PART 2
COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION
IN YOUR TELECENTER'S OPERATIONS AND ACTIVITIES[1]

In the 21st century, community participation is becoming increasingly important for various local enterprises. So you can expect organizations outside the community as well as the community itself to raise questions about how "participatory" your telecenter is. While participation is often approached in a philosophical way, it has very practical implications for a telecenter operation. Participation is important because it helps you decide what services to provide, and it affects who uses the telecenter, how relevant the telecenter is to the community, where you get dedicated staff, and whether the telecenter can survive.

1. WHY IS PARTICIPATION IMPORTANT?

The goal of participation is to increase the relevance of a project by using the knowledge, values and beliefs of people and groups within the community. The benefits of participation lie in its emphasis on the involvement of diverse people and organizations who can influence the success of a telecenter (we sometimes call them *stakeholders*) – stakeholders who often represent a range of perspectives and ideas, all of which the telecenter staff should recognize and acknowledge. The diverse perspectives of individuals within a community serve not only as a reservoir of ideas concerning the community's ability to address its needs and desires, but also as a reservoir of skills and talents that can be used for taking action to fulfill those needs and desires. As a local citizen itself, these are matters a telecenter should consider addressing.

Participation can lead to partnerships. Often another organization or group in the community will have resources that will be useful for the telecenter, and the telecenter might help those organizations work towards their goals.

Participation in a telecenter is both a means to – and an indicator of – sustainability. It is a fundamental *component* of most community-based sustainable projects, and it is also a *measurement* of the success of the telecenter in meeting community needs.

A word of caution: developing and using participation takes time and requires a high investment of energy, particularly in the beginning stages. While participation may initially seem inefficient and time-consuming in comparison to other methods of management, strong support of a participatory approach will ultimately result in a telecenter that is relevant and effective in meeting community needs. These are the keys to telecenter success and sustainability.

2. ELEMENTS OF SUCCESSFUL PARTICIPATION

2.1 Involving a variety of stakeholders.

The key component to a successful participatory process is the involvement of the stakeholders who will use the telecenter, directly or indirectly. In ideal circumstances, this will include representatives of the *entire* community. Special attention and energy should be given to attracting typically under-represented or marginalized groups (for example, poor people, women, minorities, the elderly) to the telecenter.

A participatory process that only includes community members from the dominant class

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[1] This is adapted from Module 2 of Royal D. Colle and Raul Roman, *A Handbook for Telecenter Staffs.* The full *Handbook* is available at http://ip.cals.cornell.edu/commdev/handbook.cfm.

or favored sectors will not adequately bring attention the multiple interests and needs of the entire community, which the telecenter should try to serve. Some stakeholders may not agree with including representatives from *all* community sectors; however, a successful participatory process involves not only *including* these under-represented groups, but also making them feel comfortable with the process and incorporating them as partners in your operations.

2.2 Evaluating community needs through continuous feedback.

Participation is an on-going process. A community is a dynamic body that constantly responds to new social and environmental conditions and often changes in the process. As such, the needs and desires of a community are also continually changing. To operate telecenters in the most effective way, telecenter managers must continually assess the needs of the community to ensure that the telecenter is up-to-date in meeting those needs. One of the best ways to ensure that the emerging needs are met is to *ask* the community. This is can be done, as we will discuss later, by making participation a part of the management policy of a telecenter.

Participation should not only be promoted, it should also be measured. By conducting regular needs analysis studies, telecenter personnel will be able to measure progress and identify areas in which to consider providing information services. A needs analysis in a community serves the double purpose of collecting assessments from outside the telecenter as well as spurring participation. Through sharing their opinions in the studies, individuals will, indirectly, be participating in the development of the telecenter. In other modules, we provide specific guidelines on doing simple but useful studies of a community's information and communication needs.

2.3 Creating significant integration of the telecenter into community institutions.

One of the best ways to enhance the potential for telecenter sustainability is to combine efforts with already existing organizations in the community. This has several advantages. First, it integrates the telecenter into a pre-established social and organizational network, thus increasing the chances that the telecenter will become established as an important part of the community. Second, it works to ensure that the activities of the telecenter will complement – and not compete with – existing community projects. Third, the telecenter can provide services to the established organizations to aid them in their work and enhance their efforts.

Integration with these community institutions requires that the telecenter invite them to participate in the life of the telecenter. It is not by good luck that this happens, but rather by good design. We will address this issue later.

2.4 Raising awareness about the telecenter to the community.

Simply establishing a telecenter is not enough; supporters must actively "market" the *idea* that information is valuable and that the telecenter is the key to the benefits of good information and communication. Although seemingly obvious, it is important to note that community members must first become aware of the telecenter and its services before they will get involved in it. Telecenter managers must persuade their communities of the benefits to be gained through information technologies. As we mentioned in Part 1, focusing on the information, not the hardware, is the key to reaching much of the community that has a natural resistance to technology. Diffusion, using (as in training), and sharing of *information* is the goal; technology is merely the medium. Advertisements in the local paper, on the local radio and/or television station, pamphlets, fundraising activities – these are all examples of basic marketing ideas that are discussed in more detail elsewhere in the complete *Handbook*. It is good to

remember that a satisfied customer is the best advertisement there is.

A recent study by FAO indicates that few participatory needs assessments are done prior to the installation or formation of ICT initiatives, including telecenter projects. FAO suggests how important participation is for some of the practical concerns of a telecenter operation especially in relation to the idea of "appropriation." In the box below a short excerpt summarizes this part of our discussion on participation.

