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**ICTs as a tool for economic empowerment of women:
experiences from the use of a CD ROM
by rural women in Uganda**

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1. INTRODUCTION

Uganda, like many countries has men as the dominant players in decision making, although women shoulder most reproductive, productive and community management responsibilities, many of which are not remunerated or reflected in national statistics. The lower status of women, in comparison to men is due to gender imbalances that arise from the unequal opportunities and access to and control over productive resources and benefits. Statistics show that although women in Uganda constitute 70 – 80% of the agricultural labour force, only 7% own land and only 30% have access to and control over proceeds^{1a}.

Gender imbalances are further reflected in the education sector, formal sector employment, and in government and local government structures, for example in the rural labour force women are 53% and men are 43%, while in the urban labour force women are 35% and men 63%^{1a}.

The ability of women to contribute to the economy and their families is increasingly being recognised especially now that more women are becoming entrepreneurs. However, this is constrained by a number of factors such as:

- Lack of access to relevant information on markets, credit, prices etc
- Lack of appropriate knowledge and skills
- Lack of time to access information centers due to gender roles in the home

In order to address some of the imbalances, Uganda has initiated and is implementing policies and strategies that are aimed at addressing Gender Inequality such as women's emancipation in Governance. Uganda has 56 districts and each district has a woman representative in Parliament. In addition, since the rapid expansion of the ICT sector, Uganda is ensuring that ICTs are built into the overall development framework.

Uganda like the rest of the world has experienced rapid changes in the information and telecommunication sectors. It has been rapidly introduced to modern information and communication technologies, ICTs. This revolution could play a resounding role on the socio-economic transformation of people, especially, those living in rural areas.

The focus on ICTs for development especially gained momentum in Uganda in 1997 when the President made a special appeal to the International community to support the development of ICTs and especially gives special attention to rural development.

In an effort to bridge the gender digital gap, International agencies like the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), International Telecommunications Union (ITU), International Institute of Communication Development (IICD), UNDP, UNESCO, World Bank and others have supported initiatives, whose main aim has been to:

- Discover the role ICTs can play in empowering rural women
- Encourage women to take advantage of the developments in ICTs
- Demonstrate the use of ICTs and how they can facilitate the development process
- Provide access to ICTs and ICT-based information

Initiatives undertaken and aimed at providing women with access to ICTs as tools for social and economic empowerment, include the International Women's Tribune Centre (IWTC) CD-ROM project and Centre for Economic Empowerment of Women in Africa (CEEWA) ICT women's project.

2. ICT SECTOR IN UGANDA

There has been significant growth in the telecom industry in Uganda and the services this industry provides to its customers are due in large part to the privatisation and liberalisation of the sector that has occurred in the last decade.

In 1993, the Government of Uganda started the process of restructuring the telecommunications sector. The process started off with the Telecommunications Sector Policy Statement of 1996 and later a Communications Act, (Communications Act of 1997)^{2a}.

The Telecommunication Policy Statement allowed for the fair participation of any interested private sector providers under the rules and regulations of a government statutory and regulatory body – the Uganda Communications Commission (UCC)^{3a}

The Communications Act of 1997 provided the legal framework for the introduction of competition in the telecommunications sector with its main objectives as to:

- a) Improve penetration of telecommunication services in the whole country
- b) Encourage domestic and international private investments in the telecommunications sector
- c) Reduce the involvement of Government in the telecommunication sector to a minimum
- d) Foster competition for the provision of telecommunication services,
- e) Create the Uganda Communications Commission (UCC) to regulate telecommunication services

There are two national telecommunications providers, three cellular network operators and some ISPs. There are also several privately owned radio and television stations countrywide.

The Government of Uganda has a draft National Information and Communication Technology Policy framework to address how Uganda should promote the growth and potential of ICTs in the country, (National ICT Policy, August 2002). The policy's main goal is to promote the development and effective utilisation of ICTs such that quantifiable impact is achieved throughout the country within the next 10 years.

In order to ensure rural communications development, the reform process in the Telecommunications sector, provided for specific measures that will ensure growth in the communications infrastructure network and equitable distribution of communication

services within the country. These measures include rollout service obligations in the National Operator licenses, introduction of effective competition within the sector and statutory provision for the establishment of a Rural Communications Development Fund (RCDF) by the regulatory body, Uganda Communications Commission^{9a}.

The RCDF is now operational. The call for proposals went out in October and the first release of funds will be effected 1st December 2002, (UCC Workshop, 25th October 2002).

