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ICT AND POVERTY REDUCTION - A MISSING PIECE IN GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT

Chat Garcia Ramilo

Association for Progressive Communications, Philippines

IT for Change

with Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era

and Centre for Public Policy, Indian Institute of Management - Bangalore

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In the last decade, the enthusiasm over the rapid growth of information and communication technologies and their applications have generated a variety of projects, research, events and other initiatives that focus on fostering development. Many of these initiatives are directed at arresting the growing divide between countries and communities that had access and mastery of new information technologies and those who do not. Access to ICTs is typically divided along traditional lines of development resulting in unequal access that has become known as the 'digital divide' or 'digital exclusion'. This divide is often characterised by high levels of access to technologies including the Internet while infrastructure in less developed nations is at a very low level due to problems of poverty, lack of resources, illiteracy and low levels of education.

Attention to reviewing and evaluating the impact of these experiments are gaining momentum and early findings point to mixed results about the impact of ten years of experience in ICT for development. A study by the International Development Research Center of Canada (IDRC) that investigates ICT for poverty reduction strategies maintains that ICTs are generating changes markets, private and public sectors and economies in developed countries citing the contribution of these technologies to successes in productivity, growth and poverty reduction. In developing countries, evidence of pro-poor ICT access and use are mostly culled from numerous case materials that document the experience of a large wave of investment in ICT for development initiatives. The trend shows, particularly in the last five years, that "ICTs have been applied to systemic improvements important to poverty reduction such as education, health and social services delivery, broader government transparency and accountability, and helping empower citizens and build social organization around rights and gender equality." However, the study also cautions that while documentation of experiences is increasing, there continues to be a need to consolidate research and evaluate lessons that will fuel effective ICT for development strategies, including support for pro-poor initiatives such as girl's primary education.

Beyond generating new jobs for women, ICTs are also being used in projects that address other gender and development issues related to poverty reduction. For instance, the experience of a number of projects in South Asia , that focused specifically on income generating activities and direct employment benefits for women created a space that acted as information exchange, and support network and developed a range of interrelated social, technical and economic skills. Participants seeking to develop their skills acquired the confidence and freedom for autonomous activity that had a significant contribution to their experience of empowerment. Whereas ICTs may not yet have wide impacts on creating employment and generating income for very poor and marginalized women, their engagement with these tools opens up long term conditions of social advancement through self

development, expanded social networks, new modes of learning and a crucial symbolic role in their aspirations for overcoming poverty in the future.

In 2002, UNESCO initiated a programme to innovate and research social and technological strategies to explore the potential of ICTs to contribute to poverty reduction in nine sites in five countries in South Asia. Their study showed that gender played a significant part in determining both the barriers as well as the positive effect of ICT for empowerment.

As far as barriers are concerned, lack of freedom and oppressive social structures intervened significantly. The report relates that "Women talk about the restrictions on the mobility, education, work and social life that both arise from and reproduce poverty, people closely associate their poverty with the domestic discord and violence including dealing with alcoholic, violent or absent husbands". The researchers found that social and commercial exclusion on the basis of gender restrictions on mobility was repeated in many households, with most women generally restricted to their immediate family, a few neighbors and some extended family. This restrictions result in narrowing women's access to information and resources that ICT centers can otherwise provide.

Access to ICTs represented real and symbolic access to modernity, the future, education and knowledge and therefore ICT centers constituted a space into which people can project and develop a sense of change and possibility. In the course of the initiatives, the notion of empowerment emerged as a way of describing the positive effects of the introduction of community multimedia centers. Through their collective experience, the definition of empowerment have come to refer broadly to the challenging of social norms, shifts in power relations, an increase in perceived opportunity and increases in confidence and the consequence that arise from this.

For those who managed to participate in the centers, the research showed that every female user mentioned that one of the major changes has been the rise of confidence. The capacity to operate technical devices and the new knowledge they can share with their communities increased the respect they have in their communities.

