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From the Editor’s desk

Information Communication Technology (ICT) plays a very important role in the world today, both in developed and under-developed economies. It has been used in different sectors to spur development and has improved businesses across the globe. It is also true for the financial sector and, of late, in the microfinance sector that delivers social and financial services or only financial services to the urban and rural poor.

Keeping in view the important role played by ICTs, this issue of the newsletter deals with the application and use of information technology in microfinance. Mr Subodh Kumar Gupta elaborates on a wide spectrum of IT applications for microfinance operations. He uses both the operational and application dimensions of IT. He also throws light on the advantages of IT for the growth of the sector and the problems and best practices of computerisation.

Mr. I. Gopalkrishnan, R. Arjun and S. Narayanan discuss the seven lessons for effectively integrating technology and automating MIS for MFIs based on the practitioners’ experience. The learning here are that computerisation should only happen when the microfinance model is reasonably stable; there is no substitute for a comprehensive needs assessment through appropriate methods, prior to automating an MIS; MIS design must be kept simple and flexible; MIS must be in compliance with best practices, past data conversion must be looked at the time of designing an automated MIS; and finally, maintenance of an automated MIS is serious business.

Mr Narendrath provides an account of a computerised account system, run and operated by local youth-entrepreneurs call “Computer Munshis” who are employed by SHGs to maintain their accounts. He talks about how the systems work, the various actors involved, and their roles. His article showcases the success story of computer munshi Sumanta Singhadeb of Balarampur village in Purulia, West Bengal.

Mr Ramesh Arunachalam has attempted to look at microinsurance within the field of microfinance and provide real-life examples of how technology has been used to reduce delivery costs, enhance access and create other impacts including better services. He talks of Megatop Limited (an insurance broker in India), which has used e-Choupal, a web-based technology, for the promotion and marketing of a large variety of insurance products offered by several insurance companies. He elaborates on how technology is used to overcome geographical hindrances, like remoteness and distance, with regard to underwriting insurance policies. This entails a large number of repetitive transactions.

Finally, we have an excerpt from the speech of Dr. Y.V. Reddy, Governor, Reserve Bank of India on “Use of technology in the financial sector: Significance of concerted efforts”.

We look forward to your feedback and contribution in making the Patrika a platform to take the microfinance movement forward.

Mathew Titus
Information Technology Solutions, A Growth Driver for MicroFinance Institutions: An Overview

Introduction

The microfinance sector in India started in the mid-'80s but the application of information technology (IT) in microfinance operations is barely a decade old. When BASIX started its operations in 1996, it could not find any appropriate technology package and started in-house application development. Almost at the same time, CARE, in collaboration with PRADAN, started development of self-help group (SHG) monitoring software. Similarly, Cashpore developed software for Grameen methodology in the late '90s. By 2000, these packages had become operational in some places.

Though there were not many IT solutions providers till the late '90s in the microfinance segment, it was increasingly clear that microfinance operations required specialised software packages. In early 2000, some small software companies took the initiative to develop packages for the sector. By 2005, the requirement attracted the attention of big players such as IT major Infosys and ICICI, India's largest private sector bank, who entered the field to develop generic packages. Like in any other industry, in the microfinance sector also, Smith's invisible hand worked, and today more and more vendors are entering the field.

X Vector: The most popular applications in the microfinance field are

1) SHG Monitors: Such applications are required to capture the data of member-SHGs from the regular meetings where all transactions such as savings, loan disbursements and repayments take place. The non-government organisations (NGOs) promoting these SHGs require this to track savings and loans at the individual levels. The software keeps accounts of all the SHGs separately, without mixing them up. Each SHG is a different entity and each has its own management and accounts. But all SHG accounts have to be managed by a single software. There are many software packages available in this application – McFinancier from Sarada Computer, SafalFin 2 from Safal Solutions, FAMIS plus from BASIX/Sadguru, Subh Labh from Cooption, etc.

There are many variations in the user-interface (UI) but all have attempted to provide member-level analysis on savings, loans and repayments. In addition, new modules are being added with features that monitor activities such as bank linkage and dividend distribution to members.

2) Tracking of loans given by microfinance institutions (MFIs) to individuals, SHGs or joint liability groups (JLGs): Such applications are for MFIs who lend money to the individual, SHG or JLG. This is the most popular application at this moment. There are eight-10 software packages in the market which address this requirement. These can be broadly divided into three models – individual loan, loan to SHG and loan to JLG, following the Grameen method. There are lots of differences in UI. However, the loan analysis is the same in all the cases since there is no

Application of IT for Microfinance

The spectrum of IT applications for microfinance operations is quite wide. To understand the entire landscape, it is necessary to study it from two-dimensions – X-vector i.e. Applications and Y-vector i.e. Operational Area.
difference in how interest is computed, i.e. either flat or declining.

3) Insurance retailing applications: Currently, most MFIs find it easy to offer insurance to their clients at no additional cost. Insurance services are combined with the credit-and-saving services currently offered. These MFIs are retailers of big insurance companies. Appropriate software is required to enter the collection of premium and forward these premiums to the concerned insurer. The challenge lies in collecting the premium from the branch offices and depositing it with the Insurer from the head office. Claims have to be settled at the branch level and they have to be collected from the Insurer at the head-office level.

4) Credit Cooperatives: There are many credit cooperatives that deliver multiple financial services – credit, deposit, insurance and trading. Till recently, they have used only accounting packages but are now looking for loan tracking systems. A comprehensive software that provides all the financial services is required.

5) Rural Banking: Both district cooperative banks and regional rural banks require software that can enable them to carry out all banking transactions. Many IT companies are servicing this segment. All these applications have architecture that draws inspiration from mainstream banking. These applications require to be properly customised since they need to be integrated with SHG, JLG and the Individual methods of lending.

6) Chit fund company: This is a much older operation and all the big chit fund companies have evolved their own automated systems.

7) E-commerce applications: In the rural areas, practitioners are yet to work out e-commerce applications.

