Perspectives and challenges of common service centres towards e-governance

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Abstract: Common service centres (CSC) run by village level entrepreneurs (VLEs) are expected to contribute significantly towards e-governance by providing government services. Even after 12 years of their inception, rural people are not much aware about facilities in these centres vis-a-vis VLEs running them are still facing a lot of challenges. The study was conducted in the year 2019–2020 by conducting a survey of 200 respondents in rural areas supported by both qualitative and quantitative data. The present study is aimed to investigate the reasons for poor performance of CSC. Challenges and problems faced by VLEs running them. The study contributes towards interdisciplinary study of digital initiatives to serve rural, semi urban population in India and challenges of micro entrepreneurship.

Keywords: electric governance; common service centres; CSC; village level entrepreneur; VLE.

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1 Introduction

Common service centres (CSC) are strategic cornerstone of Digital India Program. They are intended to transform rural India by providing easy access to government services, public utility services, social welfare schemes, healthcare, financial, agriculture services, education and skill development courses at one place by making use of information and communication technology (ICT) tools. In order to make CSCs sustainable and generate business for village level entrepreneurs (VLEs) more and more government services have been incorporated recently by the government. Vis-a-vis VLEs are the key stakeholders of CSC. These are the micro entrepreneurs running them across the country through their entrepreneurial skills. Selection, training and capacity building of VLEs are the major concerns in successful implementation of CSC scheme for e-governance.

Further, dissemination of government services through e-governance has always been a much sought after dream. It involves the integration of ICT in all the processes and government schemes for their effective dissemination. Digital India scheme is meant to empower rural citizens with information, knowledge and skills, enabling them to
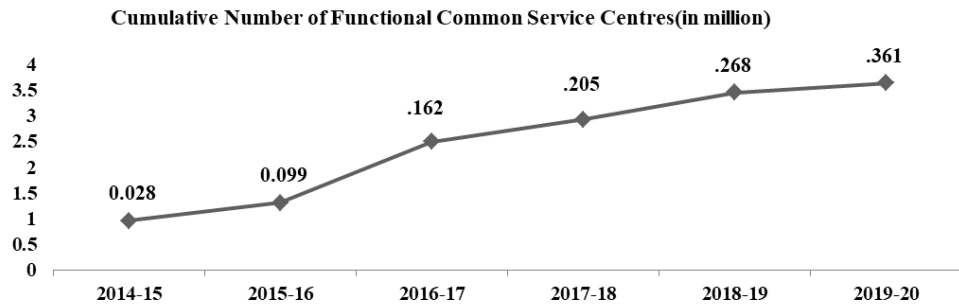
participate actively in the governance.[1] Diffusion of ICT are essential for the development of nation (Aker and Mbiti, 2010). ICT tools, such as computers and mobile phones, have emerged as essential tools for delivery of developmental services in rural areas (Reeni and Isha, 2009). There has been lot of schemes and policies incorporated by government from time to time in this direction, ranging from updating of its websites, development of android applications and many more (https://www.meity.gov.in/content/common-services-centers-0).

Launching of CSC in each panchayat in year 2006 (DIT, 2006) was a great boost in this direction, to connect rural people with facilities and benefits of government schemes. Development-oriented tele centres, mainly organised as PPPs, are increasing at a faster rate in India than in any other country (Madon, 2005). Initially, public private partnership (PPP) was finalised as the modus operandi for opening and functioning of CSC. PPPs have been advocated for healthcare services, water and sanitation, and infrastructure projects (Miraftab, 2004) in developing countries.

