

THE COMPLEXITIES OF COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN ICT FOR DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS: THE CASE OF “OUR VOICES”

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Abstract

Community participation is often suggested as a means to a relevant, contextual rural information system (such as a telecentre). Yet, the ICT for development field has much to learn from development literature on the complexities of community participation. We first review the critical literature on participation in development and then analyze our case against this. Findings from our ethnographic study on a village community radio and IT project in south India show that even though the project is contextual (for example, it disseminates local information in an audio rather than written format) and participatory (for example, it conducted a Participatory Rural Appraisal and has a management committee drawn from the community), it faces a number of challenges – participation is a top-down concept and the “insiders” learn what the “outsiders” want to hear, rather than vice versa as Chambers hoped for in his work on participation. Finally, even though the villagers are interested, they find a lack of time to participate. The research concludes that community participation in rural information systems projects is far more complex and contradictory than “ICT for development” implementers have described so far.

Keywords: participation, ICT for development, rural information systems, telecentres, community radio

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1. INTRODUCTION

The “ICT for development” rhetoric continues in India – consider for example the India Telecentre Forum, held in New Delhi in August 2006, which attracted hundreds of policy-makers, donors and technical experts. Or the Government of India’s Mission 2007, which aims to have telecentres (or what are called Common Service Centres) in 600,000 villages by 2007 - a mere two months away at the time of writing (Mission 2007, n. d.). Key words that crop up in this rhetoric include “context”, “needs-based”, “sustainability” and “community participation”. Yet, what is meant by being contextual, answering the community’s needs, or being participatory? Literature on rural IS initiatives emphasizes these terms, but does not deconstruct what these mean (Caspary and O’Connor, 2003; Roman and Colle, 2002; Colle, 2005; Proenza, 2001; Whyte, 2000; Gómez et al, 1999). And how accurate is it to say that a participatory initiative will lead to sustainability? We look at a case study of Our Voices, a telecentre – in this case a community radio and IT centre - in a south Indian village. Our Voices aims to be strongly participatory – it emphasizes information more than technology through the use of community radio, it involves the local community (particularly women) in the running of the centre and aims to respond to their needs. Yet each of these faces challenges and contradictions. This paper explores these challenges, thereby deconstructing the rhetoric of participation. We first review the emphasis on community participation in ICT for development literature. In Section 3 we trace the roots of participation in development. Section 4 introduces the ethnographic method used here and tells the story of Our Voices. Section 5 analyzes Our Voices against the main challenges to participation as outlined in the development literature and Section 6 concludes.

2. PARTICIPATION IN RURAL INFORMATION SYSTEMS PROJECTS

At the height of the “ICT for development” wave, the World Bank was estimated to have funded between \$1 to \$2 billion on “ICT for development” projects, while InfoDev (the Information for Development programme hosted by the World Bank) had a budget of \$10 to \$15 million per year (Wakelin and Shadrach, 2001). It was felt that access to information (be it health, agriculture, education or government schemes) would at some level lead to individuals being able to act on that information and empowering themselves (Heeks, 1999). Now, however, major questions are being asked about the sustainability and impact of such projects. Kuriyan et al (2006) discover that the Akshaya kiosks in Kerala find it difficult to be both financially and socially sustainable. In their two year study of 300 rural telecentres across India, Kiri and Menon (2006) find that in order to be sustainable, most centres are run like cyber-cafes, gaming booths or computer education centres. Most rural telecentres try to finance themselves by adding services, such as photocopying, data entry, desktop publishing, digital photography and printing (Kiri and Menon, 2006; Rangaswamy, 2006). Kiri and Menon (2006) conclude that “in terms of rural ICT bridging the digital divide, most services provided by rural kiosks today do not address the needs of the illiterate mother-to-be or the retired government clerk, trying to find out why he has not achieved his monthly pension amount” (Kiri and Menon, 2006, p. 15).

One way to combat the technological determinism of these projects is to have more of a focus on information and less on technology. For example, Our Voices in south India uses a mixture of information downloaded from the internet as well as programmes made by local people which is then broadcast to a catchments of around 40 villages, through a combination of loudspeakers, tapes and radio played through a TV channel. Kothmale Community Radio in Sri Lanka combines radio and the internet – broadcasters browse the internet daily, supplying listeners with information they need, with the help of studio guests, for example doctors in the case of health information (Pringle and David, 2002). Similar initiatives include Uva Community Multimedia Network in Sri Lanka, Tansen Community Media Centre in Nepal, and Jakar Community Media Centre in Bhutan (Slater and Tacchi, 2004)¹.