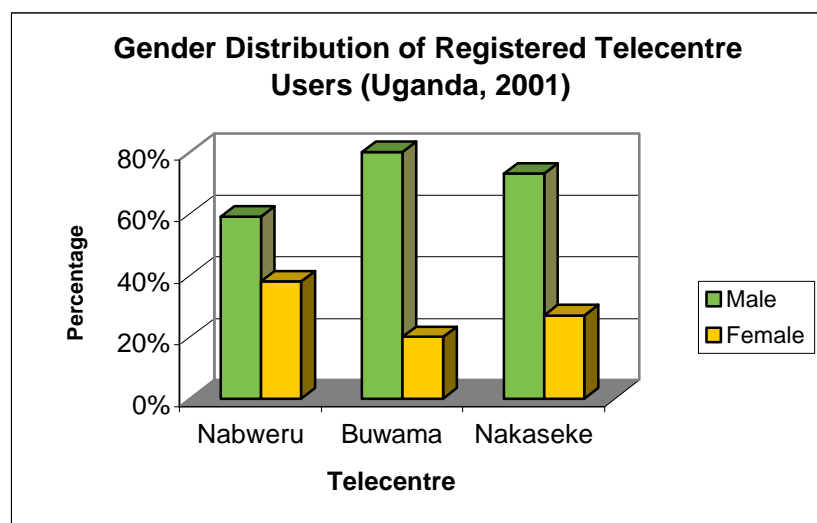
In 1998, Uganda saw its first multi-donor funded pilot Telecentre projects whose main objectives were to demonstrate how ICTs could enable communities to solve development problems and to build a validated body of knowledge and a networked dissemination process around effective approaches, technologies and methodologies.

From the experiences and lessons learnt during these pilot initiatives, implementing institutions recognized the need for local content that is relevant to the needs of the rural poor. It was recognized that it was not simply the provision of the technologies but the need for an information-driven facility and better still a knowledge based society.

Normally women have not been at the forefront of development. Worse still, in a male dominated society, they face more challenges in embracing new ways, which in this case would be embracing the new ICTs. Evaluation reports on the use of Telecentres in Uganda suggest that women were not visiting Telecentres for various reasons, such as time constraints due to gender roles.

Figure 1 below shows the number of registered users by gender at three Telecentres in Uganda, (Uganda 2001)^{4a}.

Fig. 1



However, with the introduction of the CD ROM the number of women visiting the Telecentres has increased tremendously. This is because this time round there is something in it for the women.

Modern ICTs can influence as well as redress imbalances in society by the way they are designed, produced, used and exploited. Women professionals, entrepreneurs, and youth need to take advantage of the explosive growth in ICTs to further empower themselves.

3. THE CD ROM PROJECT

The CD ROM entitled ‘Rural Women in Africa: Ideas for Earning Money’ is a response to the need for and access to information. It offers rural women direct access to information they badly need to improve their productivity and socio-economic status.

One of the major concerns that arose from various ICT initiatives in Uganda, especially the Telecentre projects, was the fact that they were under-utilised especially by rural women, and yet they are the major drivers of the rural economy. Due to the limited reading ability of rural women, the absence of appropriate content materials, and the gender roles at home, among other reasons, women were not active at the Telecentres. In response, the International Women’s Tribune Centre (IWTC) was in 1999, given the task to work with women in Uganda, particularly rural women based at the Telecentres, in the development of the relevant materials that address real needs.

Can rural women in Africa benefit from new information and communication technologies? Is it possible to develop ICT-based resources that are relevant to the needs of women with limited education opportunities? Is it realistic to expect rural African women to speed along the so-called information superhighway? The project results from the assumption that the answer to these questions is YES.

A needs assessment survey carried out by the International Women’s Tribune Centre (IWTC), in February 1999, with a small sample of rural women living near and around Nakaseke Telecentre¹, identified the need for more information that would assist them in their efforts at income-generation, about marketing food crops and other products, and prices for food and crafts in the Kampala-based markets among others.

Hence, an ICT based learning material with simple and easy to follow sections that went step by step into the basics of marketing, credit and sales management could fill much of the need for information on small business that these women expressed.

It was apparent that the kind of people this project was focussing on were the uneducated who spoke only their local language. This eventually influenced the characteristics of the learning materials, which were to be developed. The materials had to take the simplest form possible and some of the characteristics of the learning materials were to use an

¹ Nakaseke Telecentre is a multi-donor funded pilot project set up in 1999 to demonstrate the use of ICTs and how they can be used as vehicle for rural development

interactive learning process, promote problem solving, based on real life experiences in Uganda, introduce new ideas, and use experience gained from other successful small-business learning materials.