Most MFIs currently use the first and second applications listed above while cooperatives use the fourth one (See Credit Cooperatives). There is no authentic data as to how many MFIs have automated management information systems (MIS).

Y Vector: As per this application, the technology used for capturing transactions in the field are

1) Mobile technology: This enables the field staff to capture the transactions in the field itself. Such applications are also known as automated field transactions. These devices are used for the entry of transactions in the field.

2) Desktop-based application: Used for back-office MIS, all the transactions are first captured manually and then fed into MIS and later, MIS is used to produce reports for monitoring the operation from a central point. Usually such applications are loaded on a system in an MFI branch office.

3) Consolidation MIS: Consolidation is another important component of MIS. It is required not only for multiple-branch MFIs but also for single-branch MFIs because the MFI is likely to expand and add more branches in future.

4) Knowledge management: Once the data from multiple branches is consolidated, they are stored in a database. For the purpose of building of Knowledge Management applications, multi-dimensional databases are developed for storing them. Database mining tools, such as ETL and OLAPs, are used to transform data into knowledge.

Advantages of IT Solutions:
The use of IT offers several advantages, spurring the growth of the microfinance industry:

1. Attends to key constraints of the microfinance industry such as volume, human error due to volume of work or fatigue, and other security-related issues. Automation takes on the complete volume load and provides staff with the extra time needed for follow-ups. On this count,
technology is the best solution to dissipate the drudgery of repetitive tasks.

2. Creates standardised processes across an institution. Under the older manual system, there is the possibility of people introducing their own perceptions at various levels of recordkeeping. IT-powered systems prohibit anything other than what is standard.

3. Enables incentive-based system for the staff. Most MFIs plan to shift to the incentive system so that staffs doing good business are awarded. Such systems therefore bring objectivity in measuring each one’s performance and make it easy to set up incentive-based systems that would further propel the growth of the institution.

4. Offers flexible products that can be customised as per the needs of the customers. To attract more business there is the need for a variety of products and the flexibility to modify loan, deposit and insurance packages. When the products can be matched with the needs of the customer, MFIs can expect more revenue from the business.

5. Consolidates the transactions in a branch on a regular basis if data sync is done properly. A consolidated picture enables the MFI to understand the complete business and take appropriate action. For the consolidated report, appropriate data sync software is required to transfer the data from the branch to the head office-based Server, which is most crucial to keep the branch in order.

6. Provides a platform to build knowledge-mining tools. Appropriate software helps in mapping business intelligence from past data. Old data in electronic form is an asset to an MFI since it provides the business intelligence, based on which it can change the product features to provide better customer satisfaction and charge fees for additional services. Such efforts push the growth of the institution on to a new trajectory.

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**Problems in Computerisation**

While software can be a growth driver for many institutions, the story is not true for all. There are various reasons for institutions not being able to use software fully and some of these are:

1. **Legacy System**
   
   This occurs when an MFI is already using a rudimentary software package and is in the process of installing new software. There will be many differences in UI and staff may be used to one type of data entry. They may take time to first unlearn the older methods and then adopt the new system. New software needs customisation so that UI is at least made like the legacy system. Another problem is that the MFI may already have an accounting package. The new loan tracking system and the old accounting packages are required to talk to each other or else problems of interface will arise. The new system can establish interface with the legacy system only if the database is known and the read access right is available. Very often both these are not available. In such cases doing away with the legacy system is a better option.

2. **Absence of Computer-literate Staff**
   
   Many small-size MFIs do not have trained IT staff which is a must if technology infrastructure is to be put in place. Although vendors promise support, at least one trained staff member is of great help because he or she can take immediate action, report errors correctly and seek correct solutions from the vendor. Although this may seem to be expensive in the long run, it is worthwhile and worth the cost.

3. **Inexperienced Vendors**
   
   There are many inexperienced vendors in the market. Software developed by inexperienced vendors is not advisable. Normally, such software works well in the beginning. But does not stand the
Any dilution in the process has implications and could lead to inaccuracies and delay in implementation.

4. Inadequate Articulation and Documentation of Requirement

Proper articulation is often very difficult because requirement itself is dynamic in nature, especially in the changing market economy. Therefore, it is advisable to articulate sub-system wise. This means that different sub-systems of the operating systems need to be defined systematically and separately. The requirement should be divided into two parts – main and basic requirements and then sub-system wise. In the second round the detailed requirement should be taken sub-system wise.

5. Longevity of Manual Systems

Manual systems continue for a long time even after automation is introduced because staff fear making mistakes. The change to full automation is a painful transition. Organisations are often not ready and therefore care is required from both sides – vendor as well as client.

6. Issues with Software

Every software requires patient handling. There are bound to be glitches of all sorts, which will only be revealed once the MFI staff starts using the software. The vendor can solve and refine the software only with the cooperation of the users. It is akin to a horse-hoe – painful when first fitted but once broken in, enables the horse to gallop with ease. Similarly, MFI staff will face problems at the time of adopting the software but once comfortable with the technology, find that it eases the work pressure.

7. Issues of Transparency and Accountability

Many times higher management may want to automate but lower functionaries might resist for fear of mistakes being revealed or deliberate deviant practices coming to the fore. Thus, while staff may pay lip service to the software, in reality may go slow or even sabotage it. This calls for courage and maturity on the part of the MFI as it has to take the staff along, explaining the potential benefits of automation while rectifying the mistakes revealed and taking corrective action.

Useful Practices in Computerisation

1. System Study and Analysis

A systematic approach is important when initiating the process of automation. The first step is to study the system and analyse it. This process needs to be done by the client so that the operating system is streamlined. System analysis is carried out after system study. The analysis is used to clearly define all the processes – i) ones that will remain manual and ii) ones that are to be automated. Different people follow different approaches. After the system study and analysis, one needs to prepare a process-flow diagram with its use case, activity and trigger (clearly marking the processes that will remain manual and ones that will be automated). It is very useful if the study is carried out by a team drawn from both the vendor and client. Any dilution in the process has implications and could lead to inaccuracies and delay in implementation.