The final suggestion for making rural information systems projects relevant is to invite community participation (Caspary and O'Connor, 2003; Roman and Colle, 2002; Colle, 2005; Proenza, 2001; Whyte, 2000; Gómez et al, 1999). Roman and Colle (2002) call for a “conscientious attention to participation” (p. 12) because it “conveys a sense of community ownership; it provides indigenous wisdom; it helps reflect community values and needs; it provides important resources, such as volunteers or technical expertise, at a favourable cost” (p. 13) (favourable to whom?). Kanungo (2004) states that collective ownership of a telecentre enables access to everyone regardless of social status. He writes of the MSSRF Village Knowledge Project in Pondicherry that project staff lived in the setting in order to understand the issues. “Such actions perform the function of keeping the village folk engaged, keeping stakeholders engaged, continually sounding out different individuals so as to regenerate the idea and continually seek affirmation amongst the participants” (Kanungo, 2004, p. 417-8). In a similar vein, Gómez et al (1999) call for research on “community involvement, participation and use” (p. 8) and Whyte (2000) emphasizes the need for community participation in evaluation. Yet the literature does not explain further what participation constitutes and how it can be undertaken. There is a need to deconstruct several elements of these statements – is there such a thing as a community? Is participation a free and fair process – indeed, what does it involve? In order to deconstruct this myth, we first critically assess how the notion of participation has arisen in development.

3. THE EVOLUTION OF PARTICIPATION IN DEVELOPMENT

“Participation” and its companion concepts “sustainability” and “empowerment” are at the centre of contemporary development discourse (Michener, 1998). White (1996) writes that no respectable project can be funded without provision for participation, while Gardner and Lewis (1996) state that participation “has now become so ever-present in development jargon as to be often virtually without meaning” (1996, p. 111). Where has this concern for participation arisen from?

It may be argued that participation as a concept may be as old as democracy itself. However, in development, it began emerging in the 1960-70s in the ideas of Paulo Freire (1972), Fals Borda (1969; 1972) and Rahman (1995). Freire argues that “development can only be achieved when humans are ‘beings for themselves’, when they possess their own decision-making powers, free of oppressive and dehumanizing circumstances; it is the ‘struggle to be more fully human’” (Freire,

¹ It must be noted, however, that this is a fast-moving field and it is difficult to know what stage these projects are at now.

1972, p. 29). Chambers brought participation into mainstream development by emphasizing Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) (1993, 1994, 1997). PRA includes participatory mapping and modelling (for example asking village communities to map their environment, asking them how they perceive their own situations such as health, education, poverty and well-being, and involving them in producing seasonal calendars to understand their needs better). Other methods include interviews and focus groups, with the difference being that these are conducted by “insiders” rather than outsiders (Chambers, 1997). For Chambers, participation is where “the positivist, reductionist, mechanistic, standardized-package, top-down models and development blueprints are rejected, and in which multiple, local, and individual realities are recognized, accepted, enhanced and celebrated” (1997, p. 188).

However, it is argued that this emancipatory nature was somewhat hijacked into supporting development projects, where participation, rather than the end in itself, became a means to an end (i.e. the development project) (Hickey and Mohan, 2004; Leal and Opp, 2005). From the 1990s to the current era, Hickey and Mohan find that a more institutional approach to participation has appeared, with initiatives such as participatory budgeting and participatory poverty assessments. It is argued that such “planner-centred” participation is more about an efficient mechanism for delivering a development project and reducing cost, rather than a genuine understanding of a community’s needs (Mosse, 2001; Nelson and Wright, 1995).

Indeed, throughout the development literature, it is difficult to find a clear definition of what “participation” actually is. For example, the World Bank defines participation as “a process by which people, especially disadvantaged people, influence decisions that affect them” (World Bank, 1992, p. 177). It states “as participation increases, vital information not in the public domain becomes available and the voices of interested parties can help make governments more accountable; both in turn enhance performance” (World Bank, 1994, p. 3). However, it still doesn’t define *how* that participation will actually take place.

