Delivering government services access to the BOP in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh: Telecenters, mobile or both?

Bangladesh and Sri Lanka have government funded e-government and telecenter initiatives, with telecenters ("Nenasalas" in Sri Lanka and "Union Information and Service Centers" [UISCs] in Bangladesh) being a central delivery channel for e-Gov services. Both countries have very high mobile phone usage by the poor. A recent survey assessed the extent to which these telecenters and mobile phones are helping deliver government services to the poorest citizens in each country.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

SRI LANKA

1. Co-locate Nensasalas near or inside Grama Niladhari offices (lowest level of government administration) enabling 'one-stop-shop' service delivery as in similar to Bangladesh; this will also support a perception among citizens of the telecenter as an extension of the government, making them more likely to use on the telecenter for e-government services.
2. Avoid locating Nenasalas in areas where other commercially-provided public Internet access is already available or inside religious institutions where the usage is significantly lower than in other locations.
3. Empower Nensasala operators to submit forms online, or to collect and submit them in batches to the nearest government office, and/or make payments on behalf of citizens.
4. Engage in awareness programs to promote the use of telecenters in general, and target such campaigns to poor citizens.

BANGLADESH

5. Establish a call center that citizens can call from mobiles (which are ubiquitous) and obtain information about how to access government services; this can be modelled on Sri Lanka's Government Information Center.

THE RESEARCH

I   METHODOLOGY

A survey of residents living within a 5 km catchment area around randomly selected telecenters was conducted among 15-40 year old poor, or bottom of the pyramid (defined as SEC[1] D and E) individuals in the two countries. All eligible respondents were asked whether they had had any "interaction" with the government (local, regional or national level) in the preceding twelve months. This "interaction" could be on the respondent's behalf or on that of someone else either to obtain information on the government and its services (e.g. get information on whom to contact, where to go, opening hours, how to do something; or to get a form, etc.) or to access or use a government service (essentially "get something done" e.g., to submit a form, apply for something, lodge a complaint, etc.), or both.

Stratified random samples of either the telecenters themselves (Sri Lanka) or the administrative units which contained telecenters (Bangaldesh) were taken to ensure representation of telecenters. Surveys were conducted among eligible residents within a 5km of the selected telecenter. In Sri Lanka, 90 (out of 632) Nenasalas were

[1] SEC classification is a widely used method used to classify households in market research. It is based mainly on the education and occupation of the chief wage earner of the household (as well as a few other parameters in certain countries). The SEC classification categorizes households into groups A (highest/richest) to E (lowest/poorest), with finer gradations sometimes done within a given classification (e.g. SEC E is further broken down in into E1, E2, and so on). The SEC D and E groups together correspond to an income of around USD 2 a day in the countries studied

selected while 275 (out of 4,495) UISCs were selected in Bangladesh.

II   FINDINGS

Awareness and use: 68% of the Bangladeshi sample had heard of a telecenter, of which 52% had visited a telecenter and used its services. Telecenter awareness in the Sri Lankan sample was 46%, while usage was at 16% of those aware.

To create awareness it is recommended that awareness campaigns aimed at the BOP who are the main target of telecenters be conducted in Sri Lanka. These campaigns should emphasize on the types of services that available as well as the types of government services that can be accessed at telecenter. To improve usage (especially in Sri Lanka), further recommendations with regard to location are made below.

Location: The survey shows that only 28% of telecenter users in Bangladesh used other alternatives to telecenters (such as commercially run communication shops to access the internet and e-Gov services) while it was double (56%) in Sri Lanka. The Sri Lankan BOP is better positioned to access online information and services independently, and may therefore need to rely less on shared access points like telecenters.   Thus government investment can be optimized by not opening telecenters in areas where alternatives are available, but instead going to the most rural or poorest areas.

Though independently operated by an entrepreneur, the UISCs are situated at or adjacent to the Union Parishad (the lowest administrative unit of the government), and is supported by central administration. This may have helped improve the perception of legitimacy of the UISC itself, making citizens view it as an extension of the government, thereby making them more likely to rely on UISC provided e-government services. More over the co-location enables citizens to experience a 'one-stop-shop' where downloading forms and applying for a service can be done in adjacent offices. Therefore it is recommended that Sri Lanka similarly co-locates Nenasalas near or within Grama Niladhari offices (lowest level of government administration in Sri Lanka) enabling 'one-stop-shop' service delivery as well as improved perception of legitimacy of services among citizens.

In Sri Lanka, some of the Nenasalas were located within religious establishments (a Buddhist or Hindu temple, a Sunday school, a Madrasa, and so on). While awareness was similar irrespective of whether the respondent lived near a religious or non-religious Nenasala, among those aware, use was significantly higher among residents who live in the catchment area of a Nenasala which is located in a non-religious establishment (26%) compared to those residing near Nenasalas located in a religious establishment (8%). It is therefore recommended that in Sri Lanka new Nenasalas should not be located within religious institutes so as to encourage more use.

Services: The UISCs have access to government forms and relevant information through a log-in system, and are equipped to assist citizens in filling up relevant forms and submitting them online. It is recommended that Sri Lanka develop a similar system that allows Nenasala operators to submit applications on behalf of citizens online thereby reducing the need for the citizen to visit a separate government office (in other words, extend the services offered by a Nenasala to be a recognized agent of government).

Availability of Mobiles: Is the high availability and use of mobile phones impacting the use of telecenters to access government services?   38% of Bangladeshi survey respondents and 58% of Sri Lankan respondents were aware of the possibility of accessing government services via mobile phones with preference for voice based services. 52% in Bangladesh and 77% in Sri Lanka claimed they would like to use a mobile phone to obtain government information and to access government services by simply calling. In this regard it is recommended that Bangladesh set up a call center modeled after the Government Information Center in Sri Lanka that citizens can call and obtain information about how to apply for and access government services.   This service will help reduce the number of repeated visits citizens currently make to government offices.

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