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Role of Media and ICT in Empowering Kenyan Rural Communities with Information in Development

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Abstract
Information is the key to democracy. Information technology measures social integration, participation and performance valuables in any development. Emerging digital techniques, new network alternatives including intelligent networks, high bandwidth communication technology and state-of-the-art software for network functions and services, are the new technology trends evident in the development of electronic communication systems. Yet most of world's population remains untouched by this revolution. The paper discusses the need to focus on Kenyan rural communities to empower them to access information, knowledge and poverty alleviation among them by deploying the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). Analyses the factors preventing rural communities from reaping the benefits of ICT s, Kenyan initiatives to overcome the factors, ways and means of poverty alleviation and sustainable development; identifies the bottlenecks and solutions, and lessons learned. The paper will analyze the integration of media and technology in pushing development agenda. Perhaps the inclination of ICT and media as an information resource will bring enormous and diversification in developmental models.
Keywords: ICT, MEDIA, DEVELOPMENT, RURAL AND KENYA

Introduction

Information is the key to democracy. Emerging digital techniques, new network alternatives including intelligent Networks, high bandwidth communication technology and state-of-the-art software for network functions and services, are the new technology trends evident in the development of electronic communication systems. Yet most of world's population remains untouched by this revolution. The paper discusses the need to focus on Kenyan rural communities to empower them to access information, knowledge and poverty alleviation among them by deploying the Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). Analyses the factors preventing rural communities from reaping the benefits of ICTs, Kenyan initiatives to overcome the factors, ways and means of poverty alleviation and sustainable development; identifies the bottlenecks and solutions, and lessons learned.

Need to Focus on Kenyan Rural Communities

There is mounting evidence that ICTs can be used to facilitate various aspects of social economic development processes.

This is both in developed and developing countries, Kenya not being an xceptional. Example is ICT can serve as resource in achieving broad based development goals. Some of these areas include administration and service delivery within all sectors (private and public).

Even after 50 years of Kenya's independence, the country is still facing pressing problem in dealing with its rural poor and how to increase their income level. With the advent of Information Technology (IT), it has become possible for common man to access global information. Information in a broader sense includes oral communication, voice in telephony, text in fax and newspapers, images in video and television broadcasting, and data in computers.

Media performs important roles in helping rural development by promoting local identity, character and culture. This is principally relying on local content. The content is based on rural development projects by ensuring the respective audience gets the required information of their choice and consumption.

All information can be digitized, transported, stored, retrieved, modified and then distributed. The swift emergence of a global "information society" is changing the way people live, learn, work and relate. An explosion in the free flow of information and ideas has brought knowledge and its myriad applications to many millions of people, creating new choices and opportunities in some of the most vital realms of human endeavor

Mass poverty is affecting Kenya's ability to compete against countries with better physical infrastructure for connectivity, informed citizenry and more educated population for foreign direct investment that Kenya needs to face a fiscal deficit.

With its current rate of growth, existing work culture and policies, it would be difficult to keep pace for poverty eradication, until government redefine its policies and strategies dramatically, apply ICTs innovations with application and active Participation from private sector, Community Based Organizations and Non-Governmental Organizations.

ICTs and media's Role in Kenya's Rural Communities

ICTs and media play a major role in a nation's politics, economy, social and cultural development. These fuel the global economy and relate to human rights, helping at best, to support freedom of expression and right to information according to Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Factors Preventing Rural Communities to Reap Benefits from ICTs

There are a number of important factors preventing rural communities in developing countries from reaping benefits of ICTs. Without developing access models that can address these factors, rural masses will be left far behind urban dwellers closer to digital opportunities

Deploying ICTs to empower poor and lead them to the road of prosperity can be achieved through poor-oriented governmental policies rather than corporate-oriented.

The constraints are:

(i) Lack of awareness about benefits of ICTs:

Despite growing number of people who own a computer and have Internet access, most people in developing countries have little opportunity to connect to the Internet. They are unaware of socio-economic benefits and stimulus to good governance that ICTs can bring. The quasi-absence of demonstration projects in some countries, very limited information is available to assess and to advocate the impact of ICTs for development.

(ii) Lack of access facilities:

The access facilities mainly comprise computers and connectivity in rural areas. The Internet and computer are expensive to be accessible to ordinary citizens. It is often available only in urban centers, where most Internet Service Providers (ISPs) have

These prevent people from familiarizing themselves with benefits of Internet based information resources that invariably require an ability to understand international languages, especially English. As a result, most people in developing countries cannot read and understand most of the Internet content. Another factor is high illiteracy rate among rural people.

(iii) Lack of local language information products:

Lack of suitable information products tailored to the needs and assimilation capacities of rural people in developing countries. In order to better adjust their investment decisions people need updated information on market prices, new agricultural technologies and methods "to raise quality of their products, adapt to changing climatic conditions or demands of agricultural markets.

(iv) Non-availability of government information through online:

Most countries do not have pro-poor ICT policies (e-governance and rural commerce) and plans to reorient relevant government institutes as electronic service providers to boost rural development.

(v) Lack of motivation to use information over the Internet:

In spite of connectivity, people will not use ICTs unless they are motivated to do so. Community ownership of access facilities and availability of facilitator are key factors to induce motivation.