4. THE CHALLENGES OF PARTICIPATION

4.1. A top-down concept

One criticism of participation is that it can be a top-down notion imposed by the organization implementing the project (Michener, 1998; White, 1986). An NGO respondent in southern India commented “*participation is just a box we tick. We look for gender, ICT for development, participation – they are just the buzz words to get funding*”. Lohmann (1994) critiques an allegedly participatory World Bank Forest Management programme in an area of Thailand. He writes “I have in front of me hundreds of pages of a Pre-Investment Study for ... the Conservation Forest Area Protection, Management and Development Project ...” (p. 58). The study calls for the eviction of the Karen people living in the area, but the document has not been translated in Thai or Karen, although local NGOs have requested at least Thai translations. The participatory project has “much less communicated to, much less discussed with, much less agreed to by the local Karen people in the sanctuary to be affected” (p. 58). Hildyard et al (2001) provide an example of a participatory project in south India, where village women were given World Bank loans to buy a dairy cow on the condition that the women attended a dairy management course. However 90% of the women did not use the money for cows. When questioned by the staff, the women showed a relative or friend’s cow to prove they had bought one. In answer to the World Bank’s questions, the women

answered “you did not ask us if we wanted dairy animals” or “I would rather have a loan to start a tea business” (CIIR, 1995 cited in Hildyard et al, 2001).

Similarly, Michener (1998) analyzes a Save the Children Fund education programme in Burkina Faso. It is intended to be participatory, but the SCF schools are modeled after an experimental SCF project in Mali, which is adopted from one developed in Bangladesh (i.e. the project wants people to be involved in their own “upliftment”, but takes a blueprint devised in another context). The plan is to form a school management committee in the villages where schools have been implemented, but Michener finds that in two out of three of the villages, the committee was not functional. Cleaver and Kaare (1998) tell a similar story of Zimbabwean aid committees formed to fulfill donor needs, but which never resolved issues (cited in Cleaver, 2001). For Cleaver, this emphasis of institutions in participation is ironic, as the concept was originally meant to overcome the shortfalls of state bureaucracies (Cleaver, 2001). In all these examples, one asks – is community participation not required in the concept stage, but only advocated in the implementation of development projects? And therefore, who defines what the initial community needs are?

4.2. Co-optation

Michener (1998) argues that “unlike policy makers who have the luxury of expounding participatory rhetoric, field staff are faced with the realities of project implementation” (p. 2110). She cites definitions of participatory development given by SCF field agents in Burkina Faso - that the community takes responsibility for the local materials and teachers’ salaries, that “it must engage itself in all processes of development and play an important role in decision making at every level”, that “contribution can be physical or financial” and participation is “implicating the population and instilling in them a sense of responsibility” (cited in Michener, 1998, p. 2110). For Michener (1998), this kind of participation is more to do with administrative task-sharing and less to do with empowerment.

On the other hand, the intended “participants” might feel they are participating, but in different ways to those anticipated by development agencies. For example, in Michener’s analysis (1998), parents of school children felt they were contributing by paying school fees, giving the child breakfast and releasing the girls from household duties. They did not feel school management was their responsibility and saw the SCF field staff in a paternalistic and supervisory role, although the project implementers wanted them to participate. Possibly after years of development interventions, the villagers did not see themselves as part of the decision-making. For Dichter, this is because “when asked what it is they need, they will feed back what they have in effect been taught to need” (Dichter, 1989, p. 132). Mosse (2001) argues that instead of outsiders listening and learning according to Chambers (1997), it is the “insiders” who learn what the outsiders want to hear – the “needs” become socially constructed and the dominant interests become community interests. Writing about a forest management programme in western India, he notes how villagers put forward a preference for eucalyptus even though it was not a tree they had experience of. The NGO realizes that this is because the State Forest Department, which was sponsoring the NGO programme was favouring eucalyptus, so the villagers felt it was a low-risk strategy to ask for something they were likely to get.

4.3. Lack of resources

Another challenge to participation is that even if a community does want to participate in a development project, they may simply lack the skills, resources or time (Brett, 2003; Moser, 1993 cited in Michener 1998). Dichter (1989) argues that PRA has “romantic notions of communal altruism” (p. 130), such as the emphasis on volunteers or meetings – which mean time away from work or household duties at no or minimal pay, with no guarantee of a positive outcome. White (1996) illustrates the dilemma of Bangladeshi NGO workers asked to participate in a project meeting – if they don’t go, they will be told they are not interested in their peoples’ development. If they do go, they have no guarantee that their voices will be heard, and they will have wasted valuable time.