2. Outsourcing Project Management

Since MFIs do not have an understanding of system study and computerisation, it is a good idea to outsource project management. There are many organisations which take on the job. People who have experience in microfinance and software development are better suited for this. The role of a project manager is to first understand the users’ requirement and identify a suitable vendor and software for implementation. The project
manager also lays out the process of automation and provides training for smooth transition from a manual system to an automated one.

3. Agile Methods of Application Development

There are agile methods in response to the dynamic nature of operating processes. In case of small MFIs where the process is not clear in the beginning and it starts evolving while automation also gets rolling, agile methods like feature-driven development (FDD) work well. After system study, a document of requirement is prepared in terms of features. One feature is picked at a time and completed and then rolled out. Only when one feature is fully rolled out, the second feature gets developed and so on.

4. Recognising the New Process

It is important to understand that the new process that emerges from the automation process needs to be taken care of. For example, after automation, there is need for staff who will play the role of administrator, provide passwords to the team members and their access right depending on the role they play in the institution. There are other different roles that emerge which are often ignored but become the cause of failure.

5. E-readiness for Automation

E-readiness is often defined in terms of country and state — whether a country is ready for IT infrastructure and IT-driven growth or not. The same term can be used in the context of MFIs; whether an mFI has an IT policy, standardised processes and knows what it wants to automate. It also requires commitment for giving time for automation. It also means that an MFI is ready to deploy additional staff for the automation.

Conclusion

IT application, in case of MFIs, is like a kidney transplant that is inevitable if one wants a longer life. However, if the rest of the body rejects the new organ the results can be disastrous and can even lead to death. What is required is preparedness and willingness on the part of an institution to go through the transplant, however painful the process may be. It also calls for a patient doctor who is willing to not only provide a new organ but also to hold your hand even after the transplant and render all post-operative care till the patient is fit. Thus, IT solutions in the context of MFIs can be a key driver whenever vendor and institution are willing, motivated, and committed to the cause of automation.
Over the years we have repeatedly heard that ‘microfinance’ is an area that has significant scope for use of technology, especially with a view to reduce transactions costs. This is because microfinance is typically said to have a large number of small value and repetitive transactions. Agreeing that technology can play an important role in enhancing efficiency and reducing transactions cost, especially in such a setting. However, in an operational sense, neither has this happened at the pace and volume at which it should have happened nor has the impact of technology in reducing transactions costs been visible. Several years of struggle in attempting to fully integrate technology with microfinance has exposed our own naivete and we share, in this brief article, seven key lessons vital for effectively integrating technology and automating management information systems (MIS) for MFIs:

**Lesson #1: Do not computerise until the microfinance model is reasonably stable.** Often times, nascent microfinance institutions (MFIs), which are experimenting with their basic and core processes, find themselves faced with the never-ending task of (re)designing the MIS to perpetuity. For such MFIs and eternals pilot testers, automating the MIS, although not impossible, would be a very costly option. This is because of the significant down time associated with the MIS due to frequent changes to the core and basic processes. Having observed this in reality in an evolving microfinance sector in India in the mid-late 1990s, it seems best to guard against this as it not only affects the operations of the MFI but also impacts the vendor. Additionally, such frequent changes often results in loss of motivation for those working on the MIS and also makes the whole exercise prone to mistakes. However, this does not imply that flexibility cannot be a part of the MIS. Rather, it is to say that if an MFI is in an eternal pilot testing mode with regard to its basic processes, it perhaps better wait until there is a semblance of stability, before automating its MIS.

**Lesson #2: There is no substitute for a comprehensive needs assessment through appropriate methods, prior to automating an MIS.** A complete needs assessment is very critical and the time spent on this aspect, while automating an MIS, is well worth the effort/cost. Use of appropriate techniques like PRAs (Participatory Rural Appraisal) and FGDs (Focal Discussion Groups) with field workers and other management/operational staff could provide very valuable data. Most importantly, it should enable matching/reconciling information needs with the decision-making hierarchy within an MFI. Among other aspects, a proper needs assessment would provide detailed process maps and flows on various activities - with inputs, process descriptions and outputs and their sequential linkages. These are extremely valuable documents to have at the time of automating an MIS for microfinance.

**Lesson #3: Keep MIS design simple.** While automating, it is important to ensure that the MIS design is kept as simple as possible. Among other things, no information must be entered in multiple (or even two) places and also, all data going into the system must be cross-verified for utility and actual usage. Therefore, rationalisation of information flows, as per business processes and also organisation structure/hierarchy is extremely critical. A modular structure for the MIS, where different elements are linked and share information is an attractive option. It affords significant flexibility and facilitates compartmentalisation apart from synergistic benefits.

**Lesson #4: Build flexibility into the MIS.** The MIS design should also be flexible, to the extent possible and feasible. The best way to address this is by having a separate business rules module, with options for alternative methods of interest calculation, interest rates, loan installment repayment frequency, loan term and several other aspects including generating user-defined reports. This can save significant time and effort for the institution as well as the vendor in the later years, when some of the elements and assumptions in the core processes may have to be changed and/or new information and
The importance of negotiating a maintenance contract for the automated MIS at the design stage of the MIS itself should not be underestimated. It is important to recognise that for MFIs, like other organisations, it would be impossible to specify all information requirements, at any given point in time. Therefore, mechanisms that can provide flexibility like a user-modifiable business rules module and user definable reports are very necessary requirements and are best implemented.

**Lesson #5: Ensure compliance of MIS to best practices.** Six emerging, practices aspects are very critical while automating an MIS for an MFI:

- The sequence in which client repayments is being appropriated. This should always be as follows – fines (if applicable), interest overdue, interest due (if due on the date on which repayment comes in), principal overdue and principal. If principal is appropriated first, then, while portfolio quality would appear better, the yield on portfolio would reduce.

- The method of calculating age of a past due loan should be through the best practices method where age = date of calculating age – earliest unpaid overdue (in days). Using the installment method of ageing requires adjustments to be made as this method understates age of past due loan after the loan term and overstates age of past due loan within the loan term.