Local appropriation of ICTs is about communities and groups selecting and adopting communication tools according to the different information and communication needs identified by them and then adapting the technologies so that they become rooted in their own social, economic and cultural processes. It is about creativity and freedom of expression and in some cases about resistance to political and cultural dominance and to global media markets that are dominated by a handful of transnational companies. Appropriation is about power - power over the tools and content of communication.
Local appropriate of ICTs is important because it can:

- Contribute to reducing the digital divide (as well as rural-urban, wealth and gender divides) at individual, group and community levels.
- Give a voice to the voiceless (at household, community, national, regional and global levels). For example, communication processes can give rural women a voice to advocate changes in policies, attitudes and social behavior or customs that negatively affect them.
- Foster and facilitate community decision-making and action and empower them to take control of local development processes.
- Advance community ownership of ICTs for development, empowering communities to take charge of all aspects of ICT initiatives, including deciding priority applications, content, training, technical management and even financing.
- Ensure that ICTs serve the purposes of local communities. Through appropriation, communities select and transform the technologies and content to fit their needs, rather than reflect the interests of external groups.

– FAO, *Discovering the Magic Box: Local Appropriation of Information and Communication Technologies* (ICT).

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3. GETTING STARTED WITH A STRATEGIC APPROACH

A starting point is for the telecenter leadership group to address some basic questions about participation in the telecenter's operations.

1. *Why* is participation important to this project? Among the answers might be: because it conveys a sense of community ownership; it provides indigenous wisdom; it helps reflect community values and will help us identify information needs; it provides important resources, such as volunteers or technical expertise, at a favorable cost; and some people need the telecenter's services. Your telecenter team, which might be joined by representatives from various organizations in the community to explore this and other questions, can add to this list.

2*. Who* should participate? The answers may flow out of the first question, but they should be made explicit; it is not enough to say "the community." What groups of people should receive specific attention because of the possibility they will be marginalized — like women, poor people, minorities, the elderly? We'll note later how the nature of information technologies themselves can exclude people from participation and the potential benefits of telecenters.

3. *How* might people participate? The easy answer is to say that all can participate through their

use of the ICT facilities and services. But there are other ways community members can participate telecenter: volunteers who oversee daily operations; tutors who give lessons; advisory groups for policy making and management of the telecenter; people who provide links to other community organizations; and people who manage particular data bases and add value to information resources.

4. *How much* participation should be sought? Is maximum participation the goal, or should there be a target called *optimal* participation? Some would advocate a kind of participation where the community is fully responsible for the telecenter, from policies and management to raising money and care taking. Local culture and people resources may dictate a more limited role for the general community. It is not hard to imagine situations where there can too much participation. Agreement needs to be reached on the "how much" issue.

5. *When* should participation take place? This depends on what kind of participation (the *how*) is being considered. It probably should begin no later than the time in the planning when participation itself is being considered. By making participation an issue in the planning process, it sets the climate for implementation in various aspects of telecenter life – and being specific about the timing avoids the "we know it's important but haven't got to that yet" excuse.

6. *What incentives* can be offered? How people participate is related to what incentives should be offered for their participation. Benefits they receive from the telecenter's services may satisfy most. Money and public recognition are important, but so too are special privileges regarding use of telecenter facilities or, for telecenter volunteers, discounts from shops in the community (which is a way that merchants can participate).

Other answers for some of these questions will come from the following discussion; some answers will depend on your own community's circumstances, and only you and your telecenter team can provide those answers. But it is important that the answers be addressed and incorporated in a clearly agreed upon plan of action for the telecenter.

4. OBSTACLES TO PARTICIPATION

Telecenters are an innovation and thus a stranger to the community. And a new telecenter in the community will mean a change in the way some parts of the community work. Some members of the community will welcome the telecenter with curiosity and fascination. Others will see it as a threat and an intrusion in a system that already has its time-tested traditional ways. In this section, we look at some of the obstacles that need to be addressed in getting widespread participation. We start by breaking up participation *into individual participation* and *collective participation*.

4.1 Individual participation.

We need to think about the *uses* of the telecenter by a specific community and involvement of community members in telecenter activities. We can call this *individual* participation. What are the obstacles to this kind of participation?

(1) Economic obstacles. Can everybody in the community pay for telecenter services? Acknowledging that you must have a business plan for the telecenter's sustainability, you will need to consider what services people can people afford, and who might be excluded if there are charges for various services. Research and planning will reveal what services are feasible and affordable. We can also ask another question: even if community members are able to

afford the services, is the community *willing* to pay? The approach we take may determine whether those who use the telecenter are participants or just clientele.

In India, free and paid services

In an experimental telecenter project in South India, organized and planned by the M.S.Swaminathan Research Foundation and funded by the Canadian Government, the community is not ready to pay for information services. Telecenters provide a kind of information they think should be public and free. This perception is connected with the fact that many villagers are used to receiving government subsidies and they see the telecenter as a service that should be also supported by state funds. So the services are free. This removes the economic obstacle to participation, but what about the sustainability of the project? The villagers are being very creative in yielding solutions. They are trying to sustain the project financially through community banking practices and the support of self-help groups. The telecenter, as an information and training center that is at the root of self-help group activities and is the promoter of community banking opportunities, is seen by different community groups as essential for their activities. That is why they keep most services free. A share of the money kept in the bank (probably in form of interest) would serve to pay a salary to telecenter volunteers and to maintain the equipment.