On the other hand, even if a community is participatory, any achievements may simply be curtailed by the community’s context. Cleaver (1996) provides an example of Sando village in Zimbabwe which had problems gaining access to water. The villagers had built their own school, established income-generating clubs and were in every sense creative and resilient. Yet they could not get their borehole to function or ensure other water supplies because of their location deep in the forest, with a water table more 100m below the ground, and with no resources to influence the local politicians. The villagers established the Windmill Fund to purchase a windmill pump and set up a system of collection of money from households but were unable to raise enough money. Several years after initiating the fund, they were still forced to travel 10km to use a borehole (Cleaver, 1996, cited in Cleaver 2001).

We now look at how these challenges of participation are reflected in *Our Voices*.

5. EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATIONS

5.1. Ethnographic research

This research takes an ethnographic approach and forms part of larger doctoral research on participative processes in rural information systems. Ethnography involves much more time (Myers, 1999) and observation and immersion into the life of those studied (Lewis, 1985; Agar, 1986; Atkinson and Hammersley, 1995; Hammersley, 1992) than a case study method. It asks “what is life like for this group of people” (Carspecken, 1996) and is preferable where the problem is under-researched, and the situation is complex (LeCompte and Schensul, 1999; Miles and Huberman, 1994). These descriptions do seem to apply to this research – the relatively new and complex phenomenon of implementing a rural information system in India. Furthermore, an ethnographic perspective allows one to go to “where the action is” (Grills, 1998) and to flush out hidden agenda, disagreements and personal issues – again critical when considering the issue of participation, as simple interviews would not obtain the same results. Reading ethnographic research in IS (e.g. Bentley et al (1992) on the work of air traffic controllers; Trauth (2000) on Ireland’s information economy; Orlikoswki (1993) on CASE) also made this approach appealing. Ethnographic research is not without its limitations – chiefly the amount of time required to observe, analyze and write up (Myers, 1999) and the critique that it lacks analytic generalizability. However, Myers (1999) argues that just as it is possible to generalize from one case to theory, one can generalize from one ethnography to theory. In order to undertake ethnographic research, six

months were spent researching Our Voices. Part of the week was spent living in a neighbouring village (where the only accommodation was available) and the remainder in the state capital writing up notes. Over 200 people were interviewed and observed and major festivals and events were attended in the village. The most severe limitation however, was inability to speak the local language, which necessitated an interpreter at all times, except towards the end of the stay when proficiency in the language was greater, and when speaking in Hindi/Urdu to the Muslim community in the village.

5.2. Our Voices

Our Voices is a community radio and telecentre (in this case, a room with four computers and a printer), which is part of the Arivu Resource Centre in the village of Bhairavi (population 3000)². For the purposes of this discussion, we will focus only on the community radio aspect of the telecentre. Bhairavi is in a south Indian state, around 100 km north-west from the state capital. Our Voices was started in 1999 by Jaan (an NGO focusing on rural development in south Indian states and operating in the area since 1984) and Maatu (a media advocacy NGO). Both NGOs are headquartered in the state capital. Our Voices was given financial support by an international development donor in 2001 under its ICT Innovations for Poverty Reduction initiative (see UNESCO, n. d. ; Slater and Tacchi, 2004). At the same time, in 2001, “the need for a community based management structure was identified” (UNESCO, n. d.). In 2002, the IT room was set up, with equipment provided by the donor. Donor funding ended in 2004 and Our Voices became a joint initiative between Jaan and Maatu. In 2005, Our Voices became incorporated into Jaan. Currently (November 2006), the entire project is called Arivu Resource Centre and functions as the information wing of the Jaan’s activities in the area. Maatu provides the technical support but the Maatu manager who used to live in the village has now moved back to the state capital.