The CD ROM consists of an introductory section and three content sections. The introductory section is a guide to using the computer and the CD-ROM. Section one, entitled 'Starting with what we have', emphasizes the need to identify assets we have and we can build on. Section two is about making money from a product or service and section three is about expanding our business opportunities.

The major guiding factors in the development of this tool were that it:

- Had to be used on basic computer systems at the Telecentres,
- Required minimal technical expertise to operate,
- Did not rely on the Internet or Web.
- The materials would be accessible to an audience with little or no reading skills,
- Would be in the language of the local community,
- Would be affordable in cost and adaptable in other languages to ensure widespread replicability and visibility.

With those factors in mind the Project Goals became, to:

- Develop a package of ICT-based learning materials about micro enterprise that responds to the self-identified needs of rural women in Africa
- Increase women's access to information utilising new ICTs
- Motivate women to use Telecentres when looking for information
- To increase collaboration and networking opportunities amongst women and NGOs in Africa
- Involve community groups and technical teams in Uganda in the development of the materials
- Develop a simple, highly visual, audio package of learning materials using local languages for use by rural women in Uganda with low literacy skills

4. OUTCOMES ON THE USE OF THE CD-ROM

The CD-ROM has demystified technology. Prior to the CD-ROM project and the setting up of Telecentres, computers were 'alien'. The thought of using one let alone touching one was very intimidating. It was never imagined that these rural women would handle a computer and a whole range of other ICTs. Suddenly the CD-ROM comes and intimidation is history.

Rural Women can access Information on entrepreneurship development through ICTs and are keen to learn new ideas and put them into practice. The women have therefore improved their knowledge and through their testimonies they have put the ideas from the CD-ROM in practice. Anastasia, a beneficiary in this project, says her chicken have increased in number since she started using the CD-ROM. She also says she tills a larger

piece of land now and therefore increased her surplus food for sale, as result of this knowledge.

The women have become confident about what they have, what they can do, as compared to what they were back in 1999 – ‘timid, quiet, almost apologetic’^{5a}.

The rural women have become more confident, opened up and become more sociable, willing to discuss own situations and together come up with solutions to help reduce poverty. For example, at Nakaseke the women have formed a womens’ desk where they collectively go about their day-to-day challenges. At the same Telecentre the rural women have formed Nakaseke Women’s Development Association (NAWODA) whose major objective is to promote the use of ICTs to economically empower rural women. In addition, the women have allocated Wednesday and Saturday afternoons as specific days of the week to go to the Telecentre for their programs.

The women, men, youth are fully participating in using the CD ROM. According to Anastasia’s records, she has trained 110 women, men and youth on how to use the CD-ROM to access information². As a result of this training and the awareness created about this CD-ROM, some men have started supporting their wives in their quest to work and assist them to support their families.

Women have become multipliers and trainers of fellow women in ICTs (Peer teaching)^{5a}
The women have been motivated to work. Many of the married women confessed of being lazy and contented. However, since the coming of the CD ROM, those attributes have changed. The women have been greatly motivated and are happy to work alongside their husbands to provide for their families.

While the CD ROM has been very useful to the rural women in terms of accessing relevant information and improving their knowledge, there are some challenges. The major challenges encountered include:

- Still few access centres
- Low coverage, still needs wider dissemination
- Lack of basic infrastructure
- Men still need to be sensitized about the usefulness of the tool
- Language is still a barrier for wider dissemination
- Long distances to the access centres

The major challenges specific to the women beneficiaries include illiteracy, no access to credit, gender roles, lack of awareness and language.

With all that has happened, we need to examine emerging issues both around the sub themes of this meeting and other global issues.

² Field visit to Nakaseke, July 2002

The Uganda CD ROM project is a basis for learning what is possible with ICTs. It clearly demonstrates women's capabilities and possibilities and, the opportunities in ICTs. The CD-ROM clearly demonstrates that this new tool is adaptable and capable of carrying multiple language tracks. It offers rural women direct access to information they need to improve their productivity without relying on someone from outside – such as an agricultural extension worker – to bring the information in their own time and at their own speed^{5a}. The user is able to open up the programme, move to different sections as needed, or linger over parts that she particularly wants to go over and over again. Prior to the CD-ROM, were written materials, both in English and Luganda the local language. This assumed that the rural people could read either of the languages, but this is not the case. There has not been a similar interactive tool and produced in the local language. Technologies were seen as tools for the literate only. The CD-ROM was immediately accepted and seemed a workable solution because it eliminated the question of illiteracy. The CD-ROM is not the only ICT tool that can be used for rural women but it offers rural women direct access to information, which they need to improve their productivity without relying on someone from outside to bring the information to them.

