



Interviews with Naimur Rahman, OneWorld South Asia

1. Please introduce yourself and the agency you work for to our readers. What is your job like? What do you focus on?

N.R.: *I am Naimur Rahman, and I serve as Director of OneWorld's South Asia Regional Centre. OneWorld is a global network of people and civil society groups, that aim to harness the democratic potential of information and communication technologies to bring about a world, where resources are shared in a fair and sustainable way, where human rights are nurtured and protected, and where democratic governance structures enable people to shape their own lives. Based in New Delhi, OneWorld South Asia translates its mission by using ICTs towards realisation of the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) – through provisioning of innovative knowledge services at the grassroots, and by appropriating community and emerging media tools to mainstream people-centric voices in development initiatives.*

2. Describe to us the programme on ICTs, especially the use of mobile phones for rural development, which you are working for. Why do you find mobile phones to be particularly interesting in your line of work? What is the power of public private partnerships?

N.R.: *Across developing countries, including India, mobile phones are quickly becoming an affordable and useful tool to create transformational opportunities – providing new ways to access services and support livelihoods – and be a catalyst to bridge, what we call “knowledge inequity”. Today mobile usage has enabled poor communities to access business information – even for small businesses like fishing or farming – without travelling long distances, or incurring costs in time and money.*

In this context, I would like to quote an interesting mobile based community initiative that my organisation OneWorld manages in partnership with BT (British Telecom) and Cisco. This programme, LifeLines uses an innovative mix of telephony and internet to provide personalised agro-advisory services to over 100,000 farmers of North and Central India.

3. What positive impacts could you achieve for agriculture, food security and/or rural development? How, in your opinion, can we empower local farmers to really benefit from this application?

N.R.: *Through the LifeLines service, farmers can access on-demand knowledge and personalised agri-advisory services on farm related queries – in voice mode –*

with the mobile hand-set serving as a first-mile access device. The innovative shift of paradigm, i.e. using voice as medium and telephony as tool, has concurrently mitigated barriers of connectivity, language and literacy for knowledge access by rural communities. And the results have been phenomenal. LifeLines today attracts around 450 queries a day, and initial rounds of feedback from the field indicate 21% year-on-year productivity and income growth for farmers.

4. Did it also cause a change in working or living habits or even of the whole culture for the locals? Could you give examples, please?

N.R.: *The fact that a technology-based phone helpline service has today become integrated in the lives of many farmers is a significant change in itself. This assumes more import when we understand that these farmers otherwise have only very limited exposure to technology; some had not even used a phone in their lives. At an initial stage, these farmers were quite apprehensive/wary of using the LifeLines service. But with advocacy, mobilisation and facilitation by the field volunteer, and demonstrated results, these farmers have become fairly forthcoming to use the service. There are instances of a single farmer calling up LifeLines as many as 70 times. In addition to that there has also been an increased acceptance of the LifeLines field volunteer as a support agent for farmers, who helps them to access knowledge from LifeLines. Earlier the volunteer used to approach farmers asking them if they had an agri-query to be put to LifeLines, today the farmers get in touch with the volunteer themselves whenever they have any need for information.*

5. What are the challenges you are facing in your projects? Technically, socially, economically, ...

N.R.: *A challenge as well as an opportunity is to enable provision of the answers to the farmers as early as possible. For this we are exploring a system of SMS-alerts, whereby the farmer will be informed of his answer as soon as it has been provided by experts at the backend*

The service is yet to reach the ultra-poor in rural regions that do not have economic capacity to access a paid service. We are now working to address this barrier through innovative base-of-the-pyramid economic models.

6. What are your predictions for the future?

N.R.: *Mobile technology carries such enormous potential that making predictions is a risky proposition. I however would like to make two key and inter-related points:*

- a) there is scope and space to exploit the mobile phone as much more than just a 'tool for talking'; and*
- b) we need to create innovative knowledge services for the rural community that can be delivered on mobile networks*

Such value added services would greatly enhance the economic impact of mobile penetration across the Global South.