The centre comprises three rooms – a resource centre downstairs used as a meeting area and office, and a recording studio for the community radio and IT room upstairs. The centre has several aims. Firstly, the local dialect is a mix of three languages – that of the state, and of the two neighbouring states, as the district is near the border. A PRA conducted by the two NGOs involved in 1999 showed that villagers were not getting “relevant information” (as defined by Maatu) in this dialect. The PRA found “the community wanted locally relevant information on crops, market prices, and health (particularly women’s health)” (UNESCO, n. d.). The title, “Our Voices”, implies ownership and self-representation. Programme information is contextual, because, according to UNESCO “the villages of India are reduced to being hapless consumers of media that is irrelevant to them”. The nearest All India Radio station was broadcasting from the state capital, disseminating “city-based” information in the mainstream state language. The concepts of “relevant” and “city-based” information will be discussed later. The project implementers state that “by providing information about employment, better farming techniques and health we hoped for new sustainable job opportunities, improved farming knowledge and healthier life” (UNESCO, n. d.).

Our Voices aimed to broadcast daily, from 7pm – 8.30pm, as most people are at home at this time and power is available. The term “broadcast” is misleading, as community radio broadcasting on radio frequencies is currently illegal in India. The station therefore broadcasts in four different ways – as an audio channel on cable TV, through a radio set attached to the cable output, through

² All names have been changed, including those of people, the NGOs and villages.

loudspeakers, and on tapes played at self-help group meetings. Jingles and programmes are recorded by children and local people. Most programmes are in the form of plays, interspersed with public service announcements (e.g. to boil water before drinking). Programme topics include the medicinal value of local plants; road governance; sanitation and women's health. The table in the Appendix illustrates the weekly content for Our Voices.

Arivu Resource Centre (including Our Voices) is managed by a management committee, comprising 12 self-help group (SHG) leaders from Bhairavi and the surrounding villages. In total, the SHGs represent 230 women and 25 men. The management committee decides what topics are of interest for the radio and who to interview. Members of the community are also invited to make programmes and volunteer at the station.

However, Our Voices now faces several challenges. The radio set medium had been phased out soon after implementation (one of the reasons given was that the villagers started taking the radios out to their fields and listened to FM radio instead of Our Voices). During the research conducted between August 2006 – February 2007, one set of loudspeakers had been disconnected allegedly by villagers fed up of hearing the radio. The village cable TV operator had been taken over by the town cable operator who could not carry the channel because of technical difficulties (although possibly more because he did not make a profit on the station). Instead, the village now receives 80 cable TV channels.

6. THE CHALLENGES OF PARTICIPATION IN OUR VOICES

6.1. A top-down concept?

According to project documents, Our Voices intended to be a participatory project. But what does this really mean? Firstly, as Cleaver (2001) comments, it is ironic that institutions have been put into place to enable participation. To serve on Our Voices's management committee – to participate in the running of the station – one has to be the head of a self-help group (SHG). In the words of the Resource Centre Manager *“it is not every group, but only good groups ... means you behave well, keep good books”*. Further research needs to ascertain what is meant by “good groups” and how these are selected. Instead of the “outsiders listening and learning” therefore (Chambers, 1997), governance structures have been imposed on the management of Our Voices. Establishing governance structures in itself is not an issue, but does it mean that these structures exclude other members of the community? What is the interaction between the management committee and the rest of the village? In an interview with the Co-operative Bank Manager, we were told *“my wife had some ideas for programmes. She went to the station. But they told her she had to belong to a SHG. Our Voices is a ‘group’, ‘group’ thing.”* [Interview in August 2006, translated from local language].

Further, the very concept of what is “relevant information” for the community (as defined by UNESCO above) is interesting. Ramesh, the previous Maatu project manager commented:

The thing is, the [local language] channels, which are based out of [the state capital], they're all entertainment based, and they're all copying the STAR network, basically copying the same pattern, started off with soap operas, religious kind of episodic programmes, long drawn out like villagers like, sensational crime reporting, news, but not really locally relevant, but entertaining all the same. And they play a lot of movies, so what happens on the field is, the guys, it's largely an agrarian community, the farmer, comes back from the field at 7pm when it's dark, switches on the TV, sees a movie's just starting, obviously just wants to relax and see the movie. At the same time, we might be giving a programme about an agricultural scheme, which the government might have for him, which might significantly increase his yield, but he's not interested in listening to it, because it's boring. You know, he wants to watch the movie. That's the competition we've got, the challenge we have to overcome. [Interview with Ramesh, August 2006].

Therefore, despite the station's aim to be contextual because the other stations broadcast irrelevant, "city-based information", it is exactly the latter that the potential audience is interested in. Many of those interviewed said they did not listen to Our Voices *because* it was not mainstream entertainment and because the evening timings conflicted with their favourite soap operas.