In 2008 private players namely GNG Pvt. Ltd. and Zoom developers entered into the business by opening about 2,200 CSC in country. These companies were responsible for launching, nurturing and development of Sugam Kendras or Lok Miter Kendras. VLEs were scrutinised and contracted to run CSC by charging money from them. They acted as key drivers to run CSC in far flung villages by investing and starting a business of their own. Department of information technology (DIT) was acting as nodal agency in PPP mode for this purpose, with an objective to implement much sought after government scheme effectively and transparently. But inefficient policies, lack of vision and inappropriate management practices of Zoom developers and GNG Pvt. Ltd. proved to be a failure. After successful implementation of many CSC in the year 2012 many of them were struggling for their survival and existence due to management issues and lack of proper guidance. Consequently, VLEs failed to run their business the way as they were expecting earlier. Despite having made huge investment as security fee, registration fee and in infrastructure there was least inclination of villagers towards CSCs resulting in nominal income for VLEs.

Consequently, in 2015 the government changed the mode of functioning of CSC from PPP to autonomous mode by making them to function directly under its supervision and guidance (https://www.cs.cgov.in/aboutus). As a result, CSC 2.0 scheme was launched in the same year to expand the outreach of CSCs in each gram panchayat of the country and to make it a successful venture. Provisions for hassle free registration of VLEs, their training and mentoring were made. As on March 31, 2020 a total of 360,873 of CSC are functional in India[2] having witnessed a growth of 259.38% in last five years. The scheme has impacted rural lives by providing large bouquet of e-services through a single delivery platform. Recently Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (GOI), has partnered with many originations to bring millions of jobs opportunities to rural youths, launch telemedicine services, deliver banking services under the CSC scheme.[3] It has also ensured sustainability of village level micro entrepreneurs through maximum commission sharing. Presently CSCs are playing the vital role of a catalyst in extending to technology and e-services for citizens especially in far flung rural areas of the country. They are enabling grass root penetration of digital services, hence fostering participation in governance by all citizens.

Figure 1 Growth trend of common service centres

Cumulative Number of Functional Common Service Centres(in million)

Source: https://meity.dashboard.nic.in/Dashboard.aspx

2.1 CSC in Himachal Pradesh

The CSC scheme was implemented in Himachal Pradesh with rest of country in the year 2008, with a goal of start 3,366 Lok Miter Kendras (CSC) in phased manner under PPP. For implementation purpose the state had been divided into three divisions namely: Shimla, Kangra and Mandi. In its evolutionary process the scheme is functioning well in some parts of the state, while others are still struggling for business. With government initiatives some of the CSC is running from Panchayat offices, giving a boost to the business of VLEs. Transaction amounting to Rs. 19,352,491/-recorded from April 1, 2017 to June 30, 2018[4] from government to customer transactions in the state. As on March 31, 2020 there were a total number of 3,371 functional CSCs in the state.

2 Literature review

In depth review of literature has been carried out to find out the research gap and areas where research can be carried out for effective functioning of CSC. CSC is acting like a link between government services and millions of villagers living in far flung areas of the country. By opening CSC in PPP mode government wish to disseminate e-services through VLEs to millions of villagers. But, the identification, training, development and growth of these entrepreneurs have posed a major challenge towards the implementation and dissemination of e-governance services. Nanda (2006) recommended that development can be achieved more effectively through e-governance in the state. Madon (2009) advocated the Government of India (GoI) initiative to embraced entrepreneur-owned tele centres as a key component of reform through e-governance in rural areas. Yadav and Tiwari (2014) highlighted the challenges like illiteracy, unawareness and lack of suitable interface for the implementation of e-governance services. Pariso and Marino (2020) revelled that digital divide is also a major and complex issue for implementation of e-governance. Ghareeb et al. (2019) emphasised supply-demand disconnect as a common problem towards e-governance. Adler and Goggin (2015) emphasized on voluntary participation of citizens in all age group including older population towards growth of society. Kaushik and Anant (2013)