(2) *Physical obstacles to participation*. Do community members have problems in accessing the center? We have to ask ourselves: where is the telecenter located? It is clear that if the telecenter is away from the usual community meeting points, it might hinder participation. In South Africa, the telecenter in the township of Mamelodi, in Pretoria, was originally located in the local library. Later, the telecenter management decided to move to an independent location. Esme Modisane, the telecenter manager, explains the reason why: "the library location was not appropriate because it appeared to the community as an official or government site. People were intimidated by the library and what it means; they think it is for 'intellectual people'. They do not feel it as *their own* community center if it is located within the library." In Hungary, the very rural nature of the telecenter movement usually means that there are few locations in a community where a telecottage can be placed, so it is the community that decides where it should be placed – in fact, *participating* in an important decision related to the telecenter's operation. In Latin America, we are told that Internet facilities are often put in what are perceived as "male places" such as a post office, and this keeps women away.

(3) *Social obstacles to participation*. Are there any social or ethnic reasons (including gender and age) that impede the participation of some community members in telecenter activities? It may be difficult to engage some members of the community in a participatory process because they are marginalized, geographically distant, or very busy. The telecenter manager should make every effort to include these individuals by making their participation a comfortable and respectful experience. Additionally, the telecenter manager should be flexible, adaptive, and most importantly creative in encouraging these community members to participate. In a community in Canada, locations had to be set up separately for young people and adults because each intimidated the other, thereby impeding both groups' participation. Because women are often discouraged from moving beyond the home, you need to give special attention to how they can become actively involved with the telecenter. For example, as part of a strategy to attract women to participate in telecenter activities in Pondicherry, India, the Swaminathan Foundation requires that at least one woman is engaged in the management of each center (for instance, the telecenter in the village of Embalam is ruled by four female volunteers).

Cultural factors in access

There is a story we were told in South Africa by Paula Middleton, a British Council official who is actively working on telecenters in that country. It is a story about computers. She explains: "The British Council demonstrated a telecenter at the Commonwealth Summit exhibition in Durban last year. It was very interesting to see the reaction from the public to visiting the telecenter stand. Indian visitors to the stand were confident with using the computers, whereas Black visitors needed encouragement to try out the computers and to navigate the Internet, not sure how the technology could be applied to their own experience. This experience seemed clearly to point to the heritage of previous disadvantage in this country and the challenges faced for the use of technology to enable equitable development. On the other hand, Black children felt very comfortable in front of a computer. And this fact clearly shows that entering the digital age is an educative process."

(4) Political obstacles to participation. Some groups within the community may be unfriendly or even hostile to each other, which can make effective collaboration among them difficult. The telecenter manager may not be able to eliminate these tensions; however, the manager may still be able to gather input form these conflicting groups by meeting with each of them separately. Are there political reasons that restrain the participation of some people? If a telecenter is politicized, it can create power struggles. An example is the first telecenter established by South Africa's Universal Service Agency, the Gasaleka telecenter, in the Northern Province. This telecenter, which is run by the local South Africa National Civic Organization, has very good links to community groups. All the organizations in the area support and work with the telecenter. According to the telecenter manager, Masilo Mokobane, "the telecenter is well-known, although we need to engage the tribal authorities more. However, we don't have problems with any organization. We do have problems with some individuals within those organizations, though, because they feel jealous of the resources we have here. But when those reticent individuals are informed, and know the telecenter is here to support the community, they help us. *The telecenter cannot be politically driven*, because it is for the community."

Associating a telecenter with a partisan organization such as a political party or religious group runs the risk of excluding non-members of those groups. There are also more subtle aspects of political power. For example, those people in power may discourage or obstruct the community's use of information technology because of potential challenge to their authority. In Mexico, we asked a schoolgirl in a telecenter if her teacher encouraged her to use a computer for her schoolwork. "No," said the girl, "the teacher is afraid of the computer because we might learn something she doesn't know."

(5) Public awareness. Does the community know about the telecenter? The obstacle to participation here has two parts: awareness that your telecenter exists and awareness of what benefits there are from the telecenter. The second of these is the most challenging. Recall the woman in Nepal who raised the question "Our priorities are hygiene, sanitation, safe drinking water, hw is having access to the Internet going to change that?"

Is the community aware of the potential of ICT? As Richard Fuchs states, "people need to be encouraged to become involved in "information-seeking behavior." Simply put, people need to understand that it is worth their time and energy (and sometimes money) to find information to help solve their problems. While macro data relating telecenters to improvements in a nation's Development Index are difficult to find, many examples exist of people discovering the benefits of telecenter services. In Shanghe, a small village near Chongqing, China, we encountered a peanut grower sitting at a computer in the telecenter. She reported how − through a web page − she was able to find a good price for her peanuts in a neighboring county. And, she said, it was worth the logistics effort to do business that way. In nearby Qing Lon village, a woman used the web to improve her silk worm practices. In India, a 40-year old

woman in a self-help group urgently used the village information center to find a veterinary doctor who could provide immediate artificial insemination for her cow. The timely action resulted in some important income for her family. News of good services will contribute to the community's awareness and positive assessment of the telecenter.

The question of benefits is closely related to how people in the community think about the telecenter's relevance to them. In India, the Swaminathan Foundation is making a big effort in this direction: trying to make the telecenter relevant to the surrounding communities. As part of their telecenter project, they have established a *value addition center* (which we mentioned in Module 1). This center collects and repackages information (thus making the information *locally relevant*) on a daily basis, and makes it available to a network of telecenters through a wireless communication system. For example, you will recall the example in Module 1: they placed a telecenter in the fishing village of Verampatinam where they found that many local fishermen, most of them illiterate, expressed the need to have timely information on weather forecast and wave height. To meet this need, the value addition center downloads everyday the weather information from the US Navy web site, translates it to Tamil, the local language, and then sends it to the local telecenter as an audio file.

