

Progressive African Library & Information Activists' Group
(PALIAct)

PALIAct ideas & action

No. 1

January, 2006

PALIAct Ideas & Action is an irregular publication which carries news on developing the PALIAct vision to help create a people-orientated information service that can meet the information needs of workers and peasants in Africa. It will also bring news about innovative services, experiences and ideas from all countries and continents where similar struggle for creating "information equality" are taking place. You are welcome to suggest items for future issues.

This first issue is circulated to all those who had indicated an interest in being kept informed about PALIAct. Please let us know if you do not wish to receive future issues.

Shiraz Durrani
29 January, 2006

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PALIAct News

Progressive African Library & Information Activists' Group

The PALIAct programme is available from: *Pambazuka News; weekly forum for social justice in Africa.*

<<http://www.pambazuka.org/index.php?id=28705>>.

Esther Obachi and Mary Wanjohi at World Social Forum in Bamako

Esther Obachi and Mary Wanjohi from the Kenya represented PALIAct at the World Social Forum (WSF) in Bamako, 19-23 January, 2006. The Network Institute for Global Democratization (NIGD) which was founded in Helsinki in 1997, organised a two-day Library Workshop during the WSF on the theme "The Role of the Library in the WSF Process". PALIAct is grateful to the Finnish Foreign Ministry for sponsoring Esther and Muthoni to participate in the Forum.

The PALIAct Kenya Centre will be an active participant and one of the organisers for the Nairobi WSF Conference in 2007 in partnership with NIGD, one of whose aims is "promoting global democratization by producing and developing emancipatory knowledge for democratic movements, organizations and states". NIGD's work is based on the conviction that "globalization as coming-together-of-humanity must be based on cross-cultural dialogue concerning both philosophical fundamentals and concrete reform proposals". Further details are available from: <http://www.nigd.org/libraries/bamako-nairobi>.

Contacts: Esther Obachi and Mikael Bök.

PALIAct- IFLA Public Libraries Standing Committee exploratory meeting

A meeting was held in London between John Lake and Shiraz Durrani on 20 January at the Department of Applied Social Sciences of the London Metropolitan University to discuss co-operation between PALIAct and IFLA Public Libraries Standing Committee (IFLA-PLS). John is the Secretary of Section 8 of IFLA Public Libraries Standing Committee and Division III, Libraries Serving the General Public. The discussion covered a wide range of areas of co-operation, including the possibility of PALIAct Kenya Centres being involved in the Caterpillar Book Box Project (see details below).

Contacts: John Lake and Shiraz Durrani

The IFLA Caterpillar Book Box Project¹

One of the strategic aims of the IFLA Public Libraries Section for the next 2 years is to assist with practical steps for librarians and information workers in Africa, particularly in relation to the provision of HIV/Aids health information and to continue a pilot mobile library type project called the Caterpillar Book Box to provide books to rural communities in Africa.

¹ Information supplied by John Lake

The Caterpillar pilot programme has been funded through IFLA which has now agreed to provide further funding to extend this scheme to 20 locations in Africa in the future.

The term "Caterpillar Project" was coined from an existing project in Kenya. Sam Culphe and June Baatjes worked together on the project, which was tested in the North (Kenya) and South (rural South Africa) areas of Africa.

The Caterpillar Book Box is a folding case which is 1.8m high on castors for ease of movement and the shelves accommodate approximately 100 books fuelled by a crate depot of approximately 500 books to replenish the stock in circulation. The first box has been used by an Adult Basic Education group who are using it a night and a very small school group in the daytime. The pilot scheme is located in Koekenaap which is a very poor farming area where 60% of the adults are illiterate and only 30% of nine year olds can read. They are too poor to travel the 20 miles to the nearest library. The adults are nomadic as they earn a living during the grape season which lasts only three months a year before they move in search of other work.