discussed benefits of common service centres for rural population, identified rural entrepreneurship as a major bottlenecks of the project towards implementation of e-governance. Srinivas and Somayajulu (2011) emphasised that higher literacy rates and awareness of lok mitra kendras among citizens are prerequisites for success of e-governance mission in rural India. Baker (2005) advocated online government services for the upliftment of society, while Vijai (2020) emphasised on cloud computing and cloud based e-governance for its successful implementation in India. Burn and Robins (2003) devised the change management process through e-governance in organisational change process. Maijer (2015) developed model of e-governance innovation, highlighting different phases and barriers towards its implementation. Emphasised on need of comprehensive strategies to tackle barriers of e-governance. Chen et al. (2006) proposed that e-governance impact the structure and functioning of public administration through enhanced, efficient and cost-effective communication of the government with public. Ebrahim and Irani (2005) devised architectural framework by defining standards, identifying infrastructure and technology for successful implementation of e-governance. Gilbert et al. (2004) emphasised that trust of people for e-governance services is the most significant factors towards its successful dissemination. Babita et al. (2008) devised a model named unified theory of acceptance and use of technology (UTAUT) for adoption and successful use of ICT in government organisations in developing countries. Venkatesh et al. (2003) further examined the behavioural implications of UTAUT model for its effective implementation in organisations. Shah (2007) highlighted that illiteracy, lack of infrastructure, security and privacy of data with geographical, social and economic disparities are major barriers in full fledge implementation of e-governance. Suggested significant investments in government process re-engineering, capacity building, training, assessment and awareness. Almaiah and Nasereddin (2020) emphasised on website quality, trust of internet, trust of government for effective adoption of e-governance system.

Wagner et al. (2003) explored needs and techniques of knowledge management towards e-governance. Suggested virtual communities as most appropriate solution towards e-governance for developing countries.

While there is a rich documentary available on the adoption, challenges and significance of e-governance across organisations and countries, very little is known about the perspectives and challenges of CSC and VLEs and services that are required most by the villagers at micro level. The present study is aimed to find out the business perspectives of CSC for villages level entrepreneurs operating CSCs in far flung remote areas of the country. An attempt has also been made to find out the services that are required most by the villagers from CSC.

3   Objectives and methodology

The study is aimed to find out the functioning mechanism of CSC and to evaluate the success rate of scheme after ten years of its implementation in Himachal Pradesh. Likewise, problems faced by VLEs, supposed to be the ultimate source for functioning and success of e-governance scheme, meant for villagers in far and remote areas of the state. To fulfil these objectives of the study following research issues have been outlined.

- To assess the awareness level of villagers towards functioning and availability of services provided by CSC to them in their locality.

- To find the problems and challenges faced be VLEs in running their CSC in rural areas.

- To evaluate the services those are needed most by the villagers from CSC.

- To make an assessment of services provided by VLEs through CSC.

- To find out the initiatives being made by the government towards successful implementation of this scheme in the state.

The study may throw some light on the awareness level of villagers, their perception towards CSC, problems and challenges faced by VLEs as well as the reasons for the failure of most of the CSC located in rural areas. The study may help in formulation of better policies and strategies for the effective implementation of CSC, which is the long cherished goal of government to disseminate its services to citizens through e-governance.

The study is based on both primary and secondary data. Secondary data has been collected from DIT, Government of Himachal Pradesh. For collection of primary data multistage clustered random sampling was used. The study was carried out in three districts namely: Mandi, Bilaspur and Hamirpur of Himachal Pradesh in the year 2019–2020. Further, two blocks were selected from Hamirpur district and one each from Bilaspur and Mandi. A total of 200 VLEs were surveyed for the purpose of study. The scope of study is confined to explore the perception of villagers towards CSC as well as functioning of these centres after ten years of their implementation. The study was carried out only in three districts of Himachal Pradesh is the limitation of study. The study is aimed to find out services that are required most by villagers through these centres as well as problems, challenges and expectations of these micro level entrepreneurs.

