

Concept Note for Research Collaboration with University of Michigan

Sustainability First

www.sustainabilityfirst.org

Telecentre ecosystem and Sustainability question

Telecentres are the 'Shared ICT Access Facilities', having computers, internet and other affiliated equipment, made available for community access at free or affordable prices, mostly at developing country rural environments. Since early stages of pilot testing of telecentre models in 1990s, telecentres have emerged as an acceptable tool to adapt ICT for Development (ICT4D), reduce poverty and bridge the digital divide. As of now, a plethora of telecentre brands and models are functional all around the world, demonstrating multiple forms of management models, technology packages, connectivity options etc. Microsoft UP (Unlimited Potential) alleged to support over 50,000 telecentres in their global outreach. According to telecentre.org of IDRC, there are over 60,000 telecentres including about 35,000 in Latin America, and 15,000 in India.

Amidst this expansion, the issue of Economic sustainability of telecentres remains as an unsettling question at every telecentre forum. The underlying key question is how to economically sustain a telecentre / network, on their own. As most of the telecentres are donor funded initiatives, there is a common tendency of telecentre operators struggling to manage operations, when the funding cycle completes. On the other hand, telecentres being established to serve a social purpose – that is to serve underserved communities – it is quite challenging to build revenue models without compromising the social objective. Thus demands engagement of social-enterprising.

Sustainability First – Research initiative

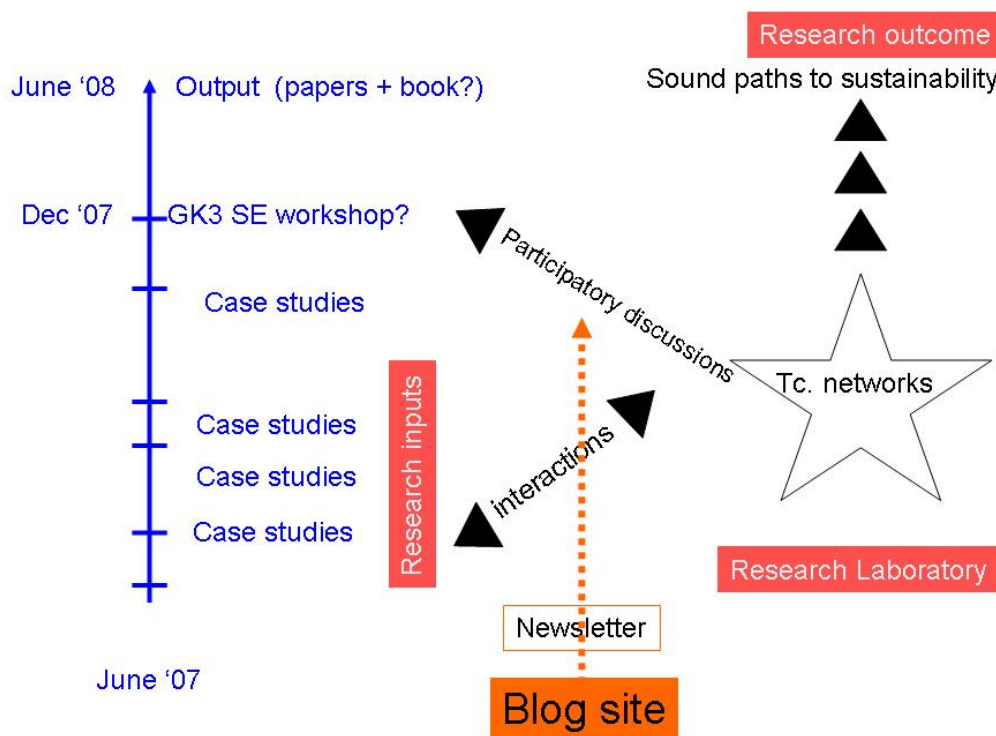
'Sustainability First' is a research initiative to plot path to this delicate issue of telecentre sustainability. Research funded by telecentre.org, is intended to study the available Best practices, recognize the constraints hidden at the multiple layers of the telecentre eco-system, and formulate mechanisms to generate Social-entrepreneurial spirit within the overall telecentre eco-system.

Research had been carried out over last 10 months (since January 2007) and continues towards June 2008. Hitherto carried out following activities;

- Overall landscape study on the relevant Social Enterprise models to ICT for Development. (Desk based study supplemented with field studies)

Strictly for restricted circulation

- Screened the champion models in Africa, South Asia, Latin America and Central Europe (Desk based study, based on broader acumen of telecentre.org ground engagements)
- Detail study on Grameen CIC telecentre network (Bangladesh, Field study)
- Detail study on D.Net telecentre model (Bangladesh, Field study)
- Detail study on Drishtee Pvt Ltd telecentre network model (India, Field study)
- Detail study on ICTA (Government of Sri Lanka) telecentre model (Sri Lanka, first part of field study completed)
- Detail study on Sarvodaya-Fusion telecentre model (Sri Lanka, continuing detail study)
- Detail study on Moule Activa and ATACH telecentre network (Chile, detail study partially completed).



Participatory Research Engagement

The research is expected to build up the spirit of Social enterprising within the key players of the Telecenter eco-system while carrying out its intellectual investigations. Following strategies are formulated and being implemented to ensure this objective:

- Maintaining a public blog site:

While the case study research continues, the findings are being posted (as abstract snippets) in a public blog site - www.sustainabilityfirst.org.

- A monthly online Newsletter (Sustainability First)

3rd Issue of the Newsletter circulated to over 150 hand picked telecentre audience (consisting of Academics, Policy makers, Donors, Telecentre operators, Corporate bodies) promoting the dialogue. As per the online statistics, about 36% opened the Newsletter (mail) and about 20% readers click through to the specific blogs.