Some of the suggestions from the community may be difficult or inappropriate to implement within the telecenter. However, the telecenter manager should strive to respond to community needs and to gather ideas from the community. Being open and honest about the goals of the telecenter and the resources available will help align community expectations with the practical limitations of the telecenter.

Visibility? In a Canadian community, just changing the name from a somewhat forbidding "Community Access Program Site" to "cybercafé" increased the visibility and use of the facility.

The BusyInternet (BI) telecenter in Accra (Ghana) takes seriously the issue of awareness. To attract people to the center who might not otherwise be interested in technology, movies are shown at the center on weekends. Another magnet is Liquid, the BI Accra restaurant and bar with its cool-blue bubble design. This is where the local cyber crowd hangs out to network and dream up ideas. The BI philosophy is that creating a social scene around technology will help spark an innovative technology culture, and it places equal importance on both social and financial return. For example, to raise awareness about national ICT policy, the telecenter hosts monthly debates and organizes experts' lectures. Low or no-cost Internet access is offered to those attending HIV/AIDS workshops and other socially oriented programs. Those who cannot afford the normal daytime prices of fee-based services can pay half-price at night (Bridges.org (2003).

(6) *Technophobia* is one of the obstacles that prevents the community from getting involved in the activities of telecenters, either as users of the services or in other aspects of a telecenter's program. Continuous efforts to familiarize key people in the community with the process is an important tactic. Young people, who tend to learn and value technology quickly, can be used as a path to getting parents involved. Training programs for community health workers not only gets them involved, but also may lead them to influencing their clients to use the telecenter services. Similar approaches can be made with teachers and extension agents.

How can we overcome these obstacles? Here we are dealing with marketing and awareness raising, with creation of value addition products (and this might be related to training issues), and with research and analysis related to the socio-economic dynamics of a community.

We return to some specific suggestions in Module 6 (Marketing Your Telecenter).

4.2 Collective Participation

Next, we need to think who is going to be involved in telecenter planning and management. We can call it *collective* participation. We are referring to *perceptions* of community ownership. We suggested earlier that there can be community steering committees that set the direction of the telecenters and supervise the work of the telecenter manager. Some of the successful telecenter operations such as those in Australia, Canada and Hungary build this feature (community ownership) into their organizational structure.

We have to ask ourselves: How well is the community represented in the steering committee? This question is difficult to answer, and it depends much on the community structure itself to decide what stakeholders should be represented in the committee.

What are the problems that this kind of management entails? We can see the example of the Universal Service Agency (USA) telecenters in South Africa. The system permits not only joint decision-making and evaluation, but also higher financial transparency. However, the added layers of ownership mean that decision-making is subject to the complications of bureaucratic layers. The effect of this is a less proactive style of management. Decisions cannot be made immediately – as and when they are needed.

5. PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN TELECENTER ACTIVITIES

There's a story about new information and communication technologies and rural development from Peru that urges us to think seriously about the role of women in our telecenters. It comes from a recent issue of the *Washington Post* newspaper. The story starts:

> Until a brilliant sunny day when the Internet reached his Ashaninka Indian village in central Peru, tribal leader Oswaldo Rosas could think of few benefits modern life had brought to his people.

The story goes on to tell of how through grants from the Canadian government, the local telephone company, and a nonprofit organization, things were changed by the introduction of a computer, portable generator, a satellite dish and a big screen monitor. Rosas and five other tribal leaders received eight weeks of computer training which led to developing their own Ashanika web site (www.rcp.net.pe/ashaninka). With it they sold their organically grown oranges in Lima, 250 miles away, and boosted tribal revenue 10%. Now, Rosas' hut also doubles as a tribal cybercafe (Faiola and Buckley, 2000).

So benefits from information technologies are reaching the Ashaninkas in Peru. But almost all of the middle aged women there cannot read or write (a situation common in the poorest Latin American countries and in other countries around the world), and thus they could miss some of the benefits of ICTs.

Literacy is not the only obstacle women face in using ICTs. Because girls are sometimes denied the opportunity of going to school, they lose the chance to become familiar with computer technology at an early age and later may develop *technophobia.* Furthermore their culture often defines (and they themselves begin to believe) that technology is for males, not females. The social environment in which a woman lives may prevent her from going out of the home to a telecenter where there may be men who are not from her family. And women may perceive telecenters as irrelevant to their lives. These issues present a challenge for telecenters

that want to serve the *whole* community.

Jacques Diouf, Director-General, FAO, puts the issue of women's participation in sharp perspective:

> We live in the 'age of communication', but the full impact that information and knowledge can have on development is just starting to be seen. This is especially true for rural women, who shoulder much of the agricultural work and other rural activities in developing countries, where they are responsible for producing most of the food. Harnessing the power of communication – through traditional folk media, rural radio and, where available, television and the Internet – is critical both for us to learn from women and to help them learn new ideas, practices and opportunities. The use of modern communication technologies, integrated with local channels and networks, will enable more women to be heard and reached. A common challenge, for women and men alike, is to exploit the power of communication processes as a means of realizing their potential as well as achieving equitable and sustainable development. *Voices for Change,* FAO

The importance of women in relation to participation in telecenters is important enough that we must probe further. Silvia Balit, former communication special with FAO, wrote the following section.

Women's Access to the Internet

Exclusivity in access to the Internet has led many to brand it as yet another technology that is available only to the wealthy and powerful elite in developing countries. The true picture is more complex, however, and despite its limited access, the Internet is making an impact. One consistent criticism centers on men's predominant use of the Internet. Access to information means access to power, and most societies continue to exclude women from both. Estimates suggest that the global Internet gender ratio has remained static for a number of years, with about 63 percent of users being men and 37 percent women. Less optimistic is the claim, made by the Association for Progressive Communications, that "male domination of computer networks" is as high as 95 percent.

