

# Bangladesh

## D.Net : Pallitathya Help Line (Call Center for the Poor and the Under Privileged)

*<sup>i</sup>Winner of APC WNSP and GKP Gender and ICT Award, 2005*

D.Net (Development Research Network) is a Dhaka based Bangladeshi non profit organization which envisages to use ICTs for economic development of Bangladesh<sup>ii</sup>. In 2003, the organization researched that ICTs add a new dimension of divide between the rich and the poor. Those having access to ICTs are more informed than the others and thus well placed in the economic activities. To help the under privileged gain better access to vital information, various models of ICTs for the rural and under privileged were studied and *'it was found that some of these models stressed too much on the 'telecenters' but not enough on the 'intermediary' (i.e. the person who works as an interface between an ICT tool and rural end-users), while the others focused on issues of connectivity but not on understanding the service requirements at the rural level'*<sup>iii</sup>. D.Net found this assessment relevant to the rural Bangladesh where women were heavily deprived of access to information and were dependent on the social system of superstitions and traditional belief systems. Consequently, they had less opportunities to pursue careers and earn their income.

In the same year D.Net started 'Pallitathya Programme' with a research on understanding information needs from a village perspective. It took advantage of penetration of cell phone in 80% villages and decided to use mobile phone as a 'Last Mile' access instrument. A 'Help-Desk' and a 'Help Line' were established. Help Desks were manned by operators equipped with ICT-based system to respond to queries related to the rural livelihood. Help Desks were given local language database system which was used for searching of answers to the questions and dissemination to the villagers. The second objective was to give access to rural population to this Help Desk. For this purpose, the Help Line deployed 'intermediary' women in four villages around Dhaka as "Mobile Operator Ladies" who move from door to door to enable villagers – mostly women and especially housewives, to ask questions related to livelihood, agriculture, and legal rights via a mobile phone. The queries are responded by the Help Desk operators at D.Net, Dhaka. The Mobile phone ladies get a monthly salary from the D.Net and also a part of the revenue generated from the calls to the help line.

The Mobile Operator Ladies use four modes of information delivery :

- a. Mobile to Mobile : Instant reply is given through the directory information.
- b. Mobile to Mobile (Delayed) : This mode is used to answer questions where no instant reply is available and the users get an answer within 3 days.
- c. Mobile to Letters : The users ask questions through mobile and answers are provided through letter within 5-7 days.

- d. Letter to Letter : Users put their questions in letter forma and hand it over to the mobile operator lady who forwards it to the help desk. The help desk researches the question and replies within 15-20 days.

( A small fee is incurred on the users depending upon the mode of query, however two days a week free time given by Mobile Networks is utilised to provide free service .D.Net [2007:28] found that three fourth of the users call at free time. )

During the initial months of the programme it was found that 48% (D.Net 2005:24) of the total number of users were women and that housewives represented the biggest group users. Questions related to health issues, especially gynaecological problems were asked. <sup>iv</sup>This is a manifestation of the rural Bangladeshi society where women do not have access to medical information and what ever information is available comes through the man of the house. While giving medical information it is ensured whether the information needs to be handed out a physical examination. Mobile lady operators guide the female users to the nearest government medical facility ( a list of which exists in the D.Net database). D.Net is currently working on the proposal of doctors directly attending the call of users for instant medical guidance. According to D.Net (2007:39) ‘one of the major impacts of the Help Line service is that it enhanced the horizon of the thinking of the mobile ladies. They have become more tech-savvy through familiarity with the mobile phone. They now want to get computer education...it is important to note that three out of four mobile ladies want to continue the service even after withdrawal of support from D.Net.’

From a gender empowerment perspective the Pallitathya Programme claims to have achieved the following objectives <sup>v</sup>:

- a. It has developed information service delivery in a cost-effective , easily scalable and affordable manner.
- b. It provides information services that has minimal to absence of gender bias.
- c. It challenges age old perception of gender roles in the Bangladesh society.
- d. It challenges the notion of women as a relatively unimportant client group for information services.

Uptil April 2008, 63836 users have used the Pallitathya services, of which 45 % are women. It now covers 41 districts in 06 divisions in Bangladesh<sup>vi</sup>. Looking at the future, D.Net hopes to collaborate with Grameen Telecom, who has successfully brought mobile phones to the villages across the country through mobile ladies. D.Net believes that access to Help line will ‘value add’ to the Grameen Phone ( also known as *Palli* phone). It will bring in increased demand for *Palli* phone and will make the Help line more sustainable. D.Net hopes of placing one mobile lady in each village of the country, which will bring employment for almost 1,00,000 women (D.Net 2005:59).

## References :

D.Net (2005) *Pallitathya Help Line : A Precursor to People's Call Center* , D.Net Publications.

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.genderawards.net/> (Accessed 13th July 2008)

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.dnet-bangladesh.org/main.html> (Accessed 13th July 2008)

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.dnet-bangladesh.org/programs/pallitathya.pdf> (Accessed 15th July 2008)

<sup>iv</sup> [http://www.genderawards.net/gict\\_pr\\_db\\_result.shtml?x=91360&ayear=2005](http://www.genderawards.net/gict_pr_db_result.shtml?x=91360&ayear=2005) (Accessed 15th July 2008)

<sup>v</sup> [http://www.genderawards.net/winners/2005/GICT\\_2005.pdf](http://www.genderawards.net/winners/2005/GICT_2005.pdf) (Accessed 15th July 2008)

<sup>vi</sup> <http://www.pallitathya.org/MainDetails.php?Id=66> (Accessed 15th July 2008)