The Caterpillar Book Box is the only access that this community has to books. The children have been very excited by the existence of the first Caterpillar Book Box which bears the IFLA logo. June Baatjes is preparing a photographic record and video of the project to be available in 2006 following the launch of the project in September 2005.

Additional IFLA funding will enable a further 20 Caterpillar Book Boxes to be placed in rural communities in Kenya, Swaziland and Malawi and that they should contain not only books but health information on HIV and AIDS. The work will be done by local carpenters who will make the boxes to the specification supplied and the local communities selected with the assistance of Librarians and Information workers in the countries selected.

News from PALIAct Kenya Centre

PALIAct (Kenya) Centre proposals

The PALIAct Kenya Centre has had elections and an interim Committee has been elected. They are busy with various organisational tasks to build a strong foundation. They are also establishing links with interested organisations and individuals. The PALIAct approach involves building strategic partnership between library and information professionals and activists on the one hand and local communities on the other. The Kenya Centre is taking this requirement very seriously.

The Kenya team has already identified two initial proposals:

- **PALIAct & Ma'Tumaini Trust** to develop a people-centred information service. The proposal is to find funds for purchase of land and constructing a community cultural and education centre, using cheap structure using local resources and local artisans and craftspeople (masons, plumbers, carpenters etc). Volunteer stakeholders will include architects, engineers,

librarians and other others who will donate their professional services to the project.

Development of literacy and numeracy are part of the programme, while dissemination of information on health, agriculture, ICT skills will form part of core activities. Possible activities will include:

- i. book library,
- ii. audio-visual library;
- iii. video-tv centre;
- iv. hall for theatre, music, exhibitions etc.
- v. "audience development" activities as identified in PALIAct documents

The need for this initiative was highlighted by Esther Obachi: "After reading the article (supplied by Abdulqadir) about the miseries that the women who work in the flower farms go through, you really need that centre".

Contact for this strand: **AbdulQadir Nassir**.

- **PALIAct partnership with community groups on health information:** Mukuru Kwa Njenga (the well-known slum in Nairobi) and the Embakasi Health Information Network. They disseminate health information to people within Embakasi (Mukuru is within Embakasi).

Both the projects will seek volunteer librarians to help in the management and running of the PALIAct input. There are several tertiary college graduates who often look for internship and will be encouraged to render their services to PALIAct projects.

Contact for this strand: **Esther Obachi**.

Other ideas under consideration by the PALIAct Kenya Centre:

1. **School and College Library Proposal:** make photocopies/duplicated copies of relevant research reports, published articles etc to a large number of schools and colleges with simple instructions in managing a library. The project to be managed jointly by PALIAct (Kenya) Centre and local communities. The libraries so developed will be resource not only for schools and Colleges, but will provide a community resource.
2. **Kenya liberation information & archive project** - some aspects already established.
3. **Theatre for development:** develop "theatre of the people" ideas to improve literacy & numeracy skills, writing and acting experience and skills etc. (see experience of Kamiriithu Community Cultural and Educational Centre and the "Kinjikitile, Maji Maji" experience from early 1980s). A progressive theatre activists' group was launched in Nairobi some years back and will be partners with the PALIAct Centre.
4. **"Audience Development"** - as per ideas developed by the Quality Leaders Project (music, drama, magazine, film, radio, creative writing & reading sessions, poetry etc).

5. **Training of library & community activists** as per “Ideas into Action: developing people-orientated library and research services in Kenya” research proposal submitted to Elsevier/LIRG Research Award.
6. Programme of developing **modular information courses** in partnership between London Metropolitan University and African Universities (under discussion at Department of Applied Social Sciences, London Metropolitan University).
7. Proposals for **Commonwealth Professional Fellowships**, 2006-07. To apply for six Professional Fellowships for PALIAct officials. The purpose would be for candidates to come to London where they will participate in a number of modules run by the London Metropolitan University, including some work with QLP, but the main purpose will be to help consolidate PALIAct centres. A specific programme will be developed if the application is successful. Details from: <http://www.csfp-online.org/cgi-bin/schemes.pl?display=scheme&id=17>.
8. A strong ICT element will be included in all the above proposals.
9. The PALIAct experience will be presented at the XVII Standing Conference Of Eastern, Central, & Southern African Library & Information Professionals (SCECSAL XVII), Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, 10th 14th July 2006 (details available from: <http://www.tlatz.org/scecsal2006/>).
10. It is proposed to launch PALIAct at the 2007 IFLA Conference in Durban, during which the experience of the Kenya Centre will also be presented.
11. The possibilities for applying to Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation will be explored for future development of PALIAct initiatives.

