

Connecting the North-East

Rekha Jain
Centre for Telecom Policy Studies,
Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad

Community Information Centres (CICs) in North Eastern States (Nagaland)

The North Eastern (NE) states characterized by isolation from the mainstream, hostile terrain and poor availability of power pose a challenge to any development effort, especially those related to Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). However, as a part of overall development plan for the NE that aims to reduce the isolation of these communities and mainstreams them, a very commendable project undertaken by the Department of IT (DIT) has been to provide at least two Community Information Centers (CICs) per block in all the NE states and Sikkim. The project objective is to address the basic needs of citizens such as information, education, entertainment and health services through the CICs. It was envisaged that the CICs would serve as a platform for e-governance, e-learning and other IT enabled services in the state.

The CIC project was and is a joint effort by DIT and the National Informatics Centre (NIC), and the state governments of the NE. The first two CICs were set up in Meghalaya on August 12, 2000. Subsequently, it was implemented on pilot basis in 30 blocks of the North Eastern states and Sikkim. Subsequently, the main project was inaugurated on 17th August 2002 with 457 CICs. Later, the DIT decided to extend the same to other parts of the country, beginning with J&K. This was chosen primarily due to the similarity in terrain.

This was indeed a challenging project from the perspective of deployment of technology, (since it would not be possible to use traditional communication technologies because of the hilly terrain), management of equipment vendors, coordination across different central and state departments, training of local staff and sustainability. While many of the CICs are doing well and serve the purpose for which they were set up, an analysis of the problems faced by others would help us to understand how to do this better next time.

The project provided for housing each CIC in a relatively good quality building. Each CIC is provided with a server machine, five client systems, a Laser Printer, a Dot Matrix Printer, modem, LAN hub, TV, Webcam and two UPS (1KVA, 2 KVA), and an AC. Each CIC is connected to the network through a VSAT.

Each CIC has two Operators (CICOs) for managing the centers and providing services to the public. CICOs have been trained to manage the CIC, provide services and impart training on basic computer operations and software packages to visitors. They are paid salary by the NIC.

DIT has funded the project and has the responsibility of overall monitoring and management. NIC is the implementation agency. Application software development and training of CICO are a part of NIC's responsibilities. The state governments were entrusted with the mandate of site selection, preparation and maintenance, manpower recruitment and identification and creation of content for various services/applications to be delivered through the CICs.

DIT/NIC will continue to provide manpower support to the CICs for five years and NIC will provide technical and maintenance support for this period. DIT/NIC will continue to provide satellite connectivity after five years. The CICs will then be handed over to the respective state governments. The state governments are required to evolve a viable business model to make the CICs self-sustaining during these five years. The private sector may collaborate with government for effective service delivery

The CICO are free to charge some nominal fee from the local population for sending email, Internet services or for training. This is supposed to allow the operator to take care of running expenses such as electricity, consumables etc.

Recent models of CICs have shown that an entrepreneurial mind set for the CICO is critical to success. In the CICs that I visited, many of the operators did not see their role as that of a business development but more like a typical government employee, who gets a fixed salary irrespective of the output. While many CICOs have taken initiatives to run the establishments as commercial projects, unless CICOs have greater stake holding in the running of the CICs, the business orientation is unlikely to develop. In many similar initiatives (n-logue, Akshaya) the operators make at least part investments in the CICs. Given the difficult economic situation in NE, the CICOs could be provided loans at rates substantially below the market.

While the project envisages non-availability of electricity as an integral component of the project and provides for gensets, difficulties in procurement of diesel and inability to get the gensets repaired at the local level had caused many of the gensets to be non functional and CICs to be non operational. A judicious choice of the amount of hardware to be provided or whether to provide ACs (that guzzle electricity) or huge TV sets, could have saved money that could be invested in solar panels or micro hydel enterprises to give continuous power. Without such assurance, a CIC that relies solely on PCs for operation, becomes useless.

Since CICs have only data services and limited VOIP (as per the TRAI regulation), they are of limited utility for the general public. There are few applications and only few CICs use them. As far as customers are concerned, one can visualize a rural citizen initially visiting a CIC to make a phone call and over a period of time utilizing other services and contributing to the revenue. The current limited way of functioning also

reflects the compartmentalized ways in which our government departments continue to think. The DIT and DOT should have worked together to ensure that both voice and data services could be offered by the CICs.

