of poor communities in the rural sector had been addressed by multiple strategies at multiple project elements (eg. Nanasala at tsunami relief camps, e-Society to reach vulnerable communities) as described earlier. The true capacity of these innovative approaches to ensure reasonable diffusion across poverty pockets was yet to be learned. The first evaluation on a 3 pilot[19] Nanasala established by the program, recently revealed the struggle of the Jaffna (North region) pilot to overcome the area specific logistical barriers imposed by post civil conflict environment. The same evaluation, on the other hand, had reported the satisfactory performances of Nanasala in Nuwara Eliya (Central South) (E&Y, 2005). These results directly indicate the challenges ahead in translating expectations into ground level realities, especially in the conflict affected North & East regions.

Nevertheless, evaluation had recorded the substantial impact generated among the Jaffna target audience, as satisfaction expressed by the school teachers and students in the area, despite the trouble-ridden operation of Nanasala. Community impact was best observed

[19] eSriLanka initiative has established 6 pilot Nanasala as a way to learning and adapting into broader rollout of major Nanasala program. Recent outcome evaluation was expected for all 6 pilots, yet only 3 were completed by the time of writing this document.

at Nuwara Eliya Nanasala, which was implemented by Sarvodaya, the model which has been recommended by the evaluators as the most satisfactory one to replicate (E&Y, 2005).

The three pilots under the study were carried out by three different organizations, all having ICT expertise. Among them, Nuwara Eliya pilot Nanasala was a result of converging traditional Sarvodaya telecentre model with Nanasala model, with the expert inputs of ICTA. Other two pilot Nanasala under study were implemented by private sector institutions. Though it was not conclusive, results suggest the importance of NGO specific experience[20], on top of the ICT experience to ensure Nanasala success.

Governance

Within the Government administrative structure, ICTA reports directly to the Prime minister's office of Sri Lanka. On one hand this provides the required power to break through the inefficient bureaucratic barriers to implement the major project components such as re-engineering of the government. As per the evaluation reports, program could result in fair amount of initiatives as pilots (eg e-money order, empowering the workplace) though far from being scaled up to national level (E&Y, 2005). Nevertheless, in turn this administrative positioning does not exclude the potential of falling into political grips, which can push the program beyond the citizen centered agenda into a political agenda.

Challenges in the Post-eSriLanka

eSriLanka, adapts pro private sector, yet private-government-NGO partnership model to diffuse the technology to the rural masses. The model was in harmony with the very nature of ICT technologies, which inherently demands for costly technology infrastructures and competent human resources to deliver results. Thus, eSriLanka model would probably help to create the enabling ICT environment in the country. Yet, the capability of the model for the true community empowerment is a challenge to be seen in the future than today.

Empowerment needs the true sense of understanding of the communities, repetitive planning, flexible approaches, participatory sharing, persistence of engagement to seek the results (IDS, 2002). More importantly it needs the dedication and desire to see the results in the communities. NGOs were widely recognized to posses such characteristics in their institutions, which in contrast, alien to profit centered private sector.

Yet on the positive side, private sector inherits the clear focus, accountability and efficiency that most of the NGOs could not have demonstrated to the same degree. eSriLanka initiative was quite successful, as discussed earlier, in engaging the two stake holders on the project. Yet converging them into a fruitful partnership is yet to be seen.

[20] Other 2 pilots conducted by two private sector companies who had long run ICT experiences.

The alarming aspect remains within the power relationships nurtured by eSriLanka intervention. Having private sector flavor and preference within ICT Agency, the power tends to skew towards private sector. Voice of NGOs remains weak. Hence, it has the potential of becoming another target oriented project, where empowerment could be overshadowed by other major economic & development concerns. It remains as a challenge to see how eSriLanka delivers its dividends to empower poor communities, in its march to 'empower citizens'.

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