How does this experience help us then to strategize for the future? How does it help to influence the decision-makers, policymakers and policy-making processes in our countries?

5. ISSUES FROM THE CD ROM CASE

Access: There are not many such centres where women can go and access information that is relevant to their needs and in their local language. There is need to increase the number of centres where women can go and access information. Coupled with this is the need to provide basic infrastructure to enable services move nearer to their locations.

While providing access to information it is important to be mindful of the affordability and distance these women have to travel.

Some women do not use the CD-ROM very often because of lack of time especially during the planting and harvesting seasons. In addition, access to the CD-ROM is limited because the computers are mainly used for training in computer applications. When the Telecentre was set up, the women did not visit it very often due to the time constraints and the lack of appropriate content. With the coming of the CD-ROM project, the women have increased their visits and if mobilised they deliberately make time to go use the CD-ROM. Some of the men initially did not support their women going to the Telecentre but with the coming of the CD-ROM project and the new ideas therein, the men are supportive of their women.

Content and Relevance: The women are responding well to the information on the CD ROM. This is attributed to the fact that the information is relevant to their needs. Learning also seems very easy now because of the techniques of presentation used.

Process of development: During the development of the CD-ROM, site visits to the target communities was an effective consultative and participatory approach which served both as a tool of advocacy as well as a mechanism of building quick awareness and acceptability of ICTs. The women did appreciate this and right from the beginning felt they were part of the process and therefore owned it. Involvement of men in this process was minimal, especially because, for a change, it was something for women as a marginalised group, but also to get them interested in using ICTs to access that information they so badly wanted to have. Men were involved during the multimedia production where the CD-ROM was worked on in studio to insert graphics and record sound etc. However, the effects of the final product have spilled over to the men, especially those who have their wives using it. The men have become more supportive and interested in using the programme themselves.

Awareness: The site visits were instrumental in creating awareness not only about ICTs but also about the women's own situations and were, therefore, able to identify and articulate their needs. It is at the end of the site visits that we were able to agree on the subject of entrepreneurial skills for rural women.

Evaluation: The consultative visits served as a tool of evaluation of the effectiveness of the Telecentres. The women were able to state how they have benefited from utilising the Telecentres. However, it was also evident that there was a gap in as far as resources that serve the needs of women are concerned. There was therefore an immediate need to develop materials that respond to the needs of women in concrete ways and facilitate this process with ongoing training and support.

Language: The materials are produced in English (given the wide spectrum of experts) and after completion it is translated into the local language. This personalized it further and the women were very happy to have an ICT application in their local language. The local language has made the adoption easier.

Technique of Presentation: The CD-ROM is interactive, promotes problem solving, and is based on real life experiences and examples of women in Uganda. This has helped the women identify themselves with these women as their role models and it has helped motivate them. "If those women could make it, then I can make it too," a response from one of the women.

Ownership: The approach was very instrumental in building partnership building and ownership. The site visits to the target communities were an effective consultative and participatory approach, which served both as a tool of advocacy as well as a mechanism of building quick awareness and acceptability of ICTs. The women did appreciate this and right from the beginning felt they were part of the process and therefore owned it.

It is noted too that from the various discussions that have been held online and elsewhere on Gender and ICTs, there is a similarity in the pressing issues that concern women. For example the UN-INSTRAW Virtual seminar on Gender and ICTs³ and the UN-DAW

³ Read more from the achieves at www.un-instraw.org

online conference⁴ that highlighted women issues of access to information, content, and literacy, to mention a few.

Secondly, despite the many efforts towards gender equality, equity and others issues many gender issues still remain unresolved.

6. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Engendering the ICT Policy: Most countries are either in the process of developing or have already developed their ICT policies. Since these policies are still in the making, now is the right time for women to get involved so that gender issues can be considered. Women advocacy groups should actively be engaged in the consultative process to put women's issues high on the agenda.

Gender concerns in ICT policy include Network architecture and deployment (choice of technology), pricing and tariff issues, Licensing issues (ownership and control), Strengthening technology innovation (R&D), IT-enabled private sector business development, Human resource development for system support, ICT labor force participation, data infrastructure, facilitating access to IT networks, including universal service obligations^{6a}

For instance in its policy, Uganda has paid attention to increasing services to the rural areas but has no explicit reference to gender. There should be explicit objectives towards gender equality. An element of research, therefore, comes in. As the policies are being developed, research should be carried out and findings based on explicit gender analysis such as income, time constraints and gender roles, literacy, education, and language, should be fed into the policy process.

