

Relevance and Priorities of ICT for Women in Rural Communities: A Case Study from Nigeria

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The use and deployment of information and communication technologies (ICT) in Nigeria has been largely an urban and upper-class activity. It was therefore unusual for an NGO to attempt to promote ICT for rural communities and especially for women.

Fantsuam Foundation uses Microfinance and ICT as complementary tools for poverty alleviation. The ICT program starts with two rooms provided by the community. One of the rooms is the Community Library and the second is the IT training room. This article reports the preliminary results of the evaluation of an information and communication technologies program for women in rural communities in Nigeria.

Methods

This research was conducted using focus group discussions, interviews and participant observation. The focus group consisted of eight women, all of whom were literate in the Hausa language. One of the interviewees was a graduate who has lived in an urban center where there are ICT facilities.

Issues Investigated

The following issues were discussed at the focus group and in the interviews:

- Means of communication available in the communities
- Frequency of their use and types of messages and information for which the facilities were used
- Reliability of the communications means and the participants' preferences
- Relevance of ICT to their lives

- Their problems of access
- Sending of messages by post
- Sorts of messages for which they generally use these various means of communication
- Frequency of access to or use of telegram, telephone, telex, e-mail and the Internet

Findings

Content of messages usually has to do with emergencies, family health, financial assistance for school fees, farm inputs, leaking roofs and communal violence.

The most common means of communication used are verbal messages and letters, either to distant places or nearby; the danger always exists of inaccurate delivery of these urgent messages. Letters are sent by hand at the bus stops through willing drivers or passengers traveling in the direction of the messages' destination.

The problem with verbal messages is that the message may not be delivered as it was sent, or the content may be distorted – a message that “Mother’s cow is dead” might be delivered as “Mother is dead.” Such messages can have drastic consequences for those affected.

One of the women had used radio messages for news about her father’s health. Two had used telephones for similar reasons. No one had used these media for exchange of greetings: the cost was too high, and only emergency messages were delivered through them.

All the women have heard of telegrams but have not used them and did not consider telegrams relevant to their daily lives. Those who used the telephone and radio messages are people who had once

lived in cities. At the moment we do not have telephone access in Bayan-Locho village.

None of the women had ever used the Internet or e-mail. It was exciting for them to know that they can be connected to the whole world through the Internet and that e-mail can be instantaneous like the telephone, and they wished it were available.

Perceptions about ICT

The women attending the ICT training are those who are involved in the microfinance program. The economic empowerment of microfinance gives them the confidence to engage in acquiring computer skills, which are regarded as an elite activity.

There was need to explain that ICT covered a range of facilities (electronic and paper-based). However, they will only use ICT facilities if they meet immediate needs for them and their families, e.g.

- Sending urgent messages to distant families
- Requesting remittances from family members overseas
- Obtaining health information on vaccinations for children, preventive measures for epidemics
- Exploring job opportunities in the cities
- Finding announcement of dates for national examinations for students
- Obtaining market prices of grains
- Ascertaining the availability of fertilizers at affordable prices
- Obtaining weather forecasts and the impact of weather on farm activities
- Making wedding and funeral announcements.

Factors that influence attitudes to ICT include

- Previous exposure through living in the city, level of education
- Fear of new technology (technophobia)
- Lack of reliable ICT facilities in rural communities due to lack of electricity or telephones
- Desire to acquire higher status in the community
- Encouragement of children to enroll for IT training as a means of improving job chances. Some of them have decided to enroll their children for the ICT training after completing their own training.
- Desire for a fast facility to get information quickly to the police in the event of a threat to peace in the communities.

ICT Is Desirable, but Is It Feasible?

The following are the main challenges to implementation of ICT:

- Level of literacy among women
- Accessibility of ICT information in local language
- Solar power and wireless e-mail are feasible technologies for communities that have no telephone or electricity, but

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these are currently unaffordable

- Since none of our training facilities has a phone connection, Fantsuam Foundation has to access its e-mail in the capital city, Abuja, a

five-hour return trip from Kafanchan. A senior staff member has to undertake these journeys. The trips have cost implications and prevent timely responses to correspondence, and there are safety considerations for road travels. In addition there is the cost of access at cybercafés – the commercial Internet service providers in the capital city. Some of them have unreliable dial-up connections, so sometimes our trip (the travel time + the cost + safety considerations) to the cybercafé is wasted. On a successful trip, the staff will also send and receive e-mails on behalf of some of our clients.

Conclusion

Fantsuam Foundation is promoting access to ICT for women in rural communities using four strategies:

1. Part of the cash prize of the Hafkin Africa Prize was set aside to provide scholarships for women to acquire IT skills at the Bayan Loco Community Learning Centre.
2. We have invested in a satellite telephone (the only one that serves a population of over 300,000). Callers from the diaspora are able to talk to families in the villages. Fantsuam takes the phone to the receiving family and the caller pays the bills: a sustainable service.
3. We have a van that serves as Mobile Community Telecentre to carry two laptops on specific days to remote communities to provide IT training. The vision is to provide a wireless Internet access to the van so that it will provide e-mail post office service to the communities. An affordable technology has not made this dream a reality.
4. Women are the primary agents of their communities' information shops.

Women attend the IT training because it

- Enhances their status within the community
- Provides them the skills to serve as volunteers for the proposed Community Information Shop
- Promises eventual relevant and timely information on issues determined by the communities, for instance,
 - For urgent messages to distant family members
 - To promote communal peace
 - To inform job seekers of employment opportunities
 - To document indigenous knowledge and skills of elderly members of the community
 - To initiate accurate recording of births and deaths (vital registration)

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