Ramesh makes another contradictory statement:

First few months, took a lot of energy and effort co-ordinating the project. These guys, you have to keep telling them that programming should be in a certain direction. Because it's really development, development, development. We can either approach community radio as what the community wants. If you make it that way, it will be music only. But at [the donor agency] we can't justify all this equipment to play music all day. There has to be a development angle. So you kind of need to keep pushing programming in a certain direction [Interview with Ramesh in December 2004]

And goes on to state the advantages of the loudspeaker broadcast:

With loudspeakers it's an entirely different story, because there is no other media we have to compete with. Unlike the TV, there's no control from the viewer, he can't switch off the loudspeaker, it's there, blaring in your face [Interview with Ramesh in August 2006].

It is interesting, therefore, that the project is intended to be participatory, but resorts to using a media where the listener has no control.

Further, a process of negotiation and establishing a hierarchy is clearly in place:

Initially at least it was like that, they [the community] would only ask for songs from the loudspeakers, and then we said, see, don't you want to know if the government is going to help you clean up your roads? And some of them said yes, and some of them said no, no first you play the song. And then we started dictating things a bit. We said, you come and participate in programmes like road governance and all, and then we'll play songs ... So now, it's a little better. They don't request only songs [Interview with Ramesh in August 2006].

At the same time, Ramesh emphasizes the contextual nature of the community radio:

The cool thing about it is, I didn't decide that I'm going to do an agricultural programme. The guys who decides are Nagarjuna and Vanita, who are from that village. Now Nagarjuna's dad is a farmer, he owns land, so he knows the problems on the land, like this is a good scheme which will help, and he's saying let's do the programme. I'm completely out of the content part. I'm saying you want to do the programme, I'll give you more avenues, think about the loudspeakers, I'll figure out the loudspeakers for you, but hey you have to tell me what you want. But hey, I'm not telling you what to do, do health, do agriculture [Interview with Ramesh in August 2006].

Further, when we asked the NGO Maatu at what point participation became an integral part of the project, we were told that it was a four-stage process - first there is awareness-raising on what community radio is about, then participation (considered “*done through the SHGs*”), then “*a sense of ownership*”, and then community management. Management meant leaving the project up to the community, while ensuring support:

They are the ones who really have to think about it. Management means ... realizing the responsibilities ... 80 channels, they'll have to do something about it. On one level it'll be interesting to sit back and see what the management committee does. OK, now you are the management committee for the resource centre and radio station, you have competition, people will not listen on their cable TV and there are 80 channels, who will listen to a purely audio channel? What are you going to do about it? [Interview with Ramesh in August 2006].

This contradictory attitude to participation seems to echo the examples given by Lohmann (1994); Hildyard et al (2001) and Michener (1998) in Section 4 – the concept of community radio has emerged from outside the community, but the implementation and sustainability is left up to the community.

6.2. Co-optation

Is the community therefore being co-opted into the project, as Michener (1998) suggests in her Burkina Faso case? An interview with Ramesh suggested that local people tell the project implementers what they want to hear (Mosse, 2001 and Dichter, 1989):

It's hard to know if people are really listening. In a survey, if we interview people and ask them whether they watch TV or listen to us, they say yes. Instead we have to ask, what did you think of the programme last week? The minute they see us, they tell us what we want to hear. They say yes, yes, we listened. They feel guilty, for choosing entertainment over development, like something which is good for them [Interview with Ramesh in August 2006].

In contrast, the “community” for Ramesh is:

Whoever's there in and around the station. Till the people who are listening to the radio. We would be biting off more than we can chew if we say the community is even those who don't listen to our programmes [Interview with Ramesh in August 2006].

Therefore, the community has been reduced to the listeners of the station, and the self-help groups – in other words, those who support Our Voices. These individuals are different from the rest of the community, but still considered representative of them:

We have a few insiders in the village ... they come regularly and participate. It's their own people talking... [Interview with Ramesh in August 2006].

