

REPORT BACK ON THE E-CONSULTATION: ICTS FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF RURAL WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT STRATEGIES, PLATFORMS, TOOLS AND TRAINING

Background:

It was