Innovation in information

Bringing you some experiences and ideas from around the world.

UNESCO supports training for building digital libraries in Africa

20-12-2005 (Cape Town)

http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/ev.php-URL_ID=20808&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

Building digital library collections using the Greenstone software suite was on the agenda of a training workshop held at the University of Cape Town, South Africa, from 30 November to 1 December 2005.

The meeting that was co-organized by UNESCO, the Coalition of South African Library Consortia (COSALC) and Sivulile, a South African open access initiative, brought together 30 participants from Ethiopia, Lesotho, Namibia, New Zealand, Swaziland, Sudan and host country South Africa.

Wheeled Library sets on Bulgaria-wide tour

Politics: 15 January 2006, Sunday.

http://www.novinite.com/view_news.php?id=57810LIBRARIES

Classic and modern books will be delivered even to the remotest parts of Bulgaria through the mobile library to set off by June.

The idea, which will be implemented for the first time in the country after the

example of other states, was presented by Deputy Culture Minister Nadezhda Zaharieva.

Herself a poet and a widow of prominent Bulgarian author Damyan Damyanov, Zaharieva believes every reader deserves to meet something new on the book market.

The wheeled bus-library will drop by every village, every neighbourhood, even it has a sole resident, she noted.

Every seventh Bulgarian or 13% of the country's population is illiterate, according to latest surveys. The worrisome percentages of illiteracy among Bulgarians is pertaining mainly to the ethnic minority groups, such as Roma population where 60% of the youth lacks basic education.

infoSpeak

infoSpeak is a radio program produced by students at the University of Washington's [Information School](#). It showcases outstanding leaders in various areas of information access and awareness, speaking from authoritative vantage points about many interesting and relevant information issues of our day. Every show is available for free as a podcast, or as a download from this site.

They Call it the Living Library

Malmö Library

"The Calendar of Light". University of Washington's [Information School](#). [Volume 1, Number 2](#).

<http://www.infospeak.org/shows/show2/index.htm>

At the public library in southern Sweden's third largest city, Malmö, a patron can check out a human being for a 45 minute chat. They Call it the Living Library.

Infospeak talks to Ulla Brohed at the renowned Malmö library, one of her last media interviews before her recent retirement. We follow up with expert opinions from two leading professionals in the academic and public library world, Nancy Huling heading the Reference and Research Services Division of the University of Washington's Suzzallo and Allen Libraries, and Deborah Jacobs, City librarian in charge of the Seattle Public library system. Finally, Infospeak's reporter in the field, Deanna Sukkar, goes to the vibrant Pike Place market in Seattle Washington, USA, to hear what shoppers have to say about the Living Library...

Library Practice for Young Learners (LPYL)

Library Practice for Young Learners (LPYL) project was initiated 1995 as a continuation of BiS' former engagement in South Africa. The main objective of the

Sida funded project was to contribute to the development of school libraries in disadvantaged areas as part of the restructuring of the South African educational system as envisaged in Curriculum 2005.

[The South African - Swedish LPYL site](#)

[LPYL](#) - BiS Sydafrikaprojekt

Source: bis:

<http://www.foreningenbis.org/>

Bookmobiles, the village kitaabwala

Rajiv Theodore | August 16, 2004

<http://inhome.rediff.com/money/2004/aug/16spec1.htm>

The afternoon call of the muezzin breaks the silence in Dadri village on the outskirts of Delhi. The villagers stir out in the heat as a red Mahindra Scorpio approaches, throwing up a cloud of dust behind it.