- While selecting past due loans for calculating Portfolio At Risk (PAR) of any age, the reference point is to choose every loan that has either fines or interest or principal overdue. Technically, it is possible to have past due loans with ‘0’ principal overdue and some interest/fines overdue and hence, using only principal overdue to determine aggregate loan outstanding of past due loans could actually understate risk in the portfolio.

- In case of ageing with weekly/daily installments, define age categories based on number of installments skipped rather than in days. This is to ensure appropriate provisioning. For example, in a weekly payment model, < 30 days past due could actually be four-five installments skipped.

- Ensure automatic integration of portfolio and accounting modules in that date entered in one, for example, loan disbursement through the portfolio module, automatically gets reflected in the other, as loan outstanding under assets in the balance sheet.

**Lesson #6: Past data conversion must be looked at the time of designing an automated MIS.** Migration of past data is very critical to continuity and it needs to be reviewed even at design stage, so that the new database is designed so as to take care of various aspects with regard to past data. Using professionals for data conversion is very critical. However difficult this process may be, the validity of the MIS using past data and matching of MIS outputs with audited statements from the past greatly enhances the robustness and credibility of the MIS. It also ensures smooth transition from one system to another and thereby, results in less disruption of operations.

**Lesson #7: Maintenance of the automated MIS is serious business.** Maintenance is an often ignored aspect and MFIs must be willing to pay for this aspect. The importance of negotiating a maintenance contract for the automated MIS at the design stage of the MIS itself should not be underestimated. The contract should clearly spell out what is maintenance and what is fresh programming work. Ambiguity here could result in misunderstanding with vendors.

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PRADAN’s mission is to enhance livelihoods on a large scale to empower the rural poor. In order to achieve this, PRADAN has been working in some of the very poor states of North India through decentralised projects for over 20 years. Identifying and organising poor women into SHGs, building their capabilities to enhance incomes either through better management of natural resources or by taking up home-based enterprises, linking them to the government’s poverty-alleviation programmes and commercial banks to leverage finances and developing linkages for economic services are the broad strategies followed by 25 project teams, each operating in a district or a few blocks within or across districts.

As of March 31, 2005, PRADAN has organised nearly 6,000 SHGs across seven states, with a total membership of about 80,000 rural poor women. These SHGs have cumulatively generated a savings of nearly Rs 7.5 crore and have mobilised loans worth about Rs 25 crore, out of which Rs 8.5 crore is from banks.

Formation of SHGs is an integral part of PRADAN’s livelihood-promotion strategy. The following step-by-step methodology has been developed by PRADAN over time for livelihoods promotion:

1. Promoting SHGs as Mutual Aid Associations
2. Developing SHGs as Financial Intermediaries—setting up linkages with banks and other financial institutions
3. Livelihood Planning with families and groups
4. Interventions in various livelihood sectors
5. Leveraging credit on a large scale from commercial banks and other financial institutions
6. Creation of different producer organisations to enable sustainable access to markets

The above description depicts a clear thrust on livelihoods. This focus on livelihoods entails that PRADAN would like its major energies to flow towards putting in place programmes and systems for livelihoods rather than anything else. Having strong SHGs is a very necessary condition for livelihoods but not sufficient. Bringing in new technologies, training, developing linkages with the market and building appropriate linkage organisations also require investment in adequate time and energy. Therefore it is important that the SHGs become independent of PRADAN within a reasonable timeframe so that the field officers are free.
If they had to depend on unreliable outsiders for this service on whom they have no control, they would never be truly autonomous.

Need for strong systems

If the SHGs have to be on their own for routine maintenance functions, it requires that they are equipped with strong, yet simple and user-friendly systems, especially for accounts and MIS because they are the most important ongoing function in the SHG. But, as can be expected in many of the backward areas that PRADAN operates in, rampant illiteracy and remoteness makes SHGs dependent on PRADAN for data processing and analysis. Therefore, decentralised/locally-based mechanisms are needed for accounts and MIS so that the SHGs are autonomous on that count.

The manual accounting system

The manual accounting system consisted of:

- A regular meeting transaction statement (RMTS) book or a cash day-book
- An on-time repayment tracking calendar
- A meeting minutes and attendance book
- Member pass books
- Bank pass books in groups that have bank accounts
- Formats for statements such as Trial Balance, member savings and loan balances, and balance sheet
- Formats for year-end profit distribution among members

These books (except the bank pass books) were maintained by a group accountant on a meeting-to-meeting basis. The service charge for the accountants for the work were paid for by the SHGs out of their income. Once in a month the data from the weekly meetings was consolidated and the trial balance of the group and the member-wise balances of savings and loans was produced.

The PRADAN staff kept track of the transactions in the groups through a carbon copy of the regular meeting transaction statement (RMTS) and the month-end trial balance. A professional accountant consolidated the trial balance figures to prepare the MIS reports for the project.

A major principle of developing an accounts and MIS system for the SHGs is to keep it simple and easy-to-comprehend for the SHG members. Equally important is that the groups are able to get updated information on the financial situation of the groups, again in a simple and understandable format, and on time. In no way should the groups be dependent on the PRADAN staff for accounts consolidation and reporting because accounting information is a basic requirement of the group. If they had to depend on unreliable outsiders for this service on whom they have no control, they would never be truly autonomous.

Therefore, as per the above methods, PRADAN’s systems (before the SHG accounts computerisation was initiated) did not develop as desired. All the SHGs actually did have group accountants who were capable of maintaining the basic daybooks. But in most cases they were not capable of posting data under different ledger heads and produce consolidated financial statements, leave alone analytic reports. The SHGs therefore demanded these services from PRADAN. Since the monthly statements were also the only source of PRADAN’s MIS, the professionals got engaged in preparing SHG financial statements. Thus the system, even though conceptualised as a simple and user-friendly one, in practice relied heavily on PRADAN for processing and analysing.