Collaboration between DOT and DIT could have also seen better fund flow situation, as CICs could be made to receive funding from the Universal Service Fund. In addition, since to be eligible for operational support from USF funding requires reports regarding the level of operation, it would have monitored the working of the CICs. Of course, this would need to be linked to the availability of electricity and better mechanism to rectify problems related to hardware and VSATs functioning. Since the maintenance was done centrally from Delhi, a CIC that became non operational due to malfunctioning hardware could be out of operation for at least 5 days. In practice, these times are higher. Requisition of spare parts continued to be problem as it was centrally done.

The location of CICs affects their revenue potential. Some of the CICs have been housed in office buildings that are not centrally located. While from the security viewpoint this is a good choice, it makes the CICs non available after office hours and on holidays. CICs that were close to schools (major customers being school children for email and chat and also computer training) were generating more revenue. This lesson had already been learnt by the DOT in the location of the village phone in the sarpanch's house and the consequent commercial losses and later it switched to providing village phones in public places.

An ownership of the project by the state level agencies is critical for the operational success of the project. Considering how much the local people value such initiatives, I do hope that the next round of planning will review the project critically and build in the appropriate elements for its success.

CICs in Nagaland

- In 52 blocks. CICs being seen as a part of the state e-governance plan. An IT council has been set up under the CM.
- Nearly half are operational (Mr Bansal, Secy IT) He gets the reports but has not consolidated them.
- Started with the Department of Science and Technology, and later a Department of IT and Technical Education was created that took over the CICs.
- Operators are selected based on a response to the advertisement and an interview process.
- The bidding was competitive, seventeen out of the 52 blocks are covered by Wipro and Hughes for the computer and VSAT maintenance respectively. The remaining are covered by HCL and Bharti.

- Machine failures are to be electronically reported on the web. The vendors are also supposed to monitor the complaint site. The SLA specifies a 5 day period for maintenance. The penalty is linked to the number of days of delay.
- Each CIC has 6 PCs, 1 laser printer, 1 inkjet printer, large TV, AC, genset, fan, flooring, 2 rooms, web camera, speakers. 128 kbps connectivity.
- The 2 operators per CICs have been getting a salary of Rs 5500 pm from NIC and will continue to do until project end in Aug 2007.
- Response by operators has been very variable. While some have taken interest, others have not exploited the opportunities offered by the state IT Department for printing flyers and pamphlets for popularizing the CICs.
- Problems
 - VSAT direction setting problems
 - At night, voltage low, so CICs not operational and anyway, few people will come after dark.
 - Some generators got spoilt, but there was no engineer available with the vendor.
 - On Sat and Sun, CICs closed as operators do not come.
 - Managing peak time requirements
 - Availability of power is a major issue
 - Entirely dependent on NIC and BSNL. NIC support at the state level and some bureaucratic processes that do not allow fast redressal of problems. For example, requisition of parts is centrally done. With the state acquiring 4 new projects related to computerization at the district level, maybe the NIC will upgrade the quality of support.
 - Procurement policy of NIC is drawn at the national level, and that cannot take into account state level requirements.
 - Location of CICs is an issue since all of them are in the block headquarter, some of which are remotely located from the public access point of view. However, from the security perspective, the location is fine. The CICs that are away from prime locations find it difficult to generate revenue. However, since CICs are under the state district administration, at least they should find a use for it.
 - Connectivity after 10 am is a problem due to congestion
 - From this year, there is a separate head of account for maintenance of CICs.

Other Initiatives

- The Department of Science and Technology has approved a comprehensive solution for the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan covering power supply through solar, wind power and inverters.
- There is a proposal to put an incentive system in place for those operators who are doing well.
- Proposal to experiment with solar and wind power panels.

Recommendations

- Plan for hardware up gradation.
- People perceive training to be useful if accompanied by some certification process.
- Integrate CICs with other social infrastructure like school, PCO.
- Link the USF administration to the CICs
- Integrate CICs with the State Wide Area networks.
- Planning for roll out of CICs could have been done with the state authorities.
- Incentive structure for operators needs to be reviewed.
- While planning for CICs, solution for power availability, need to be factored in the cost. For example, instead of providing 6 PCs and AC, it may have been more useful to provide maybe 3 PCs and a solar panel.
- Training content needs to be formalized. For this interlinking with other initiatives like n-logue could be useful.
- An operational MIS from CICs should be designed. The disbursal of salary should be linked to the submission of the operational MIS. The current system of submission of reports is ad-hoc.
- Provision of ACs is not required in a hilly climate. The money could go towards ensuring power security.