Practice and policy

Despite such projects on the ground however, there is still much debate whether ICTs are being employed to substantially contribute to development. An infoDev report published in 2003 posits that despite the vast amounts of resources that have been invested in efforts to increase access to ICTs in developing countries and among the poor, these technologies have not proved to be transformative tools as they have been heralded to be. However, rather than dismissing ICTs as a tool for combating poverty, fostering broad based economic growth in developing countries and achieving the Millenium Development Goals, infoDev makes that point that what is needed to harness ICTs for development and poverty reduction is to

mainstream them as tools of and subordinate them to, broader strategies and programs for building opportunity and empowering the poor". The report goes on to say that the ICT for development agenda should be more realistic about broader changes required in developing countries and the role of ICTs in affecting these changes and thus be much more selective and strategic about the attention and resources devoted to these technologies. This means that the broader goals of achieving gender equality, women's empowerment and promotion of women's rights should be prioritised in the field of ICT for development. Its significance is magnified by the fact that the majority of the world's population that remains untouched by the ICT revolution are women.

For example, many organisations that introduce ICT projects in poor communities with a view to reducing poverty reports that, in many cases the biggest achievement of their projects is instilling a sense of personal empowerment among their participants, especially women. Feminists know that personal empowerment is a necessary and important ingredient in women's economic emancipation. However, personal empowerment is only the first step. ICT interventions must contribute to real and sustainable gains in the economic, social and political landscapes of communities and countries if they are to live up to their development promise.

The locus of interventions have to be both local and national and have to cover community based initiatives that attempts to address specific conditions of poverty in local settings as well as national programs that tackle infrastructure, industry and governance. Interventions cannot be limited to ICT for poverty reduction projects, they must include policy reform in all aspects of information and communication in any national context. Finally, both practice and policy have to be tightly linked.

Design and Evaluation of ICT for poverty reduction projects

Gender concerns have to be dealt in initial stages of ICT projects to ensure that the needs and priorities of both women and men are appropriately considered and that gender equality goals are embedded in project design. A study done by World Bank in 2002 of 80 ICT projects concluded that gender issues were rarely articulated in product design and implementation, often because donors do not request this. The study underlined the need for a proactive approach to ensure gender-balanced participation, particularly in projects in developing countries because of the limited pool of women with skills in this area. The study also indicated that project implementers should take into account the context of gender relations in ensuring women's full participation to avoid backlash from other members of the society. Involving all stakeholders of the target community, including both men and women, in project design from the beginning, is imperative.

Broad gender mainstreaming guidelines for ICT projects are beginning to be proposed by a number of organizations with the intention of influencing project design and implementation. The guidelines build on well-developed

gender planning and gender mainstreaming tools that are now commonly utilized in different sector areas.

There is a current drive to go beyond just documentation of "best practice", as has been the practice in the ICT for development area for some time. The preoccupation of many is to find evidence from which standards and benchmarks can be set to measure how ICT projects contribute to development, especially in poverty reduction. In some of this work, there is some consideration of gender analysis and women's views. Most however, remain gender blind.

The whole push in this direction within the ICT for development community will benefit hugely from the experience and knowledge in gender analysis of years of feminist scholarship. The input needed range from basic gender sensitivity of project implementers and setting gender indicators in ICT projects, to the more disciplined task of designing methodologies and applying rigorous analysis in gender evaluations. However, the discourse in ICT for development is sorely lacking in feminist viewpoints. What is needed and will be a challenge to the feminist movement is to take much more interest in this issue and infuse it with a women's rights and development perspective. This includes a call to feminist academics, policy advocates and policy makers and gender and development experts among others.

There are thousands of ICT for development projects all over the world, a significant portion of them meant to tackle the intractable problem of poverty. An account of some projects where issues of gender and women's empowerment are made visible is provided at the end of this report.