"It's the kitaabwala," says one villager. These semi-rural folk are watching the unfolding of a revolution on wheels that is slowly reaching out to rural India. Helped by the crowd, 70-year-old Roopwati hobbles toward the van and demands Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi's *My Experiments with Truth*. The van doesn't keep a copy but there's an easy way to remedy that. A command is given on a laptop, the signals are relayed and received by a dish antenna with KU band.

Then, it's printed and bound all in a few minutes. For a little less than Rs 20, the village woman gets the book she wanted saving an arduous journey possibly to a library or bookshop in nearby Delhi. Welcome to the world of Digital Bookmobiles.

In the United States Kahle's 'Bookmobiles' started by Brewster Kahle, a digital librarian, are gaining popularity rapidly. A book like *Alice in Wonderland*, for instance, is available for a dollar and a copy can be printed in 10 minutes. "Books are the key to knowledge but they are no use if we hold on to it. Therefore, the moral of the story is digitise and replicate," says Dr Om Vikas who heads the Digital Library of India, Initiative, under the Department of Information Technology. India has a multiplicity of languages, scripts, manuscripts and fonts. "This forms a vast treasure of heritage," says Vikas.

Obviously, books are only the tip of the iceberg in terms of what is possible. It could be research tools, photographs, music, market information, trading, remote customer interaction, e-tutoring, e-publishing and even book fairs -- the list is endless. "Universal access to all human knowledge" is Kahle's ambitious goal.

How it works is that a book or manuscript is first scanned by a high-end Minolta BS 7000 scanner, (one hundred of them were recently donated by the Carnegie Mellon University, followed by a "cropper" treatment whereby all unwanted stains or needless images on the original text are deleted. Before being put on the web the manuscript passes through indigenously developed software called the Optical Corrector Recognizer, available currently in seven Indian languages.

It is a concept many developing countries like China and Egypt have also taken up enthusiastically. But India has taken a huge lead already. Thirty Bookmobiles will soon be on the road. Two are already driving around Delhi's fringe villages adjoining Uttar Pradesh. Phase two of the project, which is scheduled to take off soon, will cover Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh.

"By 2008 we will have covered the country", says V N Shukla, director, Special Applications at the Pune-based Centre for Development of Advanced Computing, which is executing this government sponsored project under the aegis of the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology. The project first went on the road in January 2003.

Shukla, who sometimes accompanies the Scorpio or the other digital library, a Maruti Versa, says it is a daunting task to manage a milling crowd of more than 200 people at any given time, who jostle for attention when they arrive at a village. "It has become immensely popular," he says.

The IT Ministry had given Rs 1 crore (Rs 10 million) for the first phase and another Rs 5 crore (Rs 50 million) will be allocated for the second phase. An investment of a couple of lakhs is all the van needs -- a printer, a cutter, a binder and a satellite dish for downloading, says Shukla. It takes only about 10 minutes, from start to finish to create a perfect bound book.

"It could be the most expensive book too, but when downloaded would cost a fraction of its print version," he said. More than 60,000 books have already been scanned and another 100,000 have been sent to India by Kahle. Manufacturers Association of Information Technology President Vinnie Mehta said the new concept is extremely beneficial for the rural masses where even education courses can be downloaded and distributed where no schools, colleges or teachers exist. "It is time we moved away from the urban areas," says Mehta.

The Million Book Project, a joint venture between India, China, the Carnegie Mellon University and Kahle's Internet Archive is an offshoot of this new technology. The project is further linked to Kahle's e-books -- 17 million of them. The christening of the project took its cue from Kahle's unassuming legend painted on his vans, "1,000,000 Books Inside (soon)". The project is set to digitise one million public domain books and make them available in scanned format for anybody for free by next year.

