Title: Mobile Phone & Telecenter: A comparative case study of Bangladesh & Uganda
By Rubayat Ahsan
March, 2008

Abstract:
A range of information and communication technology based development projects have been undertaken over the past several decades. However, these so-called ict4d projects have had variable success in reaching the extreme poor, the illiterate and the underprivileged. The aim of this paper is to examine the utility of ict4d project efficacy. Particular consideration is given to the village phone program in Bangladesh and the Nakaseke multipurpose community telecenter in Uganda.

The findings show that the village phone program, which focuses primarily on the economic empowerment of project beneficiaries, and the Nakaseke Telecenter, which prioritizes expanding service provision, both fail to take into consideration the extreme poor and disadvantaged; a remarkable weakness in conventional ict4d programming. In addition, it indicates that project duty bearers in conventional ict4d projects are not directly accountable and participation is not particularly people centered. Rather, both projects are managed by development agencies for beneficiaries who are not actively involved in project design, a further shortcoming from the standpoint of the rights-based approach (RBA).

Ict4d is for the marginal or for the well off?
In the realm of development programming, information and communication technology is generally perceived to be a useful tool for empowering the marginalized. At the same time, however, projects employing information and communication technology for development (ict4d) purposes have been criticised for failing to reach the truly marginalized.

A common phenomenon in developing countries is the digital divide. It is most pronounced between urban and rural areas. Rural communities are often deprived of the benefits of ICT applications, widening the gap between the privileged and the underprivileged. If rural areas have access to ICTs, local rights may be protected and local capacity may be improved. They may have enormous potential to raise the capacity of people by the usage of ICT appliances and applications. Once they learn to communicate with people, stakeholders, NGOs, agencies and government, it may enable them to know their rights and to improve their quality of life. ICTs have been rapidly changed contemporary society. A majority of the world's poor live in rural areas and do not have access to ICT. The growing inequality has already divided the world between have and have not. ICT can be a tool to reach and empower rural communities.

Village Phone Program (VPP) in Bangladesh
Village phone program is increasingly popular among the ict4d projects. Grameen's VPP project in the least developed country Bangladesh has drawn attention of development practicioners. Grameen has developed VPP as an exemplary model by providing micro finance along with mobile phones. Besides national and international recognition and appreciation, the VPP model has been replicated in other countries. As VPP is apparently a 'success story' example of ict4d, therefore, it is used in this research as a case study.

In 1995 Grameen Bank came to know that the lack of information is a constraint for the poor in rural Bangladesh and because of this, the poor are trapped in a vicious cycle of poverty. Grameen Telecom (GTC), a not-for-profit company, was created to develop village phone program. GTC has a 35% share of Grameen Phone Ltd. The objectives of GTC is to provide easy access to telephone services, to initiate new income earning opportunities especially for the GB borrowers, and spread the information revolution to the rural areas. The village phone program was launched in March 1997. GB members are selected on the basis of their good performance with the bank and provided with loans for a mobile phone. Technical installation and support are given by GTC. GB collects monthly installments, VP bills, and other dues from the mobile phone owners. Village phone operators work as community or public phone operators.

Grameen Phone is a join venture among four companies. Norway's telecommunication company Telenor AS has a 51% share of GP. Professor Yunus was looking for a company that would support providing phone services for the poor in rural areas. Telenor AS showed interest in fulfilling Yunus's desire to reach rural areas with mobile phone technology. Grameen Telecom holds a 35% share, and was specially created within Grameen family as not for profit organization to run VPP and expand opportunities for poor villages. Marubeni, a Japanese trading company, having investments in many other developing countries, holds 9.5% share. Iqbal Quadir's[i] New York based Gonophone Development Corporation has 4.5% share.

Nakaseke Community Telecenter in Uganda
Nakaseke MCT is an internationally recognized ict4d project where multi stakeholders from local, national and international level are involved. This MCT project is well known example of Community telecentres. A range of ICT services are provided from the center. MCT has a different approach for serving community with ICT services than VPP's aim of economic empowerment.

Nakaseke is the well known MCT in the field of ict4d, which was opened on March 1999 as three years pilot project. It is a join venture between national and international partners[ii]. National Agricultural Research Organization (NARO), Kawanda Agricultural Research Institute, and local NGOs are also part of strategic alliances.
The program is a major component of the U.N. special initiative for Africa, "Harnessing Information Technology for Development" (HITD). Nakaseke is one of the five telecenter projects initiated in Benin, Mali, Mozambique, and Tanzania supported by ITU, IDRC, and UNESCO. The objective of the project is to test and evaluate application of new technology for the development of rural areas, providing information and communication at rural community for catalyzing their development process and finally improvement of quality of life. The MCT is located at rural area Nakaseke under Luweero district located at 50 km north of Kampala in central Uganda. Crop and livestock farming are major economic activities in the smallholdings.