For many activists, the concept of "cyberspace" is critical to understanding the importance of the new technology for women. "The issue of space has always been central for women and is highly sensitive, particularly in Africa," argues Marie-Helene Mottin-Sylla of the Synergy, Gender and Development Programme run by ENDA-Tiers Monde in Senegal. "The freedom to have access to spaces other than the bedroom and the kitchen, and to be able to act fully and safely in other public spaces is key to women's full participation in the world's future. Unless African women can participate fully in cyberspace, they will face a new form of exclusion from society."

Improving Women's Access to New Technologies

With the advent of the global information society, new communication technologies are increasingly being adopted as effective tools for reaching rural audiences. Yet the benefits of the information revolution are still much debated, particularly in the case of the developing countries. There is serious concern that the gap between the information 'haves and have-nots" will continue to grow. The bulk of information resources and technologies are in developed countries, which also control the content that they transmit. Unless developing countries acquire the infrastructure and resources to access these new technologies and generate their own content, they are likely to become more marginalized and isolated – economically, socially and politically.

The situation is even more serious for remote rural communities where basic

communications infrastructure, such as newspapers, television, radio and telephones, is lacking. If the benefits of new technologies are to reach rural areas in developing countries, it is essential not only to increase rural populations' access to these technologies, but also to disseminate information in local languages and ensure that it is relevant to local development needs. Included in this challenge is the task of making the new communication technologies available to rural women and providing the skills and tools necessary for them to express their opinions and produce their own information.

Given the fast pace of the information revolution, it is not unrealistic to conceive of telecommunication infrastructures and information technologies becoming practical tools for the promotion of development in rural areas. We are not yet at the stage where all remote rural areas are connected to the outside world. However, through the Internet and electronic mail, it is possible to connect with local intermediary organizations, such as extension services, health centers, training institutions, local NGO's, farmers' associations and women's organizations which, in turn, can share information with rural people through traditional communication channels. International development agencies and national development partners are already experimenting with new information technologies and electronic communication networks for rural development, concentrating on how to make them more accessible to rural populations and thus bridging the "last mile of connectivity"....

[Balit shows us how something as simple as the telephone can make a difference in the lives of women.]

Village Pay Phone Project

In Bangladesh, the Grameen Bank has set a new trend in communications. The Bank, which provides collateral-free micro loans to help the poor start up small businesses, has established a people-orientated, wireless communication system with the objective of promoting income-generating activities for the rural poor. The communication system is based on the Grameen phone, a wireless, cellular phone that poor rural people may purchase through a lease scheme. The leasers then charge other villagers a small fee for use of the phone, which thus takes on the function of a portable rural telephone booth. Hundreds of rural women are taking advantage of this development to create pay telephone services in communities that were previously without a telephone connection. As a result, Grameen Bank is helping rural woman to run their businesses since, through the use of the phones, they gain quick, cheap and easy access to suppliers, customers and market information. The Bank believes the Village Pay Phone Project is the largest of its type in the world. It has already changed the lives of many rural women in Bangladesh, and the aim of the bank is to put at least one cellular phone in each of Bangladesh's 68 000 villages within the next six years.

Electronic Networking for Women's Empowerment

Today, the Internet's World Wide Web and electronic mail systems compromise a global "people's network" for communicating and sharing information. Women's groups and associations in developing countries are exploring the challenges and possibilities unfolded by Internet applications and are beginning to invest in the use of these tools for promoting their interests. For example, in societies that have a long tradition of women traders, new information technology offers women improved scope for business ventures as well as the opportunity to collect and disseminate information within and beyond their national boundaries. In Ghana, communication centers with fax, telephone, copy machine and computer services have been operating since 1992. These centers are owned almost exclusively by women and serve many women clients.

Communication through e-mail networks helps reduce the isolation of women and offers opportunities to overcome many of the constraints that limit their capacity to address national and local development issues. Communicating with the international community as well as with each other, rural women's groups can gain access to information about best practices, appropriate technologies, and ideas and problems of other groups with similar interests. Despite the greater access that women's groups and association now have to new information technologies, they are still underrepresented on most networks. Entering the new electronic frontier of cyberspace remains a challenge to most women of the world, not to mention rural women. The problems faced by women users include:

- the cost of access and lack of infrastructure, especially in the poorest areas;
- a lack of education in regions where women have limited access to schooling;
- insufficient women's training programmes covering the basic skills needed to master computer technology;
- language barriers because most of the networks are in English or French, which means that women's groups that act as information brokers for rural communities need to translate information into local languages.

Rural Telecenters

Rural community telecenters are part of another approach being used by development agencies and their partners to extend access to the Internet, bringing it closer to rural communities and the intermediary organizations that provide services to these communities. Telecenters are shared information and communication facilities that provide communities with telephone, fax and Internet services as well as access to equipment such as cassette and video players, photocopiers and computers.

Telecentres can provide communities with knowledge and information from outside sources, which can then be integrated with local knowledge. For example, a telecenter can be used by a local health organization to collect information and develop material for public awareness programs on issues such as reproductive health, HIV/AIDS or female genital mutilation. Telecenters can be used by training institutes to obtain distance-learning materials for supplementing courses offered locally for girls. They can also be used by communities to share information with other communities. For example, locally developed solutions for agricultural problems can be announced and shared with other communities with similar problems and agro-ecological conditions.

Furthermore, linking telecenter facilities with other media can increase the local impact of such centers, exchanging information with rural people who cannot access their services. If local radio stations broadcast information collected on the Internet, for instance, rural women who are unable to use the services of a telecenter may still benefit from the information made available through this electronic channel.