Engaging national ICT policy processes

In the past 10 years, the gender and ICT advocacy movement has grown internationally and regionally. Punctuated by a series of regional and international events from Beijing in 1995 to the WSIS Summit in December 2003, a rights-based, gender and ICT agenda has steadily gained legitimacy. However, the gender and ICT movement is still young and the diffusion of its ideas is still ad-hoc and fragmented between and amongst networks and agencies. Generally, gender and ICT advocacy networks are still small and lack capacity, particularly at national level. The gender and ICT advocacy movement remains on the fringes of the women's movement and there has been insufficient take-up of gender equality and women's empowerment within broader civil society.

Engaging national ICT policy processes has perhaps become the most important locus of advocacy as the second Phase of the World Summit on the Information Society comes to its conclusion in November 2005. It is critical because of two reasons. First, the bulk, if not all, of the policy development in ICTs will now happen in each of our countries. Many countries are crafting their national E-strategies to present at the Summit in Tunis. Second, there is very little intervention occurring from civil society, much less from women's organizations, in national contexts.

A critical part of the problem is the lack of understanding among governments and policy makers of the intersection of gender policy and information and communication policy. Most governments assume that there is no need to focus on how policy will impact differently on men and women, unless they are dealing with policy that relates specifically to women, for example in the area of public health policies addressing cervical cancer, teenage pregnancy, etc. The result is that most national ICT policies and strategies (including e-strategies) are gender-blind. Much of the research done in the lead up to the WSIS provides evidence showing that policy-making in the ICT field has often ignored the needs, requirements, and aspirations of women, and have not included a gender equality perspective. This is reinforced by the fact that there are very few women ICT policy makers.

In addition, agencies, governments, networks and organizations that have started to incorporate a gender perspective in their initiatives struggle with the imperative to align their ICT programme objectives (and within that, their gender and ICT policies) with poverty reduction strategies and the Millenium Development Goals, which now underpin much of the ICT for development agenda. While the problem of a gender 'digital-divide' is more widely recognized, there is little understanding of how ICT policies, programmes and projects in any context are changing women's impoverished state. Similarly, little attention is given to how information and communication flows are affecting women's rights, an essential element of any development. For example, developing effective mechanisms for equal participation of women in all levels of policy-making that genuinely contribute to addressing inequalities and disempowerment.

The need for a new ICT for development rationale

Engaging national ICT policy processes that impact on poverty reduction strategies requires the understanding of fundamental access and infrastructure issues in communications. My organization, the Association for Progressive Communications, believe that there is a need for a new approach to ICTs for development (ICTD) policy and strategy. It is an approach that fully requires a gender analytical component. At the same time, it is an approach that feminists who choose to engage in this advocacy should grapple and link with the more general discourse on gender and development.

In summary APC's proposed framework proposes that the primary goal of ICTD policy should be the achievement of universal and affordable access to ICTs by 2015 in support of the MDG-based poverty reduction strategies, as outlined in the WSIS Plan of Action and the Millennium Report. In achieving this goal, the private sector can be of assistance but not the primary focus of concern because ICT for development goes beyond the frontiers of the market.

The rationale for a new ICTD policy is one that recognises the value of the market in supplying ICTs in a competitive environment to reduce the costs of communications, but also notes the market's limitations in providing services to the poor in remote areas. Provision of ICT services to the poor in remote areas is a public good that brings them onto the local, national and global information networks. This provides the poor with information and communication tools they can use for their own development, prevents their social and economic exclusion from the rest of humanity and produces a positive value to local and global information networks as a whole as a network effect.

The question then is how this is going to be achieved. To actually provide ICT services to the poor on a large scale requires a new approach. This approach should include telecommunications policy reform that will include, as a matter of priority, the extension of access and services to the poor in underserved areas. In previous years, telecom reform policy focused primarily on building a private, competitive regulated telecommunications market. To do this it aimed to privatize inefficient public telecom operators, introduce competitors to the market and remove the cross-subsidisation of local calls by long distance and international calls. This reform policy has had mixed results. While it enhanced the telecommunications market, it was not particularly successful in extending services to the poor. Nor was it able to take on board the implications of the internet with regard to a business case that depended on voice communications as a cash cow. For example, Voice of the Internet protocol or VoIP provides the technical means to radically reduce the cost of voice communications, yet the policy and regulatory framework went to great lengths to impede the scaling up of VoIP and it is only in the last few years that it has started to take off in developed countries. Most developing countries still restrict the deployment and use of VoIP to their own detriment.