The Computer Munshi (CM) System

Keeping the set of fundamental principles such as simplicity, user-friendliness and timeliness in mind, and the practical realities, PRADAN then proposed to computerise the SHG accounts completely. Along with the process of computerisation of accounts
The objective is to have a community-based computerised accounting system for the SHGs that is sustainable

Currently there are 50 CMs in PRADAN serving the 6,000 SHGs in the 25 blocks. The setting up of these CMs has been supported by CARE-INDIA, SIDBI-SFMC and NABARD-MCID.

Overall Schema of the Computer Munshi System

The CM and the SHGs are an organically linked system. The overall layout of the system is as above. The data from the SHGs on a weekly basis travel to the CM through a network of drop boxes and messengers. The CM enters the data in the computer and sends back the outputs through the same network, in time for the next weekly meeting. The main statement that goes to the group on a weekly basis is called the RMTS II that lists the loan repayments to be made to the SHG in the next meeting. It lists each and every loan instalment and interest to be paid back to the SHG in the next meeting. The SHG uses this statement to monitor timely loan repayment. As mentioned earlier, there are other statements that are provided to the SHGs and PRADAN on a monthly basis.
It creates a computerised base for any future IT interventions/improvements (Simputers, PDAs)

basis. The tasks that each of the actor performs is detailed below:

Tasks of the various actors

The tasks of the group accountant:

1. Fill up the RMTS
2. Fill up each member pass book
3. Write the minutes book

The filled-up RMTS goes to the CM through a collection system (drop boxes and messengers).

The tasks of the CM:

1. Check the RMTS that has come from the group for mistakes
2. Enter the corrected data sheet into the computer
3. Prepare the group data consolidation and trial balance once a month
4. Receive payment from the group
5. Provide data to PRADAN for a charge, once a month.

The role of the PRADAN professional:

1. Introduce the books (minutes book, pass book) and RMTS in groups
2. Help the group identify the accountant and thoroughly train him/her in maintaining RMTS
3. Set up systems in the teams for the weekly data from the SHGs to reach the CM after every meeting
4. Hold monthly training programmes on accounts entry, trouble shooting etc
5. Make the members of the SHGs aware of the importance of accounts and transparent maintenance of the system, and also the necessity of paying the accountant and the CM
6. Recruit, train and equip the CM
7. Establish a sustainable business relationship between the SHGs and the CM
8. Regularly update skills of the CM, counsel him on how to improve services, provide on-job assistance
9. Carry out random checks on the financial statements that are produced by the CM for the groups
10. See that the groups are regularly providing the data to the CM and getting prompt outputs
11. See that the groups are regularly paying the CM and solve any conflicts that may be there
12. Constantly monitor the total system through Cluster meetings and occasional group visits.

Uniqueness of the system of Computer Munshi

Through the maintenance of SHG accounts and MIS based on a community based and financed network, the SHG accounts become autonomous of the NGO but are accurate and timely. This is the only such known attempt in the country.

As of today, even though the SHG movement is the largest microfinance programme in the country, the quality of the groups, especially of systems, has not been a prime concern of the various stakeholders. The attention has been mainly on the number of groups; quantum of bank linkage etc. and the crucial questions on quality have never been asked. The CM endeavour attempts to put the attention back on the quality of groups, especially of systems. In the majority of the SHG programmes it can seen that either the NGO staff themselves provide accounting services to the SHGs or the NGO staff are not bothered about the quality of SHG accounts, because they are pressed for time with activities that are more developmental in nature.

The challenge that has been taken up here is to ensure that the quality of accounts maintenance is ensured, but based on a community-based system, rather than the same remaining the concern of the promoting NGO, ad infinitum. The argument is that the task of accounts maintenance of SHGs is too important to be made dependent on an external system such as that of the NGO. And for the NGO, this is too non-developmental in nature to be engaged in at all. Thus we need a system owned and supported by the SHGs, where their routine tasks are carried out efficiently and the quality is also maintained.

The promoter NGO and credit provider also has access to timely and accurate information on all aspects of SHG functioning, in addition to financials, to help in strategising inputs. This system also enables the PRADAN staff to have access to information as and when required. They need do no extra data entry work to have access to the information.
It also facilitates access to information by other stakeholders such as banks and enable them make prior assessment about the health of the groups.

It creates a computerised base for any future IT interventions/improvements (Simputers, PDAs). The system that is being designed is the basic framework and revolves around the basic back-end software such as the McFinancier. Since it is a PC-based system, the basic data entry at the SHG meetings is done manually. So there are manually maintained components in the system. As technology evolves there are possibilities that the front-end, that is, the data entry in the SHGs also could get automated. The present system would be able to take in such changes in technology without making redundant any of the existing components. Such a system can be dovetailed with other services (such as health etc) for information transfer.

The system, as it is being designed, is also a system for online data transfer from the SHGs to the centralised computer and back. Various other data transfer requirements could be dovetailed on to this system with only incremental additions. These could be related to information on services, production information, market information etc.

**Training of Computer Munshi**

It is obvious that the CM would require strong support and handholding initially to set up the business. Yet it will be important to verify his/her basic credential before recruiting him/her. Out of experience we have found that the following qualifications are desirable:

1. Education up to a minimum of Class XII grade, that would equip him/her with minimum working knowledge of English
2. Working knowledge of computers if possible
3. Possess some business motivation; preferably has some background of entrepreneurial behaviour
4. High amount of social maturity; interpersonal skills in dealing with SHG women
5. Sound clerical aptitude

Wherever possible it would be desirable to shortlist one CM from a group of four or five through a process of a clerical aptitude test and interview. If the person already has some knowledge of computers and the basic software then he will be introduced straightaway to the software. If not, some preliminary computer skills training will be imparted.

To help him/her set up business, different factors have to be in place:

1. A ready-made market of about 150 SHGs
2. The groups are ready to receive services from the CM and pay appropriately for it
3. There is a data flow system in place

Then the CM has to be equipped with adequate infrastructure such as computer, the software, power back-up systems, a printer and so on. Once the business is set up, the PRADAN professional will have to provide monitoring and trouble-shooting support for about one to two years to see that it runs smoothly.