[Later in this module, we will offer a variety of steps toward making participation a reality, but here Balit addresses the special case of women.]

Communication – A Prerequisite For Successful Development

Women play key roles in the development of their communities. If lasting progress is to be achieved, women and men must have equal access to the resources needed for development and to the benefits it produces. There is no simple recipe to ensure successful communication in development efforts or for the advancement of rural women. Nevertheless, from best practices and lessons learned in communication for development over the past decades, the following guiding principles have emerged. [We list these in a form adapted to this module.]

1. If projects and programs for the advancement of rural women are to be effective, the planning phase should include a communication component designed to reflect their perceived needs and special conditions and taking into account women's active participation in traditional communication networks.

2. Listening to Rural Women. Communication efforts should begin with development planners listening to women and carefully considering their perceptions and needs, their knowledge and experience and their culture and traditions. Planners must take into account the reality of rural areas and the changes required to improve the livelihoods of rural women in ways that can be sustained.

3. A Holistic Approach. Communication efforts should cover all the multifaceted aspects of life in rural areas affecting women, including agriculture, the environment, health, sanitation, family planning, education and literacy. A holistic approach should be used to insure that women's concerns are integrated into research and extension programs.

4. Communication programs should be participatory and interactive, and special attention should be given to the communication channels most suited to women.

5. A concerted effort should be made to harness the potential of the new communication technologies for sharing information and knowledge with women. Essential tasks include improving the quantity and accessibility of infrastructure, increasing the relevance of information to the needs of women, and training women in computer skills.

6. The training of women as communication specialists at all levels – from field workers to trainers and planners – is an essential requirement for successful communication efforts carried out by and for women. Training in the production and use of communication tools should be provided to women's organizations and community groups so that they can participate in programs for women and effectively communicate their own messages and concerns.

[End of Balit's section on women. The full FAO document is titled *Voices for Change, Rural Women and Communication*.

6. EXPLORING STRATEGIES TO ENHANCE PARTICIPATION

It is important to put participation in perspective. Experience in the field teaches one quickly that in many social structures, participation does not happen spontaneously; and, when participation becomes a part of the creed of an intervention, its lack of *specificity* can cause confusion if not frustration. For example, in Canada, leaders in community access centers reported that participation was one of their goals but they had not been able to pay attention to it yet.

Here are three ways to approach participation in a telecenter project *where the socio-political climate is supportive*:

1. Bring together the telecenter sponsors, supporters, community opinion leaders, and key telecenter personnel and systematically address the questions raised earlier (in Section 3, Getting Started with a Strategic Approach)

2. Make a commitment to training and have a comprehensive training program regarding the role of information and accessing it through ICTs. This starts with training the community about the significance of participation and the public's role in it. It extends to potential partners in community health, educational, agricultural, and governmental institutions, as well as local "civil society organizations." Obviously a significant effort needs to go into training telecenter staff, an effort that includes a range of skills from basic information needs assessment and information management to facilitating participation – all of which are intricately interconnected in a *system* of skills and attitudes.

3. Build research into startup and on-going operations. (See Module 3 for an extensive review of research methods for needs assessment and evaluation.) In their efforts to get the Internet hooked up and computers operational, often relatively little attention is given to assessing community information needs, including the felt needs of the people and *normative* needs (those seen, for example, by professionals). A continuous research program needs also to monitor on-going telecenter services to the community (and its perceptions about them), and try to measure impact. We have approached a variety of organizations – including e-commerce ones, whose success depends on meeting needs in the marketplace – about developing practical tools for these kinds of research without finding much enthusiasm and even less funding. Clearly, the extent to which there will be enthusiastic and continual participation depends on how telecenters are meeting community needs and the needs of partner organizations such as agricultural cooperatives, women's self-help groups, local government bodies, and small businesses.

6.1 Guidelines for strengthening participation in the telecenter

Based on observations in Africa and North America in particular, Don Richardson of Guelph University makes a strong case for participation as a foundation for sustainability, and identifies some practical lessons that we can apply to telecenters. He says, for example, that to achieve sustainability and success, rural telecommunications projects designed to achieve development goals must begin with the real needs of intended beneficiaries, and that projects that fully involve intended beneficiaries in planning, design and implementation tend to focus less on telecommunication infrastructure and gadgets, and more on basic communication and information applications that meet people's needs. This kind of planning approach, he notes, also yields improvements in the management of telecommunications operations and is directly related to improvement in the revenue received from the users of telecommunications systems.

While he writes about rural telecommunications systems in general, the following lessons provided by Richardson give us guidelines for translating the idea of participation into the reality of your telecenter.

Lesson 1: Start working with community organization leaders who instantly see the benefits of rural telecommunication services. Work with organizational leaders who are pre-disposed to collaborative, open and participatory communication approaches to community development. Do not expend too much time and energy attempting to convince organizational leaders who are

pre-disposed to "turf wars," "empire building," and who demonstrate little regard for public participation processes. Their participation will follow, in due time, as rural telecommunication services gain popularity.

Lesson 2: Real, risk-taking community leadership and advocacy for rural telecommunication systems is not necessarily found within elected bodies, telecommunication operator management and local government bureaucracies where one might normally expect to start looking. We should expect rural telecommunication champions to come from unexpected sectors of local, national and operator leadership.

Lesson 3: Provide many opportunities for women and young people to actively participate and volunteer their time and energy for practical and identifiable tasks that support rural telecommunication systems. Recognize and reward their efforts at every opportunity, and provide mechanisms to ensure that they can participate in key management or advisory roles.

