# *Forum*

## Information Needs Assessment Model for Identifying Information Needs of Rural Communities

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Often rural informatics solutions are designed without adequate consultation with the rural poor, leading to a "Design-Reality" gap. The rural informatics professionals tend to develop ICT solutions based on their own perception of the end-users' requirements, rather than exploring the rural poor's information needs. As a result, the rural informatics applications are not well-accepted and remain underutilized. We would like to introduce an Information Needs Assessment Model (INAM) to identify the information needs of the rural communities that addresses these issues.

This model comprises a set of processes: Theme Analysis, Profile Analysis, Existing Community Information Systems Analysis, and Prioritization of Information Needs.

1. Theme Analysis helps gain a preliminary understanding of all the relevant aspects of the problem.

2. Profile Analysis is a SWOT (Strength, Weakness, Opportunity, Threat) analysis, which also charts the life events of the rural poor in the targeted community, along with the area, country, and region inhabited by the rural community. It highlights the areas that need intervention to bring about development.

3. Existing Information Systems Analysis checks for other community information systems which may already be operational in the target area or other areas with a similar profile to uncover success stories and lessons learned.

4. In the Prioritization of Information Needs exercise governing criteria guide the decision of which critical information needs should be addressed and delivered first. These criteria include information: critical to poverty reduction; necessary to facilitate a smooth citizen-govern-ment interface; which helps build human capabilities; and on area-specific opportunities.

The Information Needs Assessment Model (INAM) can incorporate multiple methods (PRA approaches, surveys, interviews, Internet research) or a single method, depending on the financial and other resources available.

The INAM was applied to identify the information needs of the underprivileged in the South Asian Region, as part of UNESCO's cross-cutting theme project on "Empowering the Under-Privileged through the use of ICTs." It was also used to analyze survey data collected during a national conference on "e-Readiness Expectations of Rural Masses," organized by the National Informatics Centre in Bihar, India. We distributed a questionnaire to representatives of the rural communities, mainly from the State of Bihar, and asked them to express their information needs. Another survey was conducted among 80 respondents at the Conference on the Computer Applications for Rural Development (CARD), organized by the Computer Society of India (CSI) in Lucknow, India in 2003.

We were surprised by the sheer heterogeneity of the information needs. To organize the collected data, we grouped them into information categories which we have mapped in Figure 1. This diagram was generated by a largely inductive approach, and may serve other researchers and practitioners in the field as a checklist of potential information needs of rural communities in developing countries. Already, some practitioners have made use of these categories: it has been adopted by UNESCO to deploy information services under the "ICT for Poverty Reduction" (ictPR) project.[1] The related project envisages putting ICT into the hands of the poor through a digital interface using eNRICH.[2] Another user of these information needs categories is the Community Information Centre (CIC),[3] a project operating in the northeastern states of India.[4]

By presenting our INAM methodology and the resulting diagram of information needs in this paper, we intend to assist other researchers and practitioners in their work in the field. We hope that in this way future "ICT for development" initiatives can truly be based on the needs of the rural poor. ∎

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1. www.ictpr.nic.in
2. www.enrich.nic.in
3. www.cic.nic.in
4. www.cic.nic.in/cicimplementsites2.asp

Basic Needs

Livelihood · Health · Drinking Water · Transport · Emergency Services · Education

Access to Justice

Rights & Responsibilities · Grievance Redress · Court Case Information

Classifieds & Entertainment

Employment Services · Yellow Pages · Astrology · Entertainment · Deals · Matrimonial

Government Information

Govt. Schemes · Forms · Land Records · Licenses & Permits · Contact Govt. · Citizen's Charter · BPL Family List · Voter List · Employment Opportunities

Daily Information

Inventory Position in Fair Price Shops · Market Prices · News · Irrigation Water Release Time Table · Weather Report

Announcements

Immunization Program · Govt. Functionaries Visit · Health Camps · Self Help Group · Meetings Fairs & Festivals · Admission Notices · Seasonal Diseases/Epidemic Outbreak · Vocational Education Program

