

CASE STUDY – “Developing a low cost community access point in Guyana “
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December 2006

Abstract

“Yes, let us do it!”
“What is Linux?”

Community telecentres are important points for access for people who would not ordinarily afford their own access to Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). In Guyana, there are few community telecentres and limited experience in establishing them. Despite this, the Society for Empowerment and Wholistic Advancement(SEWA) sought partnerships to create a community access point. This project is innovative for two reasons :-

- a) SEWA created novel partnerships with different organisations and individuals to get the resources to establish the centre
- b) SEWA agreed to a technical solution involving the use of the Linux Terminal Server project and older computers which reduced the setup costs

This project was initiated in July 2005 and the centre was launched in May 2006 with eight terminals. There are numerous challenges which SEWA faces in sustaining the centre, but SEWA has recognised that there are exciting new opportunities which Information and communication technologies can provide in the reduction of poverty.

Background

SEWA works in different rural and suburban communities in Guyana on various projects which involved for the most part, the arrangement of direct assistance for people who are affected by poverty. One of the communities near which it works is a recently regularised squatting area, Cummings Lodge Area Y with about 600 families, most of whom are close to the poverty line. This area is about three miles out of Central Georgetown. During the Guyana Flood Disaster of January 2005, SEWA recognised that it could do community outreach, and that the mandir (Hindu temple) of the Cummings Lodge Hindu Society was accessible to most of the community in a time of need.

SEWA realised that ICTs provided opportunities for greater access to information and knowledge, which would enable people to improve their health, education and even provide some opportunities to support income earning activities.

The access to ICTs is limited to Internet Cafes, and the Cafes do not provide any training or support services. Some of the young people especially from the community cannot afford the cost of the Internet Cafes. The SEWA members realised that children in the community would also be completing school without having the information literacy schools. SEWA pursued various partnerships to realise this project.

Partnerships

The **Cummings Lodge Hindu Society** offered some of the space which it had available at the Mandir for the unconditional use by SEWA, except for the proviso that the space could be made temporarily available in the event of any other cultural activity. There were **Individual donations** of materials, labour¹ and the furnishings for the centre. The **University of Guyana Computer Centre** provided space and the expertise of some of the technicians to assist with making the old computers usable. Another NGO, **DevNet** conceptualised a project to raise the required US2,000 to purchase the server and also provided the expertise (along with the **Guyana Linux Users Group**) to implement the technical solution. The **Guyana Telephone & Telegraph Company** offered the DSL connection at residential rates, though the time taken to install the telephone lines delayed the completion of the installation.

The technical solution

The technical solution for a new telecentre could increase the costs. SEWA agreed to a proposal from DevNet to utilise the software from the Linux Terminal Server Project which allows older computers to act as terminals to provide access to various applications running off of a server. SEWA did not intend to do any terminal-based accounting, so the suite of applications offered by the Mandriva distribution of Linux were found to be suitable to the intended users.

The software which is used include Firefox for web browsing, Open Office for word processing, spreadsheet and presentations; and other software for computer literacy and leisure.

There were no associated licensing costs for software, and the hardware costs were expended on a server and the peripherals. This is the first telecentre of its kind in Guyana and in the English speaking Caribbean. The initial installation resulted in eight terminals and a server and printer. There is space for a maximum of twelve terminals.

¹ The painter refused payment, but this caused some delays as other paying jobs took priority. A seamstress donated her time to sew the covers for the computers

Services

The telecentre offers Internet Access, use of word processing and other tools for document production and printing. The volunteers have been involved in teaching new users how to use the terminals, with some focus on keyboard familiarisation. Another IT professional volunteered her services to develop a basic literacy manual which could be used with new users.

Staffing and resourcing

The task for implementation was given to a SEWA volunteer who was the main driver behind the project and who resides in the community. This volunteer was responsible for co-ordinating all the partnership arrangements to prepare the space and to acquire the equipment. SEWA in the first phase relies on one volunteer to manage the centre during its opening hours. The current opening hours are 5 – 7:30 during weekdays, and extended hours during weekends. Another volunteer, an IT professional, has developed a computer literacy programme which could be implemented by other volunteers for members of the community.

SEWA has also participated in the Caribbean Telecentres Workshop held in 2006 and intends to be a part of the Alliance for Community Telecentres.

The intention is to make the centre available and known in the community before designing specific programmes which would expose the members of the community to the use of Information and Communications Technologies.

User Profile

A group of women use the Mandir for a cookery class, some of them run small scale cooking businesses. The women have recognised the Internet as a source for recipes. SEWA has recognised the necessity of conceptualising activities and programmes which would allow community members to use ICTs as a means to improve their livelihoods.

The users of the telecentre are mostly secondary school students who use it for research purposes, and for games and other leisure purposes. There are also a few school dropouts ages 10 to 15 who frequent the centre and attend the computer literacy classes we have provided for their academic upliftment. Most of the boys use the terminals for games, since they are also at the mandir doing other activities. There are other residents in the community who use the centre for other purposes for research and for word processing. SEWA has also

realised that the outreach activities for the centre have to be based on some benefits, and that there is an additional challenge of working with the community members to continuously address the needs. At this stage, SEWA evaluates the impact based on the number and diversity of the users, and recognised

Challenges

We need a full time person to work with this centre to achieve the full impact

Human Resources

The development challenges in Guyana has placed strain on the human resources of organisations like SEWA which have to deliver programmes , while utilising scare human resources. SEWA realised that they had the organisational resources to develop the telecentre, and the volunteers who would be willing to manage the routine operations. The potential of the centre to impact the livelihoods of the surrounding communities will only be realised when SEWA acquires the human resources to develop and implement programmes which are based at the centre. SEWA also expects that its limited participation in the Alliance of Caribbean Telecentres will also result in new knowledge and ideas for implementation.

Financial Sustainability

SEWA is responsible for the payment of the DSL connection and the electricity bill for the centre. This amounts to about US100 per month. SEWA in the first days plans not to charge for the services rendered at the centre, since most of the users will not pay. Some of the users have paid from time to time, when extra cash is available. SEWA plans to also cross subsidise if necessary from other fund raising activities.

SEWA has to find the right mix of donors and payment for services to ensure that the centre remains operational. The plans to invest in other community development projects which are based around the centre will also result in some earnings for the overhead costs.

Lessons learned

SEWA has recognised the importance in a community in which donors are stretched, of asking many donors for different things. This requires more co-ordination resources, but it allows for greater participation in the successful completion of a project. The partnerships with at least five organisations and many individuals were necessary for the completion of the centre. Plans are being made to open a second one in another rural community, once the human resources are committed to the project.

The technical solution is feasible, and SEWA intends to make the telecentre available for others who are interested in a similar implementation.

Future directions / Recommendations

It is too early to assess the impact of the telecentre in the community. SEWA intends to conduct more outreach activities and acquire resources through strategic partnerships to manage activities which will develop more programmes beyond basic digital literacy. These include :-

- identifying new economic opportunities for the community members
- using IT to improve the management of the micro-businesses within the community and to stimulate new ideas for entrepreneurship
- to encourage the use of the Internet for access to information and for advocacy to resolve issues affecting the community.

SEWA is committed to ensuring that the centre remains open and available to the community and has decided to pursue the development of other centres, once the human resources are available to manage them.