

Case Exercise: Too many voices?

As part of the joint ICORD/EWG-ORD Workshop on *Operations Research: Addressing Issues of Development*, there will be two sessions on the first afternoon aimed at developing understanding of the contribution that different OR tools and methods can make in tackling the sort of 'wicked' problems that can arise in development contexts.

These sessions will make use of a case exercise (based on a real situation). We have prepared transcripts for each of 3 principal 'actors' in the situation, in which each of them describes the problem situation as he sees it. They are attached to this message.

We would like you to familiarise yourself with the problem situation by reading and thinking about this material ahead of the Workshop. We will be asking you to join in group discussions of this material.

The project and the case

Voices is a community ICT and radio project in Southern India. These accounts are inspired by a study of the project by Savita Bailur, Department of Management, London School of Economics¹.

The *Voices* project is designed to provide computer and Internet access and a community radio service for the local area. *Voices* has multiple stakeholders including a donor agency; 2 NGOs channelling the funding; a Management Committee; paid staff; volunteers; technical infrastructure providers; local government at village and district level; local service users; radio audience.

For this case exercise we have selected three individuals and in some aspects ascribed the views of other stakeholders to them. This process of compression and simplification means that this teaching case is not intended to be an accurate reflection of a complex and interesting study.

¹Bailur, S and S Masiero (2012) 'The Complex Position of the Intermediary in Telecenters and Community Multimedia Centers' *Information Technologies & International Development*, 8(1) Special Issue pp. 27-42

ICORD Workshop Rome, June 2013

Dev, chair of the management committee and head of the village committee

This is an important project that will bring prestige to our village and help our villagers but there are problems.

This has been a peaceful and contented village and we must not disturb that. I am pleased that I can give work to many people in my fields and in my quarry but competition is not a just a problem for businesses in Delhi and Mumbai it is a problem for us here as well. People think my life is easy but looking after the well-being of everyone is difficult. If we lose the contract for roadstones with the district my business will close, I will lose much money and many people will lose their jobs. We have to be cheap but also I have to make sure the contract managers at the district are looked after.

The donors go on about corruption but why are they looking at me and my few rupees when ministers and judges are making millions. I have to pay bribes, where will the money to do that come from if I do not receive; to give you have to receive. This grand scheme will turn off the tap and we will all be ruined.

Guru thinks everybody should be involved in politics but it won't work. I have my contacts and my networks and I look after everyone. When the police cause trouble everyone comes to me and I can make the trouble go away just like my father and grandfather did. Do they think if they elect a cobbler who has read about politics on the Internet he will be able to protect them?

Of course I pay them to vote for me, it's good for me and it's good for the village, I can make sure District treats them well and they get some money in their pocket, what's wrong with that? It's better than sending District an email, anyway they'll only read the email if I pay them to.

We had real problems at the last election when the radio broadcast comments from all sorts of people, lots of them trouble makers. These troublemakers were stirring everyone up about those of us who work hard for this village. Getting everyone excited is not a good idea we need to be at peace with each other. I've told Guru that if they do that again I'll resign and most of the committee will resign with me. If we do resign who will help them get their licence renewed, it cost me a lot of time and effort to get it last time and what gratitude do they show? They just let agitators say rude things about me and my sons. This is not what they promised me when I agreed to help them.

Do they think that if they learn about computers they will be able to go to Bangalore and get a job? They won't; they'll just have had their hopes raised and then they'll be unhappy.

They think they're clever and they'll get better prices for their crops with this Internet information. I can ring three people and know the prices must quicker and much more accurately. I do that for myself and I can do it for the others.

As I said we need to keep harmony in the village. We have looked after our Muslim villagers; they were not attacked when hotheads elsewhere burned down mosques. Now they want their prayers on the radio every day. That will inflame people. We are a Hindu village and the radio should be used to broadcast Hindu prayers; that's what people want to hear. Friday is the Muslim's special day so I think it is right we now broadcast Muslim prayers on a Friday but not all the committee agreed with me.

ICORD Workshop Rome, June 2013

Guru, centre manager

I was born in a village five miles from here. I was clever and I was lucky and I got a college education. Now I've come back and I want to help my people.

They have lived isolated from the world for too long. Most of them have never been out of the district. They know nothing of the provincial capital; Delhi is as remote from them as New York or the moon. The Internet is their chance to learn about more than their tiny part of the world and to be part of something bigger. At least it would be if it worked.