Kenya in the Context

Kenya is emerging as a testing ground for new technologies and business models that aim to narrow the digital divide. Limitations in electricity, telephony, Internet connectivity and other kinds of basic infrastructure in Kenya's rural areas are a key challenge for a number of development organizations (Rao, 2002).

The corporate sector too is discovering that bridging this digital divide could translate into new market opportunities (Ribeiro, 2002).

A number of innovative experiments already under way indicate that achieving global digital access and jump starting development may not be as difficult as many think.

In the long run, rural ICTs projects could prove to be the most effective means of driving changes in rural areas:

(i) Socially: by ensuring equal access for less privileged groups;
(ii) Economically: by creating new kinds of work and financial transactions; and
(iii) Politically: by improving the quality, speed and sensitivity of state apparatus to the needs of local citizens. The success of a rural networking initiative depends on how far it progresses down the stages of IT and information diffusion: initiation, adoption, adaptation, acceptance, regulation and infusion.

ICTs Enhances Access to Information and Communication

ICTs provide the opportunity to access information on development. This addresses the digital divide between

the informed and the uninformed people. Through information empowerment on various development projects, there is a significantly change of national gross domestic product (GDP). In most cases this is built by ICT through public-private partnerships.

ICTs in Education

Increased and improved education through computers or about computers or both would contain the poverty in all fronts. There are several successful initiations to demonstrate the role of ICTs to promote education among poor and preventing poverty. This supports the integrative and contextual learning and teaching in classes. Overly there is efficiency in delivery of education in schools and higher learning institutions. Through this democracy education is achieved.

ICTs in Economic Interventions/Entrepreneurship

ICTs play an important role in direct poverty alleviation by enhancing activities of poor and increasing their productivity by way of new credit and financial services, new opportunities to design, manufacture and market products through the Internet or intranet systems, etc. These interventions can be successful only when accompanied with other supporting infrastructure consisting of access roads, storage facilities, competitive markets and opportunities to global market. The impact of select projects demonstrates various levels of reducing poverty.

ICTs in Health Programmes

There are many successful initiatives to demonstrate the role of ICTs to promote health of the poor and preventing poverty that originate from poor health by way of providing superior medical advice, diagnosis or knowledge in their locality.

ICTs in Governance

ICTs facilitate improved access to government and quasi-government resources and services. Good governance ensures transparent use of public funds, growth of private sector, effective delivery of public services, rule of law, etc. It also facilitates pro-poor policies and foolproof macroeconomic management. The factors that have "influence on denial of basic services to the poor are lack of investment, institutional structures that lack accountability, domination by local elites and well-to-do, widespread corruption, culturally and socially determined inequality, and lack of participation by the poor.

ICTs aid to facilitate speedy, transparent, accountable, efficient and effective interaction between public, citizens, business and other agencies; promote better administration and business environment, and saves money in costs of transactions in government operations.

ICTs in Promoting Democracy

ICTs play a major role in supporting the culture of democracy, democratic processes and civic values that uphold a democratic system. Interventions in e-democracy involve processes on electronic interaction between government and citizens. The aim is to: provide for citizens access to information and knowledge about political process, services and available choices, and facilitate transformation of passive information access to active citizen participation by informing, representing, encouraging to vote, consulting and involving citizens.

Thus, ICTs aid in creating well-informed and active citizenship, undermining closed and undemocratic regimes, and supporting watchdog role of citizen groups. Often the poor know their problems well, but they lack knowledge of larger socioeconomic context of their poverty and various options to improve their situations. It is essential that development planners need to have direct contact with poor, to link development programs to realities.

Bottlenecks and Solutions

The basic requirements for successful implementation of rural ICTs initiatives are electricity, hardware, appropriate software, telephony, network connectivity and policy guidelines. The creation of assets and training of people enhances the sustainability of ICTs projects. These projects work effectively when training is an inherent component of the project and skill development ensures rapid diffusion of innovation through interactions and communication. ICTs projects have assisted rural communities by providing them with news, information, advice and knowledge that has hitherto been inaccessible to them.

This information has allowed rural citizens/consumers to make more informed economic decisions: landless laborers have negotiated their daily wages more effectively; and tractors, threshers, old television sets, cattle and motorcycles have all been traded across towns and villages due to online advertisements.

Until the cost of basic IT devices that deliver the 'last mile' of connectivity and local language software is lowered, the goal of wiring rural India will remain a dream.

Conclusion

The use of ICT tools help in strengthening social networks, empowerment and participation, as well as fostering productive processes at the local level through the provision of employment and skills, as well as support services for micro-enterprise activities(Abhay Kumar and K. M. Singh Book chapter)Creating information-rich societies is a key element of poverty alleviation and sustainable development.

To empower poor people and to reduce digital divide, ICTs projects should be developed in local language prioritizing local needs and content; be a model of low cost solution so that poor people can replicate this model or can own or share the system; be owned and participated by community in general; be sustainable in long terms; be able to adopt and utilize innovative ICTs; and be supportive to local and public access points as in rural areas where divide is the widest.

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