Lesson 4: Provide human resource development support for rural telecommunication project management in the areas of project planning, evaluation, monitoring, facilitation of stakeholder participation, and leadership skills.

Lesson 5: Continuously remind all involved that, at its core, a rural telecommunication service has the dual goals of sustaining itself through revenue generation and supporting rural development.

Lesson 6: Rural telecommunication systems are unique and should be planned and implemented in unique ways, in consultation with rural stakeholders who best understand local contexts. Large, government initiated, top-down telecommunication systems that provide rural telecommunication services as an afterthought have a high failure rate, are generally unsustainable and can cost large amounts of money.

Lesson 7: Build an energetic steering committee to assist in infrastructure deployment and stakeholder engagement. Rural telecommunication systems are ultimately about people, not technology. Build a team of enthusiastic proponents who come from diverse backgrounds. Do not stack a steering committee with "techies," or "urban elites." Actively seek people who know more about rural communities than telecommunication systems.

Lesson 8: Always try to work with people who work with community-minded organizations or community development agencies. Their experience and contacts in the community will help ensure that you will find the resources and support you need. Good organizations with which to begin working include: service clubs, health clinics, churches, educational institutions involved with outreach and continuing education initiatives, libraries and non-governmental organizations involved in economic development. When linked together through improved communication systems, the power of such grassroots organizations can be multiplied by a hundred. At the same time they can use their telecommunication connections to enhance inter-agency collaboration, joint service offerings and joint planning.

Lesson 9: Use local technical and human resource development expertise wherever possible, and provide necessary training and capacity building where the expertise does not currently exist. The ability to access local technical expertise and local training services will significantly enhance sustainability.

Lesson 10: Take sustainability seriously rural telecommunication service must find creative

ways to generate revenue. Advertising, value-added services, and reselling of network services to government bodies and large organizations are some ways to create the revenue needed to keep the network running. It is also important to recognize that it may be more important to address the sustainability of the improved relationships that rural telecommunication systems help establish, as opposed enhancing only the sustainability of the service itself. By encouraging stakeholders to use rural telecommunication systems to enhance relationships, those relationships will provide the foundations for the sustainability of the system.

Lesson 11: Community ownership, management and involvement is important. Centralized telecommunication operators would be wise to decentralize rural service and enable the resale or franchise of service areas to local operators, cooperatives or municipal organizations. The more local the operator, the more likely the system will be responsive to user needs and facilitate sustainable revenues.

Lesson 12: Participatory community management will help a network thrive. Community members need mechanisms for influencing network management, system design, and the development of creative and beneficial applications. Local advisory councils can provide a great deal of support and advice to enable local operators to provide beneficial and profitable services.

Lesson 13: Provide opportunities for students and young people to learn about the technology and the community development potential of rural telecommunication systems. This too will enhance sustainability and the ability of the rural service to grow to meet needs, while creating new employment opportunities for young people, especially young people living in rural areas.

Lesson 14: Strategic marketing brings higher revenues, better service and helps reach rural development objectives. Operators that make an effort to understand specific clients and market services that meet their needs will be rewarded with profits.

Lesson 15: Train volunteers to train new users. Those of us who are used to using telephones may think that using a telephone requires no training. On the contrary, rural people who have had a few chances to use a telephone, or a more sophisticated telecommunication application, will very likely require an orientation period to become comfortable with the tool. Community volunteers can assist in training and orientating those who are least comfortable with the tools.

Lesson 16: Share resources, ideas and lessons learned with other rural telecommunication operators, advocates and supporters. Sharing lessons learned will help other rural telecommunication initiatives to find their feet faster.

Lesson 17: Enlist the support of "respectable wired elders. " Within many nations, regions and organizations, there often exist telecommunication enthusiasts with influence or decision-making authority who, by virtue of age, wisdom and established credibility can lend significant support to specific development initiatives. These are the "respectable wired elders," because, unlike many of their younger peers, their voices and visions can capture the imaginations of "unwired" politicians, funding agency bureaucrats and private sector benefactors. They are often an untapped resource, but their support can add a fantastic boost to a project.

Lesson 18: Enlist the support of organizations with existing outreach networks and presence in rural communities. These organizations might include agricultural extension services, rural health services, rural and agricultural cooperatives and credit banks, farmers' organizations rural library systems, and rural women's organizations and rural youth organizations.

Lesson 19: Collaborate with radio, newspapers, and television services, both locally and nationally in order to build momentum and support for rural telecommunication initiatives and rural stakeholder awareness and engagement.

Lesson 20: Recognize that telecommunication policies seldom contain the elements that actively and effectively enable the creative conditions, ownership models, interconnection agreements, and pricing arrangements that foster rural telecommunication services. Stakeholder engagement is one strategy to help change this if stakeholders can assume policy advocacy roles.

[These lessons were drawn from Don Richard's article "Rural Telecommunication Services and Stakeholder Participation: Bridging the Gap Between Telecommunications Experts and Communication for Development Practitioners" in Richard, D. and Paisley, L. (eds), *The First Mile of Connectivity*, FAO, Rome, 1998, pp. 14-35.]

7. SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTIVITIES

Now that participation has been defined, its importance has been emphasized, and elements of its success have been outlined, how can participation be implemented? This section offers suggested activities a telecenter manager can do in order to transform the fuzzy concept of participation into action.