**Story of Sumanta Singhadeb of Balarampur, Purulia, West Bengal**

**My Story**

1. Name: SUMANTA SINGHADEB
2. Father’s Name: Late PADMALOCHAN SINGHADEB
3. Mother’s Name: KALPANA SINGHADEB
4. Permanent address: Vill-Lakshmanpur, P.O.-Bhawanipur
5. Dist.-Purulia (West Bengal), Pin-723143, Ph. No.-9434050328
6. Date of Birth: 04-08-1982
7. Marital status: Married
8. Sex: Male

Once the business is set up, the PRADAN professional will have to provide monitoring and trouble-shooting support for about one to two years to see that it runs smoothly.
My association with SHGs started way back in December 1998 when PRADAN initiated an SHG in my village Lakshmanpur with 18 women. My mother took an active part in its promotion by motivating the other village women. At that time I was in the 8th standard. The Dada (Elder Brother) from PRADAN and the SHG members approached me and asked me whether I would be interested in maintaining accounts of the SHG as the members were not literate enough. I immediately agreed to their proposal after which I attended the training of accountants imparted by PRADAN. Besides this I picked up the nitty-gritties of accounts on the job during the SHG meetings attended by the PRADAN officer. I learnt fast and also began helping other SHG accountants. The PRADAN professionals always appreciated my work which further inspired.

Soon I became a resource person for a large number of SHGs in my area. During this period all the SHG books of accounts were maintained manually. Many accountants had problems in preparing monthly Trial Balances, calculating interest dues, in maintaining On-Time-Repayment calendars. Finally in 2002, PRADAN introduced the computerised system for accounts maintenance. The PRADAN staff in-charge of my area, Avijit-da asked me whether I would like to attend the training. The training was done in PRADAN office at Kashipur. There were many others like me there. As none of us had even touched a computer before this, we were very nervous. But the training was very interesting and finally on the seventh day we had an exam on what we had learnt. I scored the highest in that exam, and it was a nice feeling and gave me a lot of self-confidence.

After returning from Kashipur, we had a meeting at Balarampur. In that meeting we planned how we would computerise the accounts of all the 120 SHGs at Balarampur. First we had to audit the SHG books and prepare the Master Data sheets for each SHG. Accordingly we fixed dates for each SHG cluster, and on a campaign mode prepared the Master Data sheets of all the SHG’s. Other accountants also helped me in the preparation of these sheets. The entire exercise took us nearly two months. Once this phase was over, we again had a meeting to decide how to initiate the system for weekly meeting data flow from the SHGs and its regular updating in the computer. In that meeting we decided to place drop boxes at strategic locations in each SHG cluster. The groups would drop the duplicate of the meeting data sheets (RMTS –1) in those boxes after conducting their meetings on respective days which were assigned for each cluster. Three messengers used to collect these sheets from 16 such boxes spread over three blocks and then file those with me. During that time there were two old computers at the PRADAN Balarampur office and I worked on one of these. The PRADAN staff started calling me Computer Munshi, and I must say I liked the new identity.

Each messenger was paid Rs 2 per RMTS and I was paid another Rs 2 per member per month for entries. This money was given by PRADAN. One day the computer became corrupt due to a virus and we lost all the data. So the entire process of feeding the Master Data had to be repeated. Then PRADAN decided to purchase a new computer and dedicate it to this purpose. This time Avijit-da told me that they would give me the computer if I agreed to take this activity of doing SHG accounts as a business. I would have to take the computer and accessories on loan and pay back the amount over a period of time. I could then own this computer; I was also free to do other computer-based businesses with this, provided I carried out my core activity without fail. I agreed to it and the next day I had my own new computer. We again had a meeting where Avijit-da helped me prepare my business plan. Subsequently I also attended a training at Ranchi, the cost for which was borne by PRA.

Gradually, in about a year, the system of regular data-flow to the PRADAN office, and the data entry in the computer was streamlined. We then started the process for sending feedback to the SHGs. Reports such as RMTS II, member savings and credit balances and monthly Trial Balances were required by the SHGs regularly. I assisted the PRADAN staff in training the SHGs on the utility of these financial statements and how they were to be
used. We also tried to convince the SHGs on the need to pay me for providing these statements. The PRADAN officers had repeated meetings with the SHGs and informed them that after six months they would have to bear the entire cost of operations, that is, the cost of data entry for the groups by a local accountant, the fee for messengers carrying the data sheets back and forth, and the fee of the Computer Munshi for data entry and generation of financial statements.

I was also informed that from September 2004 onwards I would also receive no financial support from PRADAN for the tasks I did for the SHGs. They would nevertheless continue to pay me for the data that they purchased from me. Avijit-da also told me that I would also have to start repaying the computer loan in monthly instalments of Rs 500. I decided to take up the challenge.

I decided that I would have to organise myself much more to be able to run my business properly. Avijit-da and I decided upon certain action points:

1. There would be a monthly meeting of PRADAN and the Computer Munshi for joint monitoring
2. Make a weekly calendar for the entire operation right from RMTS-I submission to RMTS-II reaching the SHG before its next meeting
3. Maintaining records of RMTS-II dispatched and money received, followed by payments to the peons and PRADAN
4. Issuance and collection of receipts for money collected from the SHGs

In October 2004 I decided to set up an independent office at my residence and shifted out of the PRADAN office. I operate from here currently. Much of my revenue is from payment by SHGs. Currently I am providing RMTS-II regularly to 79 SHGs, with a total membership of 1,383 women. The cost economics works out like this:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Total members in 79 SHGs:</th>
<th>1,383</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Collection from SHG for RMTS-II per month: 1383x2</td>
<td>Rs 2,766</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From PRADAN per month: 79x15</td>
<td>Rs 1,185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monthly payment to peons: 79x12</td>
<td>Rs 948</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost of stationery</td>
<td>Rs 545</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electricity</td>
<td>Rs 150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Income</td>
<td>Rs 3,951</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Expense</td>
<td>Rs 2,143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Net Income per month</td>
<td>Rs 1,808</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After setting up my independent office, I realised that a phone connection was important to keep in touch with the PRADAN office. Besides this I thought this could also be income-generating. So I immediately applied for and installed an STD booth in my office. While doing my SHG work I had seen that for photocopying various documents related to SHG account-opening, loan application etc, the groups had to go to Balarampur, which is about 13 km from my house. So I took a loan and installed a Xerox machine and also a scanner, seeing the potential of the business from the nearby high school, panchayat and other offices nearby. From this business I now earn about Rs 3,000 per month after paying for the assistant who now helps me. I have also cleared my loans for the STD and the photocopy machine.

