

In Sri Lanka, Rural Firms Get Connected

By Lorin Kavanaugh-Ulku



.Kanwalinder Singh, head of QUALCOMM India, seated, demonstrates services available from Easy Seva center as Sri Lankan Minister of Skills Development, Dayasritha Tissera, and his daughter look on.

Y.K. Indra lingered outside the Chamitha Mobile Easy Seva Center in Wennappuwa, Sri Lanka, waiting for the opening ceremonies to wrap up. As soon as the room was cleared of VIPs, Indra took her seat before a computer terminal and began typing an address for an Internet telephone network.

Minutes later she was beaming as the flickering image of her sister's smiling face appeared on the screen.

"Buongiorno!" she said with a laugh before switching into rapid Sinhala. "I can't believe I can actually see you when we're talking."

Indra's sister works in Italy as a domestic as do many Sri Lankans from this region. "We used to speak only every few weeks," she said. "That's all I could afford on my mobile phone. Now we will talk every day."

The Aug. 28 opening of the Easy Seva Center is the latest addition to a chain of 25 Easy Seva cyber-centers opening up across remote regions of Sri Lanka as part of the Last Mile Initiative in Sri Lanka.

The program, a Global Development Alliance (GDA) between USAID, Synergy Strategies Groups (SSG), QUALCOMM, and Dialog Telekom, forms alliances with the private sector to bring vocational education skills to rural communities.

The Easy Seva centers provide customers with wireless Internet access, personal computer usage, and broadband telephone services such as Skype. In addition, some centers will provide online training opportunities and a place where residents can receive micro loans and other banking services.

Last Mile Initiative partners see this project as an opportunity to provide wireless access to the underserved.

“We’re really hoping that this center and others implemented here in Sri Lanka serve as models and have a replicable effect,” said Dick Edwards, USAID/Sri Lanka office director for economic growth. “USAID has worked hard to make sure there is content in these centers, that they’re not just Internet cafes, but also include microfinance and financial tools. We see plenty of opportunity for education and growth here, as customers begin to understand the potential of the centers.”

QUALCOMM India Director Kanwalinder Singh notes that information technology is the key to sustainable development in communities such as these. “This [initiative] provides access to data and information that will result in prosperity,” he said.

He was particularly struck by the entrepreneurship of the Easy Seva Center operators. The entrepreneurs are recruited from within the communities and villages where Easy Seva plans to locate.

For Chaminda Perera, owner of the Easy Seva in Wennappuwa, this initiative is a great business opportunity for him and his customers. “People can come and learn about things that will help them build careers, like the latest trends in agriculture. If someone wants to learn about plantations, they can come here to do their research,” he said.

The initiative represents a new approach to delivering development assistance by providing seed money for the private sector in a mutually beneficial profit-making venture.

“This project is not about charity, it’s about value-added service,” Steve Schmida, president of SSG, said. “We’re bringing the Internet everywhere because it’s the ‘right’ thing to do, but we’re also presenting it as a business venture: there is a high demand for the services our partners are providing.”

Schmida believes that Sri Lanka’s market system could accommodate hundreds more Internet centers developed by the private sector using this business model.

“This is the first step to making villagers citizens of the universe,” said Dayasritha Tissera, minister of skills development in Sri Lanka.

This project is one of many that fall under the umbrella of the President’s Digital Freedom Initiative, which aims to harness the strengths of the U.S. public and private sectors to help developing countries use information and communication technology. The

initiative involves multiple federal agencies, the private sector, non-profit organizations, and universities.

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