**Table 1** VLEs: an overview of socio economic profile

Particulars of VLEs		Number	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	152	76
	Female	48	24
Age	25–30	20	10
	30–35	56	28
	More than 35	124	62
Educational qualifications	10+2	72	36
	10th	16	8
	Graduation	80	40
	Post-graduation	32	16
Primary occupation	Computer centre	24	12
	CSC	144	72
	Shop	32	16

Source: Primary data

Regarding the socio economic profile of VLEs, the data indicate that VLEs had a good educational background as 56% were either graduates or post graduates and 36% had education up to 12th. Only 8% were matriculate. The majority were male (76%) having age more than 30 years (80%). It was further observed that majority of VLEs (72%) are engaged only in running CSC as their primary occupation, while 28% of them are either having a shop or computer centre as well. Business growth is the main concern of VLEs, but most of them are just either sustaining their business or are getting closed due to nominal footfall of villagers in their CSC.

In order to assess the awareness level of villagers the feedback was taken from VLEs in studied blocks. Figure 2 discuss the awareness level of villagers about the functioning of CSC. It can be concluded from Figure 2 that awareness level was initially high in Bamson (91.67%) and Bhoranj (71.43) block. Since district Hamirpur is a highly educated district in Himachal Pradesh, so people were aware of this concept. While in case of district Mandi and Bilaspur people were not much aware of the concept and normally do not visit to these CSC to render their services. Villagers are still of traditional mindset, where they rather prefer to visit government offices. On the other hand, VLEs keep on waiting them in their offices whereas they are supposed to provide services to rural people at their doorsteps for payments of utility bills.

Figure 2   Awareness level of villagers about the facilities available in CSC (see online version for colours)
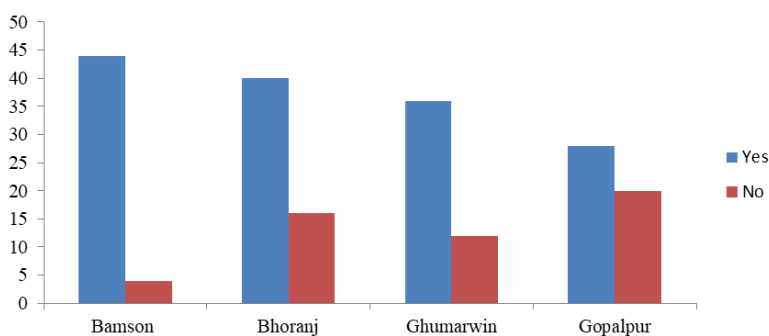
Source: Primary data

4   Challenges faced by VLEs

VLEs are the focal points to address this highly ambitious project of the government. Identification of efficient, skilled and ambitious entrepreneurs for running and of these CSC is one of the key concerns. As of the primary occupation of these entrepreneurs are concerned, 72% of them has started their business exclusively as CSC, while 12% of them are running computer centres as well, remaining 16% of them were running small shops with CSC. It has been further reported that 74% of entrepreneurs are earning less than 5,000 rupees in a month from their CSC while average expenses to run these centres was more than 3,000 rupees a month, which include shop rent, electricity bill, internet bill, etc. Major challenges faced by VLEs while running their business are unawareness, trust of villagers (41.5%), and payment of shop rent (19.5%) since most of them are primarily located in small towns and monthly income from CSC is merely around

4,000–5,000 rupees. While the charges of internet (11.5%), technical problems and technical support (11%) are some other problems faced by these entrepreneurs.

Further, payment of additional charges as commission rates for payment of electricity and water bill payments has been observed as a major challenge for these entrepreneurs. As, most of the villagers rather prefer to deposit their bills in nearby government offices while they have come to the market for other purposes as well. Since CSC in Himachal Pradesh are viable only in market of villages, most of these places already have electricity and IPH offices.

