



Comments to the Common Service Centres guidelines version 2.4 by Mission 2007 Partners

Overall generic points

1. The Mission 2007 partners appreciate the Department of Information Technology (DIT) for their ambitious plan of establishing knowledge centres in 100,000 Indian villages. The partners have carefully gone through the guidelines in order to assist the DIT in shaping up the Common Service Centres (CSC) guidelines to be a set of rules for more inclusive and pro-poor programme of the government.
2. The guidelines give an impression that the programme precludes all those who have not dealt with the info-kiosks business yet. This impression will be seen as undermining the decades of experience that the civil society and community based organisations possess in empowering the rural communities. It is therefore essential to make the document read 'inclusive'.
3. The document could discuss the role of rural communities apart from being the purchasers of the CSC services. There is a greater understanding within the community-centric agents that the people are no longer mere 'recipients' of services and 'merely' a market opportunity. The document lays less emphasis on determining the needs of the rural communities, but enlists an impressive list of services to be offered.
4. An attempt can be made to internalise a gender sensitive outlook in the programme— for making it truly accessible to women. A scheme of this magnitude and nature allows for the acceleration of the Millennium Development Goals.

5. The document presumes that the Service Centre Agency (SCAs) and the State Implementation Agencies have the capacity to roll out this hugely important CSC programme. But it is important to recognise that there are as yet unfulfilled capacity needs at all levels. Similarly, efforts have to be undertaken to articulate the capacity needs of the Village Level Entrepreneurs (VLEs) without presuming that the SCAs will automatically address the needs. The experiences of Mission 2007 partners in social marketing/franchising would be of help.
 6. The document could make it explicit if the state level implementation agency would have representatives from the private sector and civil society actors for the implementation and monitoring of the CSC programme
 7. The document could clearly spell out the overall objectives of the programme. It appears that the programme is designed to create SCAs as business-viable institutions rather than providing eGovernance services to people and ensuring people's participation in a transparent and more accountable governance
 8. The document should also attempt to discuss alternatives to village level entrepreneurs for rolling out the CSCs. The Mission 2007 acknowledges several models for rolling out village knowledge centres, including the commercial and semi-commercial models. The DIT scheme appears to be favouring solely the entrepreneurship model which may not work out to be the best option in several parts of the country, especially where ultra-poor communities live.
 9. The CSC guidelines do not stipulate synergising the DIT efforts with Mission 2007 as yet. The two need to be entwined. This convergence is necessary keeping in mind the stature of the village knowledge centre movement. It is desirable that there is an ongoing dialogue with Mission 2007 partners for optimising the outcomes of the DIT programme
 10. The basic objectives of the SCAs are to serve the people and to ensure the GoI objectives of serving its rural citizens rather than looking at the NeGP as a revenue generation model. It is useful to debate why the SCAs should not be not-for profit organisations
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Comments to the paper

1. The background section provides an opportunity to clearly set out the objectives of the CSC programme. It is unclear from the text if the CSCs are small scale entrepreneurship outlets or institutions that aim to provide the much desired socio-political and economic empowerment of people at the grassroots. The background section could link up with the NeGP which is the overall programme that supports the CSCs, and also discuss how the pace of SWAN implementation would impact the CSC programme
2. The programme does not discuss any risk factors in the CSC programme – technical, financial or human-centred. The document gives an impression as though all the services enlisted in the annexure are already available. While most of the services are yet to be developed, the document leaves one with little information as to how the back-end processes will be strengthened; and the enlisted services will be developed
3. It may be helpful to provide a reference in the document to the proposed Public Tele-Info Centres to be deployed using the USO Funds which currently stands at a few hundred million USD. The document may also include (or provide references to) the guidelines to be prepared under the NABARD ICT-SHGs programme rolled out during the same period in ten states in India.
4. There is clearly a need to debate whether the VLE concept is acceptable to the people who would like to participate in the eGovernance programme of the government. Consultations with a select list of people do not reflect the ethos of the present government, which has conducted effective consultations with the stakeholders earlier. At the outset, the Mission partners would like the government to debate this issue with the key stakeholders – especially the community based organisations and the NVA Fellows on the scheme before recommending a formula for implementation. The recommendations that emerged at the Mission 2007 NVA Fellows’ consultative meeting clearly reveal that the views of the NVA fellows differ from the formula proposed by the DIT for the CSCs.

5. In addition to the consultations held with organisations with a limited experiences in running few info-kiosks, the DIT may consider seeking advice from organisations that are deep-rooted in rural development, social mobilisation, local governance institutions, including the Panchayati Raj Institutons (PRIs) and Community-based Organisations (CBOs) supported by several NGOs and professional organisations in India before finalising the implementation structure. A number of well reputed NGOs and Mission 2007 partners would be in a position to advise the government officials responsible for the roll out of the CSC structure.
6. The national IT plan is a national infrastructure programme which leads to 'development in all spheres'. The CSC scheme is planned and spelt out as a single-minded village level entrepreneurship concept. True development is possible only if the government programmes are human centred, especially women-centred. It is important to recognise the CSC as a tool for information empowerment and effective eGovernance as much as an entrepreneurship development programme.
7. It is appreciated that the DIT held a consultation with the Mission 2007 partners, but it is important to engage with them in the design, planning and implementation of CSCs. Else, the one-off consultation will be treated as a consultation only in name. Professor MS Swaminathan and the key drivers of Mission 2007 can make effective contributions to the Village Knowledge Centre (VKC) movement in this country. As deliberated upon by the President of India and a number of dignitaries including the Hon'ble Minister for IT, the Mission 2007 objectives are inclusive of all models, more so of the community-led, community-centric and community-controlled model. The CSC guidelines if implemented as they currently stand would defeat the very purpose, objectives and ethos of Mission 2007, deliberated upon for the past several months and the VKC movement that began in 1992 under the auspices of M S Swaminathan Research Foundation.
8. The selection criteria for SCA over-emphasise 'prior experience' of providing rural ICT services. Only a limited number of entrepreneurs possess the same and such stringent criterion might keep some very competent service providers out of the loop. Acquiring the requisite level of ICT skills, especially for an enterprise like SCA

should be a simple undertaking. It is therefore desirable to ensure that all the barriers to entry are removed. Some civil society organisations like SEWA, Development Alternatives, and NCHSE in Bhopal have established competencies, including knowledge of and relationship with rural communities, which are in fact more urgently required to build effective CSCs.

9. A national level implementation agency could be identified for the implementation of the CSC programme, with support from the Mission 2007 partners. The implementation structure should be more cautious in engendering the implementation process. Clearly, there is a need for implementing the programme that lays emphasis on gender parity.
10. The implementation structure should spell out a strong monitoring mechanism for the CSC programme. It would be advisable for this monitoring agency to have a stronger civil society base as a way to ensure expenditure related accountability and effectiveness.
11. The document does not include any impressions about the geographical ‘coverage’ of the programme other than generic calculations of how many centres are likely to be established.
12. The economic viability and the sustainability of the CSC programme are very important. It is therefore necessary to make the programme socially, culturally and locally sustainable and economically viable. This can be made possible in a number of ways. One such idea would be graduating the Self Help Groups to Sustainable Self Help Groups (SSHGs) with necessary ICT-enabled forward and backward linkages. Owing to the inherent similarities of the two programmes, it may be useful for the DIT to refer to the village knowledge centre toolkit and recommendations prepared by Mission 2007 partners for implementing the Mission 2007 objectives.