7.1 Establish a steering committee.
One of the first steps in establishing a telecenter is to form a steering committee consisting of members of the community. (See Module 4 for more details on how to organize your steering committee.) The steering committee can serve as the governing body or as an advisory committee. In order to establish this group of stakeholders, a telecenter manager needs to identify the important population segments of the community. These might include:

- individuals (local community members, tourists and regular transients, such as truck drivers, traveling salespersons, etc.
- small businesses
- schools
- youth and youth groups
- disabled people
- farmers
- women's groups
- religious organizations
- clinics, hospitals, and healthcare workers
- police
- civic organizations including cooperatives
- political parties
- government departments
- sports club

After identifying the sectors, you need to negotiate with those groups to provide a representative who will become involved in telecenter activities.

The roles of these committees will vary depending on the community and the culture of participation that exists. Among the possible roles are:

- set the directions, guidelines and strategies for the telecenter
- help secure funding and other resources for the telecenter
- seek new directions for the telecenters, where possible
- develop policies and procedures relating to membership, usage, data collection, financial management, other operations
- provide linkages to community organizations
- mobilize volunteers for regular and occasional telecenter operations and activities
- advise the telecenter staff on planning

You can add to this list. It is important that there be a clear understanding of what the roles of the members will be and what their term of commitment is.

7.2 Map out the community's assets.

The idea of asset-based mapping comes from the belief that many in the community have talents or resources to share with others, and opportunities can be created where these can benefit the telecenter. We have seen situations, for example, where retired persons with a little computer experience have volunteered to provide training in computer skills for telecenter users. Special talents are often untapped because people may not realize the talents they have are special, unique, and valuable to others, or they may never have been asked to share their skills.

Community asset mapping includes everyone; it encourages conversation and creates an environment where people can become acquainted, relationships can grow and people become interested and motivated to support each other. Building this "skills and talent" registry can done early in a telecenter's life, even before specific needs are identified.

7.3 Identify local volunteers.

Encouraging community members to volunteer at the telecenter is an excellent way to promote participation, and to establish community relationships. Volunteers could be used in many of the telecenter operations, from fundraising to running training sessions or marketing. f desirable incentives were offered (such as free Internet sessions, discounts on courses, etc.), many community members probably would provide their services for a few hours per week. Volunteers are helpful resources for sustainability, not only because of the cost efficiency, but because of their community relations and loyal enthusiasm.

7.4 Encourage activities that may not be technologically-oriented.

In order for a telecenter to truly become enmeshed into a community it can step outside of the confines of offering only technology services. The telecenter should attempt to become an *information* center, not just a technology center. By taking on this broader, more encompassing position, the telecenter will open up the possibility for other activities. For example, in Western Australia, a small rural community lost its bank. Because the telecenter was recognized for its emphasis on meeting community needs, it was proposed as the location for a new bank. In such cases telecenters have earned a place in the fabric of the community. In other places, telecenters offer child day care camps, space for local self-help groups to gather (for example, farmers sharing crop knowledge, women sharing child care tips, etc.). In this way, participation in a telecenter comes naturally with a community's daily activities.

7.5 Develop special arrangements for women.

Although you cannot change cultural factors that interfere with women's access to the telecenter, you can make an effort to make it easier for them to use your resources. For example, some telecenters have been successful in having special days, or particular hours of a day reserved for women. You can have women volunteers on duty at the telecenter. Try having programs at the telecenter that are designed for husbands and wives. Organize some telecenter-related related activities at places where women can comfortably gather, such as a household or a school. And make an effort to work with women's organizations as partners in your telecenter management and operations.

Participation in Hungarian Telecottages

Underlying the success of Hungary's telecottage movement has been the explicit emphasis on the active participation of local level non-government organizations and the openness of telecottages to all the community. Participation is built into the system. For example, the Telecottage Association, a national non-governmental organization that supports telecottages, has set standards that organizations wishing to use the name "telecottage" must meet. This is called "The Telecottage Minimum." The first of its five criteria is the imperative that telecottages must operate under community oversight. Another point is that telecottages cannot serve only certain social groups, strata, clubs or organizations. They must be accessible to everyone within the community and outsiders alike.

When telecottages began in the mid-1990s using government administered foreign assistance, the emphasis was on being predominantly a community-level civic initiative (as compared to a national program), and applications required that the owner be a local NGO that could demonstrate support from the local government or private organizations.

The Hungarian telecottage movement saw about 200 telecottages in operation by the end of 2000 and by 2005, about 500 to 800 telecottages will blanket the country. The Hungarian model, with its formula of independent community ownership and private and public sector collaboration, is providing a model for other eastern European countries to heed in their transitions to democratic participatory government.

Based on Bihari and Jókay, *Telecottages in Hungary, The Experience and the Opportunities*.

8. SUMMARY

A telecenter that encourages optimal participation creates community interest. When individuals become involved in the planning and programming stages of the telecenter it no longer remains a foreign entity in the community. Participation engenders feelings of individual and community ownership. If the community is involved in the telecenter through participation in the planning and development stages, the telecenter will become integrated in their daily existence and therefore be of interest to them.

Also, participation helps to ensure that the technologies and services offered in the telecenter are salient to the community. The telecenter will most likely be unable to provide *everything* the community desires because of resource constraints; however, this is precisely why community participation is important. Decisions can be made that reflect the interests of the telecenter constituency. The degree of relevance of technologies and services is directly related to the degree to which the interests of diverse community members are heard and heeded.

One final caution. Participation is not always an accepted practice. We recall having approached farmers in a Central American country to get their participation in deciding what kind of programs should be broadcast on a new radio station. When we asked them what programs they wanted, one answered: "We're not used to be asked this kind of question. Come back in two days and we'll try to have an answer." In another case, local people who actively promoted participation in community affairs were perceived as challenging the people in power. Some of those urging participation disappeared.

You may find that the people and their leaders will need orientation and training in participation.

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