WINNER OF THE GENDER AND ICT AWARDS
INDIVIDUAL/COMMUNITY-BASED INITIATIVE: ADVOCACY CATEGORY

Nabanna

country: India

Change Initiatives is an organisation that is putting a web-based information system to strategic use for the benefit of poor women in Baduria, a rural region in North-24 Parganas district, in the Indian state of West Bengal.

The project is called Nabanna and seeks to empower poor women who have been unable to fulfil even basic needs because of their lack of access to information and skills that could help them advance.

Change Initiatives also found that they were entrenched in a system that built barriers around them, and limited their participation in society.

The quest to develop an information system in Bengali to benefit these poor women gathered pace in August 2002, when Change Initiatives joined forces with UNESCO. The collaboration was established through a grant competition that the agency conducted on the Internet to locate partners for its project: "Empowering the Underprivileged through the Use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)."

Under UNESCO's aegis, Change Initiatives began discussions with National Informatics Centre (NIC) which agreed to provide the web interface eNRICH; and with researchers from London School of Economics and Queensland University of Technology who decided to support the action research activities.

The pilot project, involving the women from Baduria Municipality, took off in February this year.

Baduria has four ethnocultural regions, separated by village bodies and geographical factors, yet they are actually quite close to one another. To connect the four regions and help them help each other, Change Initiatives is exploring innovative uses of databases, intranet portals and web-based partnerships in the local language. The emphasis is on building a framework for information sharing, content creation, off-line information dissemination and web-based partnerships with organisations located outside the region.

To facilitate information sharing, five ICT centres are being set up in Baduria and Rudrapur (they comprise a single landmass), Taragunia, Arbelia and Punda. The ICT centre in Baduria is the main hub while the other four centres will act as nodes.

The Baduria ICT centre has two desktops and a printer/scanner. The others will have a desktop and a dot matrix printer. All the computers run on WindowsXP operating system and are equipped with eNRICH, MS-Office, Adobe Photoshop & Adobe Pagemaker.

An Internet facility is only available at the Baduria ICT centre for the time being but networking with other centres has been made possible through the innovative use of portable drives.

The women are taught basic computer skills and how to use MS-Office and DTP applications. They are also learning data input and how to search for content in eNRICH — a programme with archival and retrieval properties.

An interesting component of Nabanna, is that the beneficiaries have been asked to maintain a diary on their lives.

Nabanna's ultimate plan is to build knowledge modules that will be a database of localised best practices to help women solve local problems.