After graduating from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1982, Kahle designed supercomputers at Thinking Machines and later invented the Wide Area Information Servers, which was the net's first publishing system. During the 1990s, WAIS got commercial and government publishers -- among them the *New York Times*, Encyclopedia Britannica and the US government's printing Internet archive. After selling WAIS to AOL, Kahle founded the Internet Archive, a non-profit company devoted to archiving and cataloguing millions of websites.

The Bookmobile is one of the latest offerings from Internet Archive. Kahle said that 100,000 books have been sent to India where they are now being scanned. "They (Indian government) see that for the cost of scanning a book they can make it available to the entire country. So they are scanning up a storm, with a goal of 1 million books. In China, the same thing is happening. They are going to scan

100,000 books. The dream is of a library where you can have access to all the world's knowledge," Kahle said in a conversation to a website.

The giant question is how much this can be expanded. Information Technology Secretary, Kamal Kant Jaswal will soon review the entire project looking particularly at scalability. "That is a weak link," says Jaswal. He believes that the project needs backing from a private entrepreneur to ensure it grows rapidly. "We have to find someone who can champion the cause of the project," he says.

A senior librarian at New Delhi's new Parliament library says costs can easily be kept under control. Scanning a book in India costs \$4 compared to between \$20 and \$25 in the US. Part of the funding for public library systems in India could be canalised to create a brand new e-library and make it available to the remotest corner of the country for just Rs 20.

Obviously, there's an issue of copyright. But some librarians suggest that the project should stick to non-copyright books for the time being. "Why should we bother about it when we have not even digitised all the public-domain books yet," he says.

Vikas says that 15,000 books in local language have already been scanned. "We have urged in different forums to reduce copyright from the present 60 years to 25 years so that more books are available to the people and finally help bridge the digital-divide that is plaguing the country."

Havana's raperas: female rappers & the sexual politics of Cuban hip hop

Margaux Joffe
CubaNews

*"Mucho tenemos que revolucionary
tanto todavia hay que rapear."*

*"We have much to revolutionize
still have much to rap."*

Selection:

Over the past ten years, the hip-hop movement in Cuba has created an emerging space on the island for public discussion and criticism, addressing issues such as race, police discrimination, sexuality and the *lucha diaria*, or daily struggle, of life in Cuba. Abel Prieto, the Minister of Culture, officially declared in 1998 that rap was 'an authentic expression of *cubanidad*,'

My research goals were to delve into the ways that raperas give voice to a marginalized population of Cuba, find out how this intersection of race and gender in Cuba is articulated through hip hop, and most importantly discover what we can learn about the collective experience of afro-Cuban women in the special period through the music of raperas. Through gathering rap audio and lyrics, conducting oral history interviews, collecting magazine articles and film clips, and keeping a journal, I embarked on the process of studying hip-hop as a literary and cultural text.

Las Krudas, three raperas who are also lesbians, are widely known and generally well received. This marks an exception to the dominant discourse on homosexuality within Cuban society. Although the socialist revolution of 1959 'officially' rid Cuban society of racism and sexism, the government still retained the Stalinist belief that homosexuality was a byproduct of the decadence of capitalism.

...

Then in the 1990s laws were passed prohibiting any restrictions against homosexuals. In spite of this slow progress has been made in embracing gays and lesbians and homosexuality remains a taboo subject in the media.

Las Krudas have used the hip hop community as a space to address issues like homosexuality and other experiences of Cuban women that aren't addressed in other areas of the public sphere. In their most recent album *Cubensi*, Las Krudas subvert the typically conservative and sensual feminine presence, and as their name implies their lyrics are raw and direct as can be seen in the album's opening song 'Vamo' a vencer la dificultad.'

'Sexo femenino, siempre relegado pero las Krudas el molde han quebrado/ vamo' a vencer la dificultad...'

'Feminine sex, always relegated
But the Krudas have broken the mold
We are going to overcome the difficulty...'