There are many more infrastructure related issues that need attention and analysis. The point being made here is that, a new ICT for development approach is indispensable if the feminist movement takes the challenge of becoming more present in this discourse. At the same time, this new approach will certainly be much more effective and relevant once it goes through the wringer of feminist analysis.

The attention and momentum achieved in the past years in building a gender and ICT advocacy agenda, particularly at the WSIS, could augur well for more active global and national policy processes. Its strength though will depend on partnerships and alliances with the broader civil society movement. Perhaps, more significantly, it will need to move out from the fringes of the women's movement and taken more centrally within the gender and development agenda.

APPENDIX:

Some Examples of ICT for development projects that directly addresses women's development needs.

Community knowledge network

Nabanna is a project located in Baduria, in West Bengal, India. The municipality comprises up to 10 neighbourhoods with a total population of 47,388. Women in Baduria do not have structured local communication networks that promote access to information or provide spaces for sharing information and knowledge. From hardly being recognised in their immediate social environment, many of the women report that they have gained more respect in their local communities as a result of their ICT skills and creativity - not just because they are able to use a computer, but also because they are now recognized as people who can find and distribute information to local people. Women are finding that the community-at-large respects them for being knowledgeable on skills and issues, which in some cases has given them a greater voice within their families. The younger women feel they are able to approach the job market with greater confidence.

There has also been an emergence of solidarity - for as the women learn computers together at the ICT centres, they also often discuss their problems, creating a sense of unity among them and also bringing forth inherent and latent leadership qualities. Trainees in the centres are taking their skills back to their local neighbourhoods and in turn becoming teachers there. The project has led to solidarity among women who now share a free space for communicating, learning and innovating. The Baduria ICT centre is perceived as a place reserved for women.

Health and Education in African Countries

Information technology itself can help provide education, particularly through distance learning and ICT-enabled education, which otherwise women would not be able to access. Initiatives to help women can be illustrated with a project developed in Ghana, which uses radio to develop functional literacy as well as to provide information in local languages on a wide range of topics. The topics include AIDS, teenage pregnancy, nutrition, community empowerment, income generating activities, food preservation, animal husbandry, child labor, saving energy, and many more. Radio is also used to support literacy teaching with more detailed information that could not be provided in the classroom. Although they were faced with some problems, such as poor radio infrastructure and inadequate airtime to offer literacy in 15 languages, they found that the use of radio strengthened the coverage of the functional and development themes of the literacy program, changing people's attitudes towards family planning and it contributed to the establishment of income-generating ventures.

An example of a program that utilizes ICT tools to monitor and diagnose sicknesses related to women's health can be found in Uganda. The United Nations Population Fund with Uganda's Ministry of Health & Population

Secretariat, and Uganda district authorities initiated RESCUER with the objective of reducing Uganda's high maternal mortality rate (506 per 100,000) by improving local care and referral systems. The traditional midwives, relatives and friends handled over 60 per cent of childbirths, especially in rural areas where 80 percent of the population live. The project combined communications, transport and quality health services. They use very high frequency (VHF) radios installed at base stations, health units, referral hospital ambulances and District Medical Officer's vehicle and birth attendants were equipped with walkie-talkies. The walkie-talkies proved out to be a great source of empowerment for birth attendants. Not only did it improve their image, but also built confidence in their patients and allowed them to help more women. The project succeeded in reducing the maternal mortality rates by as much as 40 percent in three years. Rural health personnel are now able to call and give practical advice even when there is no transport available. In view of its positive results, the RESCUER project is being replicated in three districts and there are plans to extend it to 30 more.