My future plan is to set up a studio so that the SHG members can take photos for account opening. I am looking at creating a single-window service centre for SHG-related work. I am also teaching my wife how to operate a computer so that she can run the Computer Munshi operations in the future. I also plan to take an internet connection soon.

D. Narendranath
D. Narendranath works with PRADAN, New Delhi
Use of Technology for Microinsurance Distribution: Experiences from the Field

Technology is widely regarded as the solution to most problems but let us not forget that it is merely a means to achieving an end. In the case of the microfinance sector, it promises to be a good means to achieving the end goal of enhancing greater access to tailor-made financial services for low-income people in a convenient manner. This short article attempts to look at microinsurance within the field of microfinance and provide real-life examples of how technology has been used to reduce delivery costs, enhance access, and create other impacts including better service. These examples are highlighted below in terms of specific areas of insurance distribution:

Promotion/Marketing of Insurance:

Megatop Limited (an insurance broker in India) has used the e-Choupal platform (web-based) for promotion/marketing of a large variety of insurance products offered by several insurance companies. Typically, the Sanchalak at each of the e-Choupals, on a specific day or as per demand, uses the web platform (in vernacular) to present to potential farmers and low-income people an array of products (life and general insurance including health, weather, asset and the like) on offer. The premium calculator on the web immediately helps in generating various premium options as also other product features like sum assured, bonus etc. This online sensitivity analysis, apart from enhancing sheer choice and facilitating compatibility, across an array of products, has really helped enhance transparency in terms of detailing product features and benefits for the low-income customer. It has also ensured that IRDA norms and conditions are met, with regard to customer information provision and literacy.

Megatop also uses multimedia technology, whereby audio-visual vans (AV vans), travel around the villages and show vernacular ‘flash-based’ insurance movies to potential low-income buyers. In a remote and under-reached area like Bundelkand, Madhya Pradesh (just an example), the impact of the e-Choupal platform/AV vans has been phenomenal in terms of reducing cost, and ensuring continuous availability and local reach of the insurance message. Likewise, Tata AIG, a life insurance company in India, has similarly used AV vans in Andhra Pradesh to promote its insurance products to low-income people, in a friendly and transparent manner. A critical aspect that needs to be noted here is that ‘marketing’ of insurance is never easy among the rural poor, especially given the negative perceptions associated with it because of past (bad) experiences. This is where the use of technology has really helped insurance companies and intermediaries alike, in ensuring a continuous presence through a technology medium that is essentially low-cost in comparison to its overall outreach/impact.

Preliminary Underwriting Work:

Megatop has further innovated in using technology to overcome remoteness and distance with regard to underwriting insurance policies. As soon as a proposal is received orally at the village, the Sanchalak fills it out on the computer and sends it to the Megatop headquarters by e-mail. From here it is dispatched (almost the same day) to the respective insurers who, in turn, go through the proposal and send it back to Megatop with comments and/or acceptance, for onward transmission (back) to the respective Sanchalak - all this in record time because it is all electronically done.

And, indeed, the savings in time/effort and resultant impact on cost is phenomenal - it would easily take several days for a proposal to reach Megatop headquarters from a remote location (like Bundelkand) and, in turn, for the same to be forwarded from the Megatop headquarters to the insurer’s office. If changes are required, the time can be easily doubled. It would not be incorrect to say that anything between two-three months may be required for an insurance policy to be issued to a poor farmer in a remote location if this

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1 The article draws ideas significantly from a piece of global research done by Ramesh S Arunachalam for Enterplan (UK) and Genesis (South Africa) with regard to Distribution of Micro-Insurance (2006) as also insights and information from partners (Megatop and Tata-AIG) of the DFID Enterplan Financial Deepening Challenge Fund.
technology were not available. The reduction in time to between two-three weeks is significant and it can perhaps be further reduced if and when digital signatures are accepted as a norm. Apart from time and the associated costs, the greatest impact of using the electronic filling, transfer and vetting of insurance proposals from remote rural areas is that of being able to respond to the needs of the clients, in a quick and timely fashion. Discrepancies can be corrected quickly and also, in case of complete insurance proposals, covers can be provided almost immediately - a feature that more and more low-income clients are demanding.

**Premium Collections:**

Like in traditional microfinance, premiums in microinsurance tend to be small and are often collected on a weekly/monthly basis. This entails a large number of repetitive transactions. Some insurers and intermediaries have used electronic transfer of premium payments as a strategy to reduce transaction costs. Two notable examples are CARD (Philippines) and TUW SKOK (Poland), which transfer premium payments electronically. Megatop (India) uses an innovative strategy with regard to premium remainders. Through the use of a special software (being piloted), the Sanchalaks are provided remainders on forthcoming premium payments from their respective clients, at least two weeks in advance. This then offers the Sanchalaks the opportunity to remind their respective clients in villages about forthcoming premium payments to be made. In many ways, this has helped avoid/reduce delinquency on premium payments and also prevented/reduced lapsed policies. Tata-AIG is now piloting a PDA-based solution that will facilitate on-site receipt printing by CRIGs (Tata-AIG’s rural community insurance groups) with regard to premiums collected and also on-line transmission of the same data to their branch/headquarters. Here again, technology has helped in ensuring quicker cover for the low-income clients as also enabled tighter internal controls, as premiums are generally collected in cash.