After speaking with Yamilet, an employee, I learned that women's health truly is a priority, free health services are provided to everyone, there is a high value on prenatal care and breast-feeding, no stigma on abortion or birth control, and there are child care centers open to all from 6am-6pm, and only cost 10 Cuban pesos (approx. 40 cents) a month. In addition, sexual violence is rare, neighbors are urged to get involved if they see or hear signs of domestic abuse, and respect for women is taught to boys in school. Rape and child sexual abuse are capital crimes and domestic violence is punishable by time in jail. These examples illustrate the contradictions which darker-skinned Cubanas live with at the intersection of race and gender.

This summer the Mellon grant gave me the opportunity to live in Cuba during a unique and transient historical moment for the island and immerse myself in the research process. More importantly, I was able to gain a first-hand understanding of the convolution of race relations in a 'raceless' society, complexities of being a woman in Cuba's sexual and political realms, having to hustle for dollars in a classless economy which is struggling to resist global capitalism, and the conflicted consciousness of the Cuban youth—a highly educated generation coming of age in the 21st century—yet completely trapped on an island only ninety miles from the United States.

Female hip hop artists are still trying to find their place in Cuba's male dominated rap game, yet in their music they firmly address issues which male raperos don't. Beyond speaking on social themes which raperos also cover, such as poverty and racism, raperas also address machismo, and the increasing prevalence of jinetismo. Cuban hip hop provides them with a lyrical cipher for discussing topics not officially addressed in the wider public sphere. It is difficult to come up with a single conclusion about a country where all things appear to be a sort of complex

synthesis, such as Cuba's religious syncretism and miscegenation. All things contain internal contradictions which are in constant dialogue, and what I can conclude with certainty about my experiences is that though through their music, raperas have started a dialogue with the larger Cuban society. Their music forms one side of an ongoing conversation with other raperos, their afro-cuban sisters, and the machista culture. This dialectical process which is taking place within Cuba, is precisely what keeps society in constant state of flux and motion, gradually creating change. Raperas are gaining a voice within Cuba and there are many changes still to come, as Las Krudas rhyme:

'Mucho tenemos que revolucionar/tanto todavia hay que rapear.'

'We have much to revolutionize
still have much to rap.'

PHOTOS OF LAS KRUDAS AND OTHERS
<http://nubiansisters.com/photo.html>

PRINTABLE PDF OF THIS ARTICLE
<http://www.duke.edu/web/las/Funding/joffepaper.pdf>

CUBAN DAILY PAPER ARTICLE ON FEMALE RAPPERS <http://www.jrebelde.cubaweb.cu/2004/julio-septiembre/ago-5/print/oreja.htm>

African women and free and open source software

Linuxchix Africa launches an organization that will position African women within the free and open source (FOSS) movement. Linuxchix Africa was formed in 2004 by African women and for African women. It is a chapter in Africa affiliated to Linuxchix worldwide. The aim of the African chapter is to help toward building the critical mass of Linux skills among African women, and to advocate for the use of Free and Open Source Software for the many community development challenges being faced by Africans, especially African women. ... With the advent of Free and Open Source Software, it has now become possible to make software available to people who would otherwise not afford it. With FOSS, countries will no longer have to prioritise between poverty and the digital divide. ... so Linuxchix Africa will play a role as a catalyst that will demystify FOSS to the people who stand to benefit the most from it.'

Press release: <http://www.africalinuxchix.org/?q=node/22>

Web site: <http://www.africalinuxchix.org>

(Source: digitaldivide mailing list, 24 February 2005)

Ku Mudzi Wangu community radio - Zambia

This community radio show shares information about Zambian community initiatives. The project works with communities that have developed what they see as proven and successful responses to some of their most pressing problems. These development success stories are featured each week on the Ku Mudzi Wangu "In My Village" radio show. Ku Mudzi Wangu addresses issues such as: health and HIV/AIDS; agriculture/forestry; food security; education; income generation and civil society.