Table 2 Challenges faced by VLEs in different blocks

| Challenges faced | Number of VLEs | | | | | |
	Bamson	Bhoranj	Ghumarwin	Goplapur	Total	Percentage (%)
Trust of villagers	21	23	20	19	83	41.5
Shop rent	9	12	8	10	39	19.5
Internet, electricity changes	5	8	6	4	23	11.5
Technical support	6	5	5	6	22	11
Percentage of commission	4	3	3	4	14	7
Additional charges	1	4	4	3	12	6
Timely payment of commission	2	1	2	2	7	3.5

Source: Primary Data

Table 3 Analysis of services that are availed by villagers from CSC

| Services availed by villagers in CSCs | Number of VLEs | | | | | |
	Bamson	Bhoranj	Ghumarwin	Gopalpur	Total	Percentage (%)
Electricity, water bills	16	14	13	12	55	27.5
Land revenue records	13	19	12	10	54	27.0
Aadhar card updation	7	6	7	5	25	12.5
Banking services	4	5	6	5	20	10.0
PAN card	3	5	3	4	15	7.5
Voter card registration	2	3	1	4	10	5.0
Mobile, dish recharge	2	3	3	1	9	4.5
HRTC bookings	1	1	1	3	6	3.0
Application for govt. job	0	0	2	4	6	3.0

Source: Primary Data

4.1 Most rendered services by villagers from CSC

CSC are aimed to act as a one stop solution to provide every type of government services related to: bill payments, land revenue records, PAN card and ADHAR card updation, voter card registration, banking services, advance bookings in buses or trains, mobile and

dish recharge, apply for government jobs, grievance handling, micro insurance and many more services. So that villagers may not be needed to visit far off places or government offices to get these jobs done.

It can be analysed from Table 2 that most of the villagers visit CSC majorly for the payments of their utility bills (27.5%) or matters related to land revenue records (27%). For rest of the concerns to obtain any certificate like bonafide residents, category certificates, banking, Aadhar cards, pan cards, etc. they still prefer to visit the relevant government office.

This inclination of villagers towards government offices is generally due to their life time mentality, trust in government offices and lack of awareness about the availability of various government services in CSC.

4.2   *Government initiatives towards strengthening of CSC*

Government from time to time has taken several initiatives for the successful implementation of CSC. Recently, in the year 2018 the scheme has been renamed as CSC 2.0. Where registration formalities have been made very simple and hassle free, without any security fee or registration charges for these micro entrepreneurs. Commission charges have been fixed and payment is directly credited through internet banking as soon as the cash collected is deposited by them.

5   Conclusions and suggestions

Although CSC are functioning well in some parts of the country, but most of them are still struggling for their survival in Himachal Pradesh. Reasons reported for their poor functioning were: lack of entrepreneurship zeal among VLEs, non-clarity of state government policies towards effective functioning of CSC, existence of both government offices for bills payments and common service centre at the same place pose a major competition for these entrepreneurs, missing connection between government mission, vision for CSC and VLEs running them, mindset of VLEs as most of them still presume to be supported and nurtured by government through financial support. Somehow, they have developed the notion of being government employees by having privilege to provide government services to villagers. They expect every customer to visit in their centres and respect them like government employees, rather than having the acumen of a businessman with zeal to provide the best services to their customers even at their homes for the payment of bills or other utility services.

On the basis of findings of the study, some suggestions for effective functioning of CSC are: arrangement of funds for refinement and improvement of training programs for VLEs by arranging their get-together, motivational speeches, training programs at district head quarter for 2–3 days once in a year or six months. This platform will enable interaction among VLEs at the district level, enabling them to learn from experiences of each other's and have exposure to latest initiatives undertaken by the government in this direction.

It has been observed that most of the VLEs were not actually aware of the concept of entrepreneurship. They still expect government to support them in the form of either monthly income or office in gram panchayat for them. A communication gap exists between what and how government mechanism expects them to operate and the way

these centres are functioning in remote and rural areas of the state. Hence, entrepreneurship development programs needed to be carried out by the government for grooming and growth of these small scale entrepreneurs. A need has been felt to aware villagers about each and every type of services that are available in these CSC. The awareness can be spread best by the personal visits of VLEs to the doorsteps of villagers, by developing and maintaining a healthy relationship with them, serving villagers best to the utmost of their satisfaction with services available in CSC. This will enable VLEs to nurture their business and disseminate e-governance in far flung and remote areas of the country.

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