- Presentations to the telecentre audiences:

First presentation on the research findings were made at 'Telecentre Leaders Forum' at eIndia conference, during Aug, 2007. Responses of the audience confirmed the research investigations continue in an appropriate track, providing satisfactory insights to the telecentre stakeholders. There was a significant demand requesting the research findings, though authors opted not to disseminate as the research is still on going and findings require more validations.

- On line debate (Africa Telecentre Forum):

A broader online debate facilitated (22 Oct - 8th Nov, 2007), with the participation of African Telecentre Operators and Champions, around the issues of sustainability, while building their focus into the research findings. A broader dialogue is on-going.

- Upcoming global Platform at 3rd Global Knowledge Conference (Dec 13th, 2007)

Platform is set for a broader 'Sustainability First' platform, where research findings would be presented to an audience of 250 telecentre + ICT4D audience at the upcoming GK3 Conference, which is reckoned as the biggest ICT4D event of the year.

The responses generated by above designed participation of broader ICT4D community, would be systematically filter into formulate the final phase of the research, from January to June, 2008.

'Yes' & 'No' Paradigms

Emerging broader findings can be categorized into 'No Paradigm' (fig 2) and 'Yes Paradigm' (fig 3). 'No Paradigm' outlines the Social, Economic, Institutional and Policy reasons constraining the Sustainability of Telecentres. 'Yes Paradigm' outlines the exact positive countering of - more or less same - constraining reasons as observed by the Case studies and associated models.

Those quadrants are validated by the participatory presentations carried out as explained earlier. Nevertheless, next phase of the research is expected to do the following;

- Further validate each and every quadrant
- Elaborate each quadrant making them more focused and appropriate to the context
- Build anecdotal examples on each and every quadrant.



Fig 2 - 'No' Paradigm

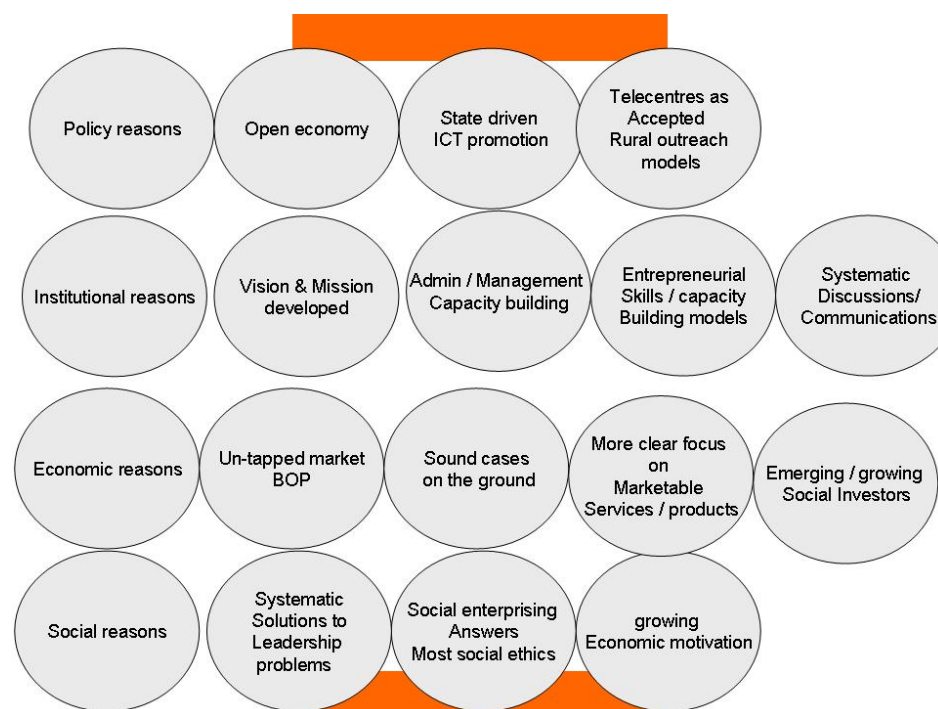


Fig 3 'Yes' Paradigm

Research potentials for University of Michigan students

Given the depth of the research investigation, there are multiple opportunities for the students to carry out their research as a complementary development. Following are few possibilities framed by author to generate some insights;

- Systematically validate (building more investigative questioning) one or many quadrants in 'Yes' & 'No' paradigms
- Expand the 'No' & 'Yes' Paradigm quadrants (adding more)
- Build up more systematic validating models; for eg. Author built these quadrants just capturing the knowledge gathered through participatory discussions, interviews and reviews. It may be advisable to build scientific models to extract points from diverse participatory engagements.
- Build anecdotes for each quadrant

Author can provide guidance to the students (over online communications) to formulate research thinking, direct to appropriate information sources, support to set up interviews with outside agencies if required.

The knowledge generated would be aimed to integrate to the overall research investigation. And due acknowledgements would be made in upcoming Research Articles, Presentations and the Book aimed to be published at the end (towards June, 2008).

Sustainability First and telecentre.org

SustainabilityFirst is an initiative of telecentre.org -- a global community of people and organizations committed to increasing the social and economic impact of grassroots telecentres. Working together, telecentre.org provides the resources that telecentres need to succeed: locally relevant content and services, support and learning opportunities, and networks that help telecentre activists connect to each other. With these things in hand, tens of thousands of telecentres will be in a better position to enrich the communities they serve. Founding investors include Canada's International Development Research Centre, Microsoft, and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation. Visit www.telecentre.org to learn more.

Harsha Liyanage, PhD,
Visiting Research Fellow, Telecentre.org, IDRC,
Email. smilingharsha@gmail.com
Blog: www.sustainabilityfirst.org