As we engender the ICT policy process, women Advocacy groups MUST be active in order to help get rural women's active participation.

The development of implementation plans of action of the engendered ICT policy must bear in mind gender sensitive measures like income, time constraints and gender roles, literacy, education, and language.

Kampala Know How Declaration:

In terms of access to ICTs, women must challenge government policies that hinder access to ICTs. We need a strategic understanding at national levels of government policies, and as a group we want to ensure that all policies that affect women's access to ICT include a gender perspective^{7a}.

Access to Information: ICTs can increase access to information and this information help women work more productively as well as in new opportunities. Increasing women's access to information and communication technologies should involve

⁴ Summary is available at <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/egm/ict2002/online.html>

increasing availability of ICT infrastructure where women live. The infrastructure should be highly subsidized so that the investment costs are not passed on to the women. There should also be access to credit as this increases the chances of women to afford the services.

There should be deliberate efforts to help women access information. Access should not only address reaching information and communication infrastructure to rural areas but also explicit issues of affordability, pricing and tariffs, location, time and appropriate technology.

Coupled with access to information is the choice of technology and ICT tool to deliver this information. We **MUST** be sensitive and creative in the choice of the most appropriate ICT tool to use for women's economic empowerment.

To consider along with enabling women gain access to relevant information using ICTs, is the facilitation and support for women.

The DAW online conference^{8a} identified two critical prerequisites for using ICT as a tool for women's economic empowerment:

- Making improvements in access in terms of affordability, effective access ensuring infrastructure and applications
- Promoting initiatives to include rural women and women in the informal sector

Content: Women should be directly involved in the content development processes. That way they are more responsive. Content should be developed in the appropriate language used by women.

Universal Access: Infrastructure is key in enabling and providing access to ICTs. There should be infrastructure investment strategies that provide basic and affordable infrastructure. Through universal access and a focus on adult literacy make ICT tools available to women.

Human Resource Development – In order for women to effectively participate in using ICTs for economic empowerment they need to be empowered themselves. The young girls must have access to the education and technologies for development

There should be equal access to training in ICTs at all levels. Governments should include in the curriculum of training in ICTs right from lower levels and in addition ensure training of girls and adult literacy for rural women.

Create Awareness: The only way that women are going to understand the potential of ICTs to economically empower them is to tell them about it. Women groups and movements must document and share experiences in order to increase women's participation in the use of ICTs to economically empower them.

7. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is also important to harmonize ICT policies with other development policies for example the Rural Electrification under the Energy Sector policy would ensure hydro-electricity and other forms of power in the under-served areas. This would then allow use of ICT equipment and hence provide access to rural women. Other relevant policies may include the education sector and Poverty Alleviation.

It is my opinion, that if you do not ask for gender you do not get gender. We must ensure that women participate in ICT initiatives, policy processes, and implementation. We continue to have disparities and the gender digital gap is still widening because we have failed to consider gender and gender sensitive issues and their socio-economic implications. The CD ROM clearly demonstrates that initiatives that take into account gender relations and concerns are more successful than those, which do not. The only way to do it is to do it. I add my voice to the NGOs Gender Issues Strategies Group and Multi-Stakeholder Gender Caucus that we simply have to put Gender on the Agenda in order to enhance the potential of ICT for the empowerment of women.

REFERENCES

^{1a} Uganda Poverty Status Report, 1999

^{2a} Communications Act, 1997

^{3a} Uganda Communications Commission, www.ucc.co.ug

^{4a} Acacia Evaluation report, 2001

^{5a} Anne S. Walker, “A CD-ROM for Rural Women in Africa: Case Study”

^{6a} Nancy Hafkin and Nancy Taggart, “Gender, Technology, and Developing Countries: An Analytic Study”, pp. 77-79.

^{7a} IWTC Women’s Globalnet #202, <http://www.iwtc.org>

^{8a} DAW Online conference summary
<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/egm/ict2002/online.html>

^{9a} Uganda Communications Commission, “Rural Communications Development Policy for Uganda”, July 2001.

Other links

UN-INSTRAW virtual Seminar
www.un-instraw.org

English version of CD-ROM, <http://www.iwtc.org/files/!start.html>

Luganda version of CD-ROM, <http://www.iwtc.org/luganda.html>