Self Employment

Setup Your Own Enterprise Using Local Resources · Micro-Enterprise Network · Success Stories

Environmental Awareness

Keep Your Environment Clean · Pollution · Disaster Management · Environment Protection Guidelines

Area Profile

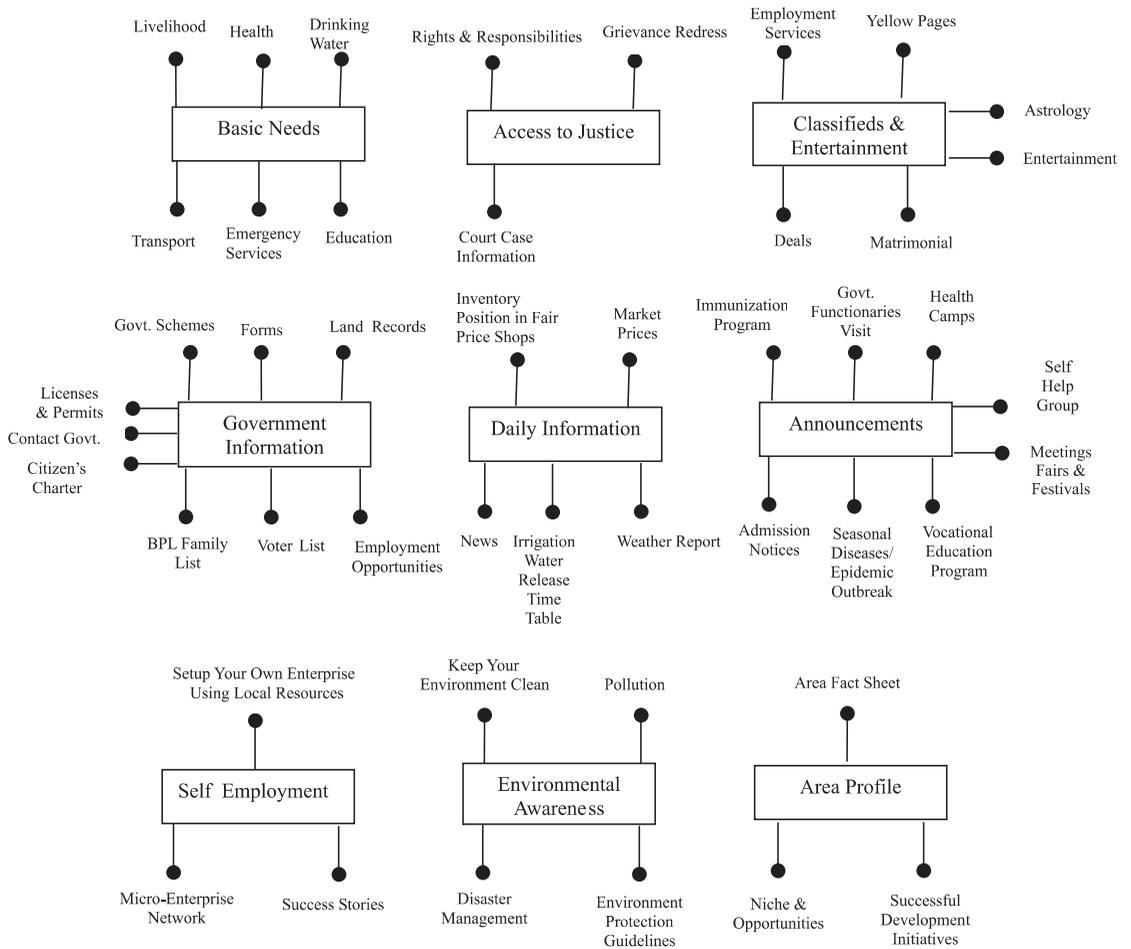Area Fact Sheet · Niche & Opportunities · Successful Development Initiatives

*Figure 1. Information categories representing the information needs of rural communities*