**Claims Management:**

Claims management is one of the key features in insurance and is an aspect that has potential to enhance customer satisfaction (in case of good management of this function) or cause dissatisfaction, in case it is handled poorly. Here again, technology has been used by insurers and intermediaries alike, to enhance the effectiveness of claims management.

The web platform is used by CRIGs to track claims and inform anxious customers, who otherwise would have to wait long to know about the status of their proposal, especially given the remoteness of some areas. This has enabled Tata-AIG to regularly inform its low-income clients with regard to their claims. Megatop also use the Choupal platform to track claims of its clients and Sanchalaks and keep anxious customers, waiting for the claim payouts, regularly informed of the status. This has indeed generated significant goodwill for Megatop and Sanchalaks among its low-income clients. CARD (Philippines) has innovated and makes payment of claims electronically into CARD bank accounts of clients - the unique advantage to CARD being that it is part of a group of institutions that deliver a range of microfinance services including credit, savings and insurance to the same low-income clients.

To summarise, insurers and intermediaries have integrated technology into the front-end insurance processes that are close to the customer. Apart from impact on cost reduction, the use of technology has helped insurers and intermediaries alike to overcome disadvantages of distance, remoteness and high transactions time/effort. In the future, as segmentation and decentralisation of insurance claims management, based on value and complexity of the claims occur, technology is expected to play a far greater role in enhancing service, reducing costs, and expanding access to hitherto un-reached customers.

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2 Source: CGAP Good Bad Case Studies on Micro-Insurance: One on CARD and another on TUW SKOK. See references at end of section.

Ramesh S Arunachalam

Independent Microfinance Practitioner and Country Manager of the DFID Enterplan Financial Deepening Challenge Fund in India.
Technology is a major key to improve service outcomes for vulnerable populations. It can mean the difference in lives saved. Deployment of technology in the financial sector can enhance the process of achieving efficiency, stability, competition and above all service to the common person. The foundation for large-scale induction of IT in the banking sector was provided by the recommendations of the committees headed by Dr. C. Rangarajan, in 1984 and 1989.

To mention a few technology-related initiatives of the RBI, first is the establishment of the mechanized cheque processing systems using the Magnetic Ink Character Recognition (MICR); second, the technological infrastructure created by the IDRBT since the establishment of the INFINET in 1999; third, the introduction of the Real Time Gross Settlement (RTGS) System which has not only resulted in compliance with the Core Principles for Systemically Important Payment Systems of the Bank for International Settlements (BIS), but has also paved the way for risk-free, credit push based fund transfers settled on a real time basis and in the central bank money. Fourth, creation of electronic fund transfer systems which has now been further enhanced as the National Electronic Funds Transfer (NEFT) System since November 2005 and alleged as having enhanced security features as well as facilitating retail funds movement with multiple daily settlements, enabling customers to receive funds swiftly. Finally, in order to improve efficiency and substantially reduce the time taken for cheque processing, the Reserve Bank has initiated steps to introduce a Cheque Truncation System (CTS).

Over the years, the role of the Reserve Bank is changing in tune with the increased levels of maturity of the markets and the financial system as a whole. In realizing the need for financial inclusion which involves the provision of banking services to the vast multitude of population so far excluded from such services, some of the challenges which need to be effectively addressed include lack of adequate infrastructure in rural areas, relatively low volumes of transactions, comparatively higher transaction costs, and other factors such as the literacy levels of target customers etc.

It is expected that with enhanced use of rural oriented technology, the bank would be able to provide value addition to services offered to the rural clients and further expand its outreach in a sustainable manner. Banks could consider the feasibility of using smart cards for the ‘No Frills Accounts’ so as to help expand the coverage of the banking services and facilitate the garnering of the much-needed low-cost deposits.

Some of the critical factors, which need to be adequately addressed while dealing with ever-evolving IT is the need to ensure appropriate security and integrity of the data processed and stored in IT systems with an adequate backup. Another major requirement relates to disaster recovery management and the fail-safe business continuity plans. The Reserve Bank, along with the IDRBT, is working on the use of multiapplication smart-card systems which can serve as a bank account and also function as a store of electronic cash, as a data repository for essential information relating to the card holder, with built-in security features such as biometric identification, and which can also double up as an entitlement identifier or as a social security card.
Some other impetus which can provide for greater financial inclusion include use of computer systems which do not require uninterrupted electric power supply, networking using radio frequency and other non-conventional methods, centralization of processing systems leading to lower processing costs, provision of homegrown customized systems such as the low cost, multi-lingual ATM etc. Here again, the approach of sharing of IT resources would have much to commend itself.

Technology has played a significant role in improving the efficiency of the financial markets. Acceptance by the Government of electronic challans has substantially reduce paper usage, provide for Straight Through Processing and obviate errors arising from the reconciliation process, wrong data entry, etc. Computerization of State treasuries throughout the country has helped in speedier accounting of receipts and payments of the State Government departments, apart from serving as a road map for achieving end-to-end connectivity amongst various accounting agencies involved.

However, while use of the state-of-the-art technology within the banking system is an asset, it also poses a challenge to the conventional banker and government accountants due to complexity of transactions and processing. So care must be paid to ensure that the transactions conducted are secure from end to end and are retrievable at any point of time. Be though as it may, our march towards a technologically advanced and efficient, effective, progressive and inclusive financial system though marks a good beginning, poses an era of challenge as well.

Dr. Y. V. Reddy
Dr. Y. V. Reddy, Governor, Reserve Bank of India speech on the occasion of Banking Technology Awards Function, 2006 at the Institute for Development and Research on 2nd September, 2006.
# Sa-Dhan’s Mission Statement

Sa-Dhan’s mission is to build the field of Community Development Finance Institutions, help members and associate institutions in rendering better services to low income households, particularly women, both in rural and urban India, in their quest for establishing a stable livelihood for improving their quality of life.

## Publication

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