Nakaseke MCT is part of Acacia initiative undertaken by IDRC. The mission of Acacia project is to empower sub-Saharan communities to enable them with ICT. Acacia supports Canada's contribution to the African Information Society Initiatives (AICS) was endorsed by African

governments as an Action to build Africa's ICT Infrastructure[iii]. Between 1997 and 2000 Acacia Project covers four countries in Sub- Saharan Africa. These countries are Mozambique, Sebegal, South Africa, and Uganda. Few other projects had been implemented in Mali, Benin, and Tanzania. Thus Acacia is engaged with 35 telecenters in seven countries of Sub-Saharan Africa. Among these projects five have been jointly funded by UNESCO and ITU.

Telephones, facsimile machines, computers with Internet access are available at the Nakaseke center. Besides these services there is also a library having digital and print materials. The center has a stock CD ROMS. The center provides ICT training and computer applications. The center conducts out reach programs to reach the people who illiterate, poor and are not accustomed to the usage of MCT. In addition, the center works on compilation of indigenous knowledge recording and dissemination. The center has eight computers, two printers, a scanner, a photocopy machine, VCR, Television, video camera, and projector. Nakaseke MCT basically relies on conventional electricity supplied by Uganda Electricity Board. The center uses deep cycle batteries and inverter as an alternate power supply during power failure.[iv] International donors fund 60% while government provides 40% of the budget. The community contributes fund for the operating cost of the center including accommodation, salaries and allowance of staffs. Community has taken initiative to collect tax which is called "school tax". Under this school tax scheme every student has to pay US $0.59 per year. (Mayanja, 2001: 111)

From beneficiaries' perspective
From VPP and MCT project analysis, it is found that existing ict4d projects are still discriminatory. These projects are more benefiting to well off classes in the rural community than marginalized group. None of the project has given special attention to vulnerable groups in the community in a significant way. VPP has given special attention to women in rural communities, which is good a initiative but not convincing. VP women are already well off members of the bank. GB has given interest free loan to beggars. GB's beggar project is a new experiment, which needs further study for evaluation. These projects do not offer "true participation" of their beneficiaries. Beardon et al. (2004) stresses that participation should enable people to identify their information needs and ability to analyze information. Heeks (1999, p.1) says, "Participation is seen to fail in such projects because it ignores context; because it is itself ignored; because it ignores reality; and because it ignores other factors." The analysis of VPP and MCT project found a lack of conventional practices of ict4d where project beneficiaries are passive receivers rather active designers of their own project. VPP has gone for raising the income level of their beneficiaries; on the other hand MCT project provides ICT services and skills for the community. The empowerment formula of existing ict4d needs further scrutiny from a capability enhancement perspective for claiming rights. In VPP and MCT project the beneficiaries are objects of the project. They do not have much influence over project implementers of the organizations.

From duty bearers or agencies' perspective
Ict4d projects needs to change their conventional approach. These are typical ict4d projects that follow conventional development approach, which may not permit a trade-off between development and rights. Practitioners of ict4d need to be educated or aware about human rights for linking "development" with "rights". Therefore, linkages to rights could result in seeing projects from a rights perspective. Corruption, abuse of power, political unrest, social and life

insecurity altogether have created weak governance in Bangladesh and in Uganda, which problematizes development practices. In the perspective of poverty reduction and basic needs VPP aims to lift their beneficiaries above the poverty line. On the other hand, MCT project does not show noteworthy evidence of poverty reduction. However, both ict4d projects lack attention to the extreme poor of the communities.

Conclusion

It is assumed that ICT can empower marginalized. Ict4d projects aim for the development of people. The analysis of the VPP and MCT projects in this thesis has found some areas where the conventional approach of ict4d needs further attention to incorporate them into a RBA. Beardon (2004, p.3) says development means a good quality of life for all people and the goal should be on people's wellbeing rather economic growth. Beardon says, "I don't know how to achieve it, but I know that some fundamental changes are necessary." A "fundamental change" is really necessary to shift the existing practice of ict4d. Incorporation of RBA into ict4d could bring some changes which may benefit the marginalized as shown in this research.

VPP is a good example of ict4d, which has empowered the beneficiaries economically, especially women, and given access to information to community people on a wider scale. Nakaseke MCT is typical of CTCs in that it lacks meaningful participation of the community. Special management positions have to be created on the basis of RBA aspects, for instance non-discrimination, empowerment, good governance, linkages to rights, poverty reduction & basic needs, accountability, and participation. Creating these positions depends on organization's projects and programs and needs for special focus on any particular or set of aspects.