As Michener (1998) argues, each group involved has a different understanding of participation in the Our Voices project. At the policy level, participation is about rhetoric such as “community radio” and “relevant information” – no doubt with a good intention in mind. However, note that of over two hundred people interviewed in Bhairavi, no-one knew the origin of the name “Our Voices” – it was thought to have been given by the NGO Maatu, ironic considered the self-representation implied by the title. At the field level, there are tensions between whether the NGO Jaan (which has been in the area since 1984) represents the people, or the outsiders from the state capital and the international donor agency. For the rest of the community, it is hard to see the value in the initiatives, particularly when the station is facing technical challenges and not broadcasting at full capacity. In terms of the computer training centre, many felt the computer classes were not beneficial (particularly for girls) when the only job opportunities are in the nearest town, 15 km away.

Finally, as Michener (1998) and White (1996) argue, empowering others is a highly contradictory notion. As we have seen above, there are tensions between the policy level and the field level – on the one hand, Maatu wants to “*start dictating things a bit*” but on the other hand they state “*it'll be interesting to sit back and see what the management committee does*”. The donor agency states that “*community media to be specific can only aim and strive to provide people information and a medium that they can use to make informed choices. It cannot make the choice for them. Further still, there is also the debate about whether we can assume we know what is in the community's best interests overlooking their own perceptions regarding this*” (UNESCO, n. d.). On the other hand, we have the comment by the Maatu project manager that the initiative is “*really development, development, development*” and not entertainment, even if that is what the community wants. He

continues “it’s your community, it’s your call, and the thing is, we’ve put in some systems in place, saying that ok, it’s your call, but still you can’t walk away and do as you please”.

6.3. Lack of resources

For an initiative that was intended to help the marginalized, Our Voices now relies on participation from the SHGs, who are already a more confident, established group of villagers. The remaining villagers have little time to participate. One can therefore ask, how representative are the SHGs of the rest of the community? Ramesh, the project manager, commented that “*the primary participation is from the SHGs, next come the youth, and the farmers come last, because daytime they have to work in the farms, not much time. Any participation is our volunteers going to the farms and recording their programmes*”. Our Voices is now working with a second (technology) donor on taking Palm Pilots with information onto farms because (according to Ramesh): “*they don’t come to the station, because of timings, maybe because of the distance, because of inhibitions, whatever, whatever ... so we thought if they cannot come to the station, let the station come to them*”. This raises another question though – if the content was interesting enough (as is the case of the soap operas, comedies and films on the cable TV networks) wouldn’t the audience come?

7. CONCLUSIONS

The case of Our Voices illustrates the challenges in establishing participatory and contextual rural information systems projects. This research is in its initial stages and only raises further questions. These include - who defines what development is? What is “contextual”? To what extent does genuine participation occur in ICT for development projects? Does one group of people have any legitimacy to state what is “good” for another group of people? If it does, what happens when tensions emerge between both groups? Our Voices illustrates that implementing a participatory telecentre for “development” and “empowerment” is no easy task. Instead, it is full of contradictions and challenges, both theoretical and practical.

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Appendix

Days/ Timings	7.00 to 7.05pm	7.05 to 7.10pm	7.10 to 7.20pm	7.20 to 7.30pm	7.30 to 7.45pm	7.45 to 8pm	8 to 8.30pm
Sun	Jingles and Narration (Events for the day)	Devotional Songs	Market rates and News	Family Values	Awareness Programme (General Issues, e.g water content)	“Home Sweet” (General Family Programme)	Film Songs
Mon	Jingles and Narration	Devotional Songs	Market rates and News	Doctor’s Advice and Q&A	SHG News PSA Announcement	Radio Clippings and Kids’ Programmes	Film Songs (Tamil)
Tues	Jingles and Narration	Devotional Songs	Market rates and News	“Double Gain” (How to increase your Income)	Beauty Tips and Folk Songs	Discussion and Speech	Film Songs (Request)
Wed	Jingles and Narration	Devotional Songs	Market rates and News	Resource Centre Announcement	“We and the People within” (Awareness of the “Great” Villagers)	Panchayat Programme	Film Songs
Thurs	Jingles and Narration	Devotional Songs	Market rates and News	Legal Advice	Jokes Folk Songs	Poetry presentation	Film Songs (Telegu)
Fri	Jingles and Narration	Devotional Songs	Market rates and News	Resource Centre Announcement	Farmers Discussion Forum	Letter presentation	Hits
Sat	Jingles and Narration	Devotional Songs	Market rates and News	Women’s Programmes	Kids’ Programmes	“Palace of Cooking”	Film Songs