IndiaCom keep telling us they will fix the line properly but they won't unless I look after the engineer but how am I going to do that. I asked Nikhil for money to do that but he said 'no, this project is to fight corruption I will not let you use the funds to pay bribes'. He is a good man but he does not want to know what we must do to make things happen here. I asked Dev but he said, 'I would like to help but I have no spare cash, there are other things more important than your Internet, it works sometimes, use it when it works and relax when it doesn't and make your radio programmes' He just doesn't understand that the point of the Internet is that it has to be there when you need it not just when IndiaCom think it's a good idea.

I have to deal with all the problems. Nikhil has good ideas but he doesn't understand how difficult it is on the ground, Dev says how good the project is but is worried that it will mean challenges for him if people know more about how the world works and everyone learns how to get District to help us, instead of that being his own private skill that he can sell.

I know that if people make the corruption here public Dev and his friends will never give them work, what good is it to be free of bribes if you can't eat?

Our donors, of course we are very grateful to them, seem to think we can turn potters into software engineers. The reality is that we can't get them beyond the basics. They find the keyboard strange and the mouse mysterious. Because of the hard work of our teachers many in the village can send a simple email and find things on the web. I would like to be able to set up courses for people at District to design web pages that give information rather than hide it, then our job here would be much easier. I sometimes wonder if the sites are so bad because people don't want information to be freely available rather than because they don't know how.

The radio works much better but even that has problems. We had to drop our talking internet programme because we never knew if we would have a connection when the programme was timetabled, a pity because it was a good idea. But even the radio can get us into trouble. A quarter of the village is Muslim and when we agreed to broadcast prayers they wanted their prayers as well. Dev thinks he's being generous by agreeing to one day a week; this might appease our Muslims but some of them are saying 1 in 7 is not enough for 1 in 4. On the other hand Dev is on a tightrope as some on his committee is saying the Muslims are a small minority so why should the rest of us have to listen to their prayers.

The radio gave us our biggest headache last year. Nikhil had been in England during their last elections and was excited by how the BBC interviewed people as they came out of the polling station, shouldn't we try that during the village elections? I thought it sounded a good idea but I should have thought harder. Many people didn't want to speak because they thought it might get them into trouble with Dev and his family. So only those with nothing to lose because they didn't need quarry work or knew they wouldn't get it spoke up. They weren't very nice about the village leadership. Now we have to decide whether to do that again next year. If we do Dev will make life difficult for us, we may lose our licence and the police will start interfering, if we don't then Nikhil might take away our money and there will be complaints that we are in Dev's pocket. I've tried to steer a course between all the factions in the village but I can't keep everyone happy over this.

ICORD Workshop Rome, June 2013

Nikhil, Chair of the Donor Agency

We believe that community ICT and radio can make a great contribution to social and economic development and to increasing social capital².

One major barrier to development is widespread corruption. Village people have little access to information and have to pay for (give bribes for) information and services that should be free. If village residents have access to the internet they can find out information for themselves and get hold of government forms rather than having to bribe a clerk to give them something they should have for free. Of course this means that as well as providing computers we need to provide trainers so people can use them. These skills won't only let village residents use the internet, they'll also be able to get jobs that need IT skills.

Information is key whether it's advice on health, information on nutrition, data on where to get the best price for their crops. At the moment information flows slowly and all too often people have to pay for knowledge that is available for free if they have online access.

ICT is only half of it though, and not necessarily the most important half. We are also trying to provide community radio. This is a way of bringing the community together, to let villagers hear each others' voices and ideas, to build a sense of common purpose. This will mean the people of the village will be able to decide for themselves what goes on in the village and be able to put concerted collective pressure on local government to deliver the services that meet their needs. It will also mean that information can be found once and then shared, not asked for time and time again by each person. We could have a talking internet programme. Listeners will ask for information, the presenter will search for it and broadcast the results to all listeners.

We can also get round the problem that not all the villagers have, or can afford radios. We could broadcast the radio through public loudspeakers to everyone. During the recent elections we kept everyone up to date with the issues, the liveliest broadcasts were when we interviewed people as they came out of the polling booths. They had lots to say about the quality of the candidates, little of it positive, and the pressure they thought had been on villagers to vote for the existing leadership. Dev and his pals didn't like that; they thought it was interfering with democracy. We think it was extending openness and giving more people a voice. I think Dev will try and stop us doing it again. I think we should but if we do the committee might resign. This would be good in some ways because they are always trying to stop us doing what we want to but without their patronage and protection we could find carrying on quite difficult.

This project will give everyone in the village a voice, increase participation in village affairs, fight corruption and improve villagers' market position.

²Social capital refers to the links and bonds within a community. It is often argued that strengthening these links strengthens the ability of communities to exercise control of their lives and opportunities.