Kenya:

The health and agriculture community radio network In Kenya, radio cassette players are helping women from HIV/AIDS affected households to exchange information. AIDS remains a major problem in Kenya, and it is often women and girls who bear the brunt of the pandemic. They have no rights to own property such as land, and are physiologically at greater risk of catching HIV/AIDS. They are generally less well educated and only a handful are employed and many of them also suffer from malnutrition.

To help address these problems, the Kenya AIDS Intervention Prevention Project Group (KAIPPG) has established community-based informal learning centres, called nutritional field schools, in six of its 28 project sites in western Kenya. Each field school caters for 30 participants, giving priority to orphans, widows, low-income women and older vulnerable children from HIV/AIDS affected households.

The participants are taught about nutrition, and receive training in relevant skills and techniques to enable them to care for people living with AIDS, to maximize crop yields and, generally, to become economically and socially empowered. KAIPPG organized a health and agriculture community radio network for women who had completed the training. The participants were organized into six radio listening groups, and were trained in the use of audio and video recording equipment to enable them to exchange information such as on farming techniques, and to raise public awareness about HIV/AIDS. The groups were also trained in photography and the use of drama and traditional oral storytelling as tools for learning, education and development. A radio cassette player and a mobile phone was distributed to each of the groups, and the participants were encouraged to communicate with national FM radio stations – to respond to programmes, obtain information, and share their experiences with a wider audience.

ICTs in agriculture and rural development

Farmwise.: A database system, an online input calculator, and email that are helping women farmers in rural village of Mwandama in Zomba district Malawi to improve agricultural production.

The project developed a computer database system with a web interface and email facility to help women farmers to determine what they can expect to harvest from their land, which crops they can grow given the soil type and fertility, and what inputs they should use. The project collected information about the women and their land as inputs for the database. Requests for advice from farmers were passed on by email to the advisers in the agricultural extension office. The email was also used to communicate with Radio 1, a station of the Malawi Broadcasting Corporation, popularly known as 'Farmers Radio'.

Since most farmers in the village listen to this radio station, it was natural that the project should use it to publicize the Farmwise project. The station's programme presenters used the online input calculator to answer questions from farmers about the types and amounts of inputs they required, and taught farmers with Internet access how to use it. The women were given alerts of the radio programmes to listen to and the times they were being aired with information such as when to plant, fertilize and weed. The most vulnerable members of the community received free inputs, and brochures were available for all to take home.

As a result of the project, their productivity has more than doubled, and they are now producing about 10–15 bags of maize each. None of the women are contemplating selling their produce yet – they are happy just to have enough for their families to eat. In the words of one of the women, 'This year we will not be lining up in queues to receive free maize, we are liberated from the food crisis circle'.

The Knowing & Growing Network:

ICT tools for women organic farmers in the Caribbean As in many other regions in the world, Caribbean women play a vital if under-recognized and unsupported role in food production. They are less likely to have access to land, extension training, affordable credit and loans than men, yet studies indicate that they make up to 65% of agricultural production and 80% of marketing decisions.

There is a growing market for organic products, and an increasing number of Caribbean women are becoming interested in organic farming methods. Organic farming is highly knowledge-intensive, however, and women farmers often lack the means to learn more about organic production methods. While opportunities exist to tap into local and even regional markets, women farmers tend to be isolated from market information, and are not producing to organic exports. To overcome these challenges, Networked Intelligence for Development (NID), an NGO based in Toronto, Canada, organized a workshop in collaboration with the Jamaica Organic Agriculture Movement (JOAM) for Caribbean women engaged in organic farming to help them take advantage of the Internet as a means to access and exchange information about organic farming methods, promote their business, and market their products standards. A number of women farmers would like to make this leap but lack the opportunities to do so. The end of the workshop marked the very beginning of a network among the participants who learned about organic farming information and networks that already exist on the Internet, and were trained in how to set up and participate in online user groups.