Source: The Soul Beat - Issue 37 - Communication & Change News & Issues. April 13 2005

Available from: <<http://www.comminit.com/africa/experiences/pds12005/experiences-2910.html>>. [Accessed: 13 April, 2005].

StudyGhana - Ghana

Mass media is used to disseminate information about education to people in Ghana and beyond. Educational video documentaries and instructional programmes are produced for screenings at workshops, schools and on national television. A weekly television programme features short video documentaries and news reports from various campuses. The project plans to publish brochures, pamphlets and eventually a newspaper on education for distribution especially to those without access to the Internet locally. A website with interactive features includes directories and databases about educational institutions and opportunities.

Source: The Soul Beat - Issue 37 - Communication & Change News & Issues. April 13 2005.

Further information available from: <<http://www.comminit.com/africa/experiences/pds22005/experiences-2961.html>>. [Accessed 13 April, 2005].

Local net TV takes off in Austria

An Austrian village is testing technology that could represent the future of television.

The people of Engerwitzdorf are filming, editing and producing their own regional news channel. The channel covers local politics, sports, events and anything that residents want to film and are prepared to upload for others to watch on PCs.

The pilot has been so successful that Telekom Austria is now considering setting up other projects elsewhere.

BBC News.

Available from: <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/4378945.stm>>. [Accessed: 13 April, 2005].

Solar plan for Indian computers

Solar power is being used in villages for all sorts of purposes

By Ram Dutt Tripathi

BBC correspondent in Lucknow

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/3623864.stm>

Authorities in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh have drawn up a pilot project to use solar power to run computers in village schools.

Nearly 80% of houses are estimated to have no power, and many villages suffer frequent disruption in supply because of power cuts or other faults. Many have to use kerosene lamps for light and most government-run primary schools have no power at all.

It is hoped the plan will help schools cope with the rural power crisis. Last year, the Uttar Pradesh Education for All Project Board bought about 1,000 computers for selected primary schools in all 70 districts.

The schools were selected in villages which had no power lines, and teachers were given special training for computer-aided education. A further 1,000 computers are to be purchased this year for village schools, but most of these will not work because there is no power available.

"In the present situation of power supply we are not sure that electricity will be available in rural schools for computers," said GB Patnaik from the Alternative Energy Department.

"To overcome this, we have drawn a scheme to arrange solar energy for these computers."

The cost of running solar panels to power computers in one school would cost about £1,000, which is expensive for many schools.

But Parth Sarthi Sen Sharma, director for the Education for All project, said funds would be arranged on a 50-50 basis by both departments.

Mr Sharma said the expenditure will be cost effective in the long run.

Lessons from an Indian village

<http://www.niit.com/niit/ContentAdmin/MED/MED9/6.htm>

INTERVIEW SUGATA MITRA: The advocate of computer-based education believes computer skills can be picked up by anyone, anywhere, writes Fiona Harvey

Financial Times (July 13, 2001)

By FIONA HARVEY

A group of children crowd around a small, dusty concrete structure in a village in the heart of rural India. They chatter and gesticulate, pointing to the screen embedded in the wall and the keyboard and mouse below. They probably do not know it but they are part of a wide-reaching experiment into education, computers and development.

Dr Sugata Mitra put up his first kiosk, containing a personal computer with an internet connection, in the middle of Delhi 2 1/2 years ago. Street children immediately took to the machines and, through their own curiosity and intelligence, learnt to become proficient. Since then, he has put up 29 more in various locations.

Dr Mitra is as much a proselytiser as a researcher. He would like to think that his experiments hold lessons for technology evangelists who want to spread PC usage and for governments that want to train their workforces in essential skills. Perhaps they also hold lessons for developing countries.

Because he is using computers, Dr Mitra can gather his data direct. While the children play with their new toy, their activities are monitored (unbeknown to them) from Dr Mitra's New Delhi office, where he works as vice-president of the Centre for Research in Cognitive Systems at NIIT, one of India's biggest information technology companies, specialising in training systems.

