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SUCCESS OF E-SRI LANKA IN RURAL ICT DEVELOPMENT:

A Study of e-Nenasala Telecenters in Rathnapura District

A research

By

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Abstract

In the current context of rapid progression of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) 'digital divide' and 'telecentres' have become attractive areas for academic research. Even though scholars have widely addressed the 'digital divide' issue and the impact of 'telecentres' in bridging the divide, there is a gap in this literature relating to studies on Sri Lanka. The government of Sri Lanka has initiated a program called e-Sri Lanka in year 2003 with the objective of taking the dividend of ICT to every village. One of the key programs started under this initiative is *e-Nenasala* telecenter program. *Nenasala* program is intended to contribute towards reducing existing inequalities and bridging the digital, ethnic, and development divide between rural areas and Colombo, the commercial capital of the country. Even though the program has been operating for nearly seven years, there were very few studies apart from government reports, have examined the success of this program. Therefore, primary focus of this study was on assessing the progress of *e-Nenasala* project in terms of its contribution to rural ICT development, from its initiation to current position. The study will attempt to explore the telecenter movement by identifying the interactions between its key stakeholders in order to assess the extent to which the use of telecentre services can reduce digital inequalities. The study employed "Stakeholder Analysis and Framework" as the key methodology to identify and analyze the stakeholders and their interactions in deciding the sustainability and success of the *e-Nenasala* program. According to the survey data, financial, social and political sustainability still remain as one of the biggest challenges. Low usage of *Nenasala* services by the targeted consumers was also identified. Remarkable lesser usage was shown by SMEs and other adult user categories. Even though the *Nenasala* movement has above weaknesses, it has also achieved considerably good results in developing ICT infrastructure, ICT literacy levels and thereby quality of life in far interior areas in Rathnapura district. The most important issue is rooted in creating awareness on what sort of benefits the rural community can gain from such centers and how the ICT can be used as a tool to improve the ways and means of their lives. The challenge for the management of the *Nenasala* centers is to become bit enterprising and futuristic to identify the growing needs of the community and design services which could match these demands.