ICTs for development start with the people

By Tadaferua Ujorha   18 Nov 2005

First Mile is the first step in bringing Internet access to Tanzania's small farmers, but for it to be truly effective, a number of conditions must first be met.

In a small village in Tanzania, peasant farmers are beginning to tap into the Internet to gain access to all sorts of information that in turn is helping improve their lives.

It is a project called First Mile, run by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), which aims to bridge the connectivity gap that separates a village with no electricity and no telephone line from the nearest online computer.

Why First Mile? Because, as an IFAD spokesperson at the Tunis World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) explained, it emphasises the place of rural communities in efforts to use information and communication technologies (ICTs) for development.

"All along the tendency, globally, has been to present the rural community as the end point of connectivity, not the starting point," they said.

Fighting poverty

Away from the lure and glamour of high technology, many of those gathering in Tunis are looking to apply simple ICTs to fight poverty in their countries.

Another project showcased in Tunis is run by SEWA, the Self Employed Women's Association – a group with 700 000 members based in the western Indian city of Ahmedabad. The women assisted by SEWA work in the informal sector of the Indian economy, engaged in embroidery, farming, trading, sewing and much else. Using ICTs they are able to directly and cheaply access local, national and global markets. This in turn has empowered them in ways they could never imagine. The women have also set up a newsletter, with no previous training in journalism.

But the fact remains that before ICTs can make a meaningful contribution to improving the lives of the poor, certain conditions have to be met in the communities.

"What good is it for a woman if she has to walk ten miles to fetch water, but has access to ICTs? What good is it if a woman knows the price of rice if there are no good roads to transport the rice to the city market?" asks Eliane Najros, project coordinator of the Dimitra Project, which is trying to get rural women to use ICTs in several African countries,

including Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Beyond technology

Many non-governmental delegates at the Summit repeatedly point out that development is not about technology or information alone.

As Alfonso Gumucio-Dagron, a communication for development expert, says, "For ICTs to contribute to the enhancement of poor people, a number of conditions have to be met, and these relate to ownership, local content, language, culture, networking and appropriate technology. The question now is to what degree are the states of the South prepared to take up this challenge."

One example of innovative use of ICTs for poverty reduction comes from the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) which runs a Farm-Radio network in six states in Nigeria.

According to Clare Farrell, FAO's communication officer, the network aims to train radio producers to make agricultural programmes, so that farmers can access the best available information.

Tough choices

Many experts hold that ICTs can address poverty issues and help nations meet the first Millennium Development Goal of eradicating extreme hunger and poverty. According to a paper prepared by IFAD, the 900 million of the world's 1.2 billion extremely poor people who live in rural areas can benefit from ICTs.

As FAO says, "The information revolution has completely bypassed nearly one billion people. They are the rural poor, who constitute 75 per cent of people in the world living on less than one dollar a day."

With scarce resources for development, deploying ICTs to tackle poverty is not going to be an easy choice for developing countries. It is understandable that a community without enough drinking water in a drought-prone region would place a better water supply over computers. On the other hand computers can play a crucial role in effective water management.

And as *The Economist* magazine of Britain recently pointed out, ICTs are versatile: "Phones let fishermen and farmers check prices in different markets before selling produce, making it easier for people to find work, allow quick and easy transfers of funds and boost entrepreneurship."

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