"Children are able to teach themselves computing on their own," says Dr Mitra with enthusiasm. Astonishingly, although the children at that first kiosk had never seen a computer in their lives, they started surfing the internet within only eight minutes.

Children's natural curiosity and eagerness serve them well when confronted with an unfamiliar object such as a PC. All Dr Mitra's kiosks have proved popular and children who may not have been able to read or write managed to grasp the techniques of web surfing. They even coped with a foreign language: all the PCs Dr Mitra has erected use Windows in English but most of the children speak nothing but Hindi.

Learning in this way is also a social experience for children that creates a virtuous circle. Children learn much faster in groups, Dr Mitra believes, because they mimic one another, spur one another on and pool their learning. As soon as one child has discovered something new, that knowledge spreads to the rest and the enjoyment is enhanced.

He explains: "When you observe a single child, that child may repeatedly do the same task, such as playing a game, until they get bored and go away and say they're not into computing. But when you have a group of people, they change - and one says: 'let's play a different game' and so they do, and so on."

And the acquisition of knowledge provides a framework for a healthy pattern of social inter-action. Dr Mitra goes on: "Knowledge can be shared: if I have it, you can have it too - but you can't get it from me by bullying me. You have to make friends with me, ask me please to tell you and I will share it with you."

Shy children who were reluctant to put themselves forward were not left out. Girls, Dr Mitra notes, took on an organising role, throwing off children who had been playing with the machine for a long time and replacing them with quieter ones who had not yet had a turn.

The children who gathered round the machines showed how potent this kind of unstructured learning can be. Perhaps the greatest feat came from the group at one kiosk who discovered and disabled the piece of software that Dr Mitra had installed on the machine so as to monitor their activity and relay it back to him. They sent him a message (in Hindi) that read: "We have found and closed the thing you watch us with."

Dr Mitra beams. "It made me so happy! I don't think (as a teacher) you can have a greater reward than to have a child beat you at your own game."

Another group managed to find and download from the internet a graphic equaliser program that they used to improve the quality of the sound of music files that they also found and played over the PC's little speakers. "That was very non-intuitive," says Dr Mitra.

That children can so quickly pick up the basics of computer literacy belies the fear that many people feel towards PCs. Computer companies themselves do little to dispel the anxiety: the latest user manual for Windows, for instance, runs to well over a hundred pages, enough to put most people off. But Dr Mitra's children managed without any outside instruction.

Dr Mitra thinks this has implications for teaching. "There is a global shortage of teachers. For developing countries, it is very important to increase the productivity of the teachers that we have," he explains. The current method of education, in which a teacher stands at the top of a classroom and instructs a group of pupils, has been the norm since the days of Plato, he says. But with new technology, it need not be so.

"I would guess that children could have acquired up to 30 per cent of the curriculum on their own if they were motivated to do so," Dr Mitra contends. He calls his ideas "minimally invasive education". Perhaps, if communities in developing nations were given computers and internet connections, they might be left to cultivate computer literacy for themselves. Having acquired these skills, they could look for a way to use them to emerge from poverty.

It may come as a surprise to cynics that in every case where a computer has been supplied by Dr Mitra, it has remained safe from vandalism or theft. The only damage has been from the normal wear and tear of many people using the equipment.

Dr Mitra's experiment continues. He hopes to have 100 machines in use around India by the end of the year. Some of these will be funded by NIIT, which has already put up some Pounds 500,000 towards the project. For the rest, he is seeking sponsorship. But this is just the beginning.

Dr Mitra's ambition is to find a "self-organising" mechanism whereby a network of such machines will grow by itself, as people become interested in the idea, and that a way will be found to use such a network to teach not just computer basics but also other forms of education that will benefit the world's poorest people, who have so far been left on the wrong side of the "digital divide".

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