Recommendation

VPP and CTCs programs have to be redesigned by bringing people back to the center of the project rather than passive receiver of ICT services. CTCs have to make sure that illiterate and poor people in the community have the minimum functionality with computers and internet. Special trainers are needed for this group of people.

Bibliography

Ahsan, R 2006. 'Incorporation of rights based approach in development programming: an examination of problems and prospects of ict4d projects'. MA Thesis. Mahidol University.

Mayanja, M 2001, 'The Nakaseke multipurpose community telecentre in Uganda', in Telecentres: case studies and key issues, eds C. Latchem & D. Walker, The Commonwealth of Learning.

Beardon, H, Munyampeta, F, Rout, S, & Williams G M, 2004, ICT for development: empowerment or exploitation?, viewed 15 February 2005, <http://217.206.205.24/initiatives/ict/home.htm>

Heeks, R 1999, The Tyranny of Participation in Information Systems: Learning from Development Projects, Institute for Development Policy and Management

Ahsan, MB ed, 1996, Grameen bank and Muhammad Yunus, Mowla Brothers, Dhaka.

Annual Report 2002, Grameen Foundation USA, viewed 30 May 2004,<http://www.gfusa.org>.

Bayes, A 2000, 'The Phone and the Future: An Evaluation of Village Pay Phones in Bangladesh', Global Dialogue: The Role of the Village in the 21st Century, Expo 2000 Hannover, Germany.

Bayes, A, Von Braun J, Akhter R1999, Village pay phones and poverty reduction, Program for Research on Poverty Alleviation, Grameen Trust, Dhaka

Bhatnagar, Prof. Subhash, Dewan, A, Torres, MM, Kanungo, P, Grameen Telecom: The village phone program, viewed 30 May 2004, <http//poverty.worldbank.org/sites/14648_grameen_web.pdf>

Campbell, Christopher J 1995, Community Technology Centers: Exploring a Tool for Rural Community Development, The Center for Rural Massachusetts, University of Massachusetts, Amherst

Cohen, Nevin 2001, What Works: Grameen Telecom's Village Phones, viewed 01 June 2004, <http://www.digitaldividend.org /pdf/grameen.pdf>.

Dahms, M 1999, Telecentre Evaluation: A Global Perspective, viewed 10 December 2004, <http://www.idrc.ca/telecentre>

Etta, FE & Parvyn-Wamahiu, S (eds) 2002, The experience with community telecentres, viewed 15 November 2004, <http://web.idrc.ca/ES/EV-31967-201-1-DO_TOPIC.HTML>.

GrameenPhone Revisited: Investors Reaching Out to the Poor 2004, OECD, viewed 17 February 2005, <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/36/6/33962074.pdf>.

MCT pilot projects 2002, ITU , viewed 24 December 2004, < http://www.itu.int/itunews/issue/2002/05/nakaseke.html>

Multipurpose community telecentres (MCTs) in Uganda 2002, ITU, viewed 7 January 2005, <http://www.itu.int/osg/spu/wsis-themes/ict_stories/Wiredinugandacasestudy.html>

Nassolo, A 2001, Bridging the rural digital divide in Uganda: case study of Nakaseke MCT pilot project, viewed 25 December 2004, <http://www.iicd.org/ stories/articles/Story.import63>.

Report on telecentres in Africa (n.d.), viewed 25 November 2004, <http://www.communitysa.org.za/africaict/buganda.htm>.

Rice, MF 2003, 'Information and Communication Technologies and the Global Digital Divide', Comparative Technology Transfer and Society, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 72-88.

UNDP 2004, ICT and Human Development: Towards Building a Composite Index for Asia, ELSEVIER, New Delhi.

[i] In 1994 Iqbal Quadir returned to Bangladesh from USA with the idea to invest in the telecommunication sector. He had a mindset that ICT could empower people and open up some windows for the prosperity of poor villagers. He discussed the idea with Professor Yunus. He realized that GB's institutional capacity can properly utilize the idea to benefit poor.

[ii] International partners are International Development Research Center's (IDRC) Acacia initiative, International Telecommunication Union (ITU), UNESCO, Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), and British Council. And national partners are Uganda Telecom Ltd. (UTL), Uganda Public Library Board, and Uganda National Commission for UNESCO.UNESCO got support from Danish aid agency DANIDA.

[iii] For detail see, http://web.idrc.ca/en/ev-5895-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html, site visited on January 29, 2005

[iv] For detail see Report on Telecentres in Africa, http://www.communitysa.org.za/africaict/buganda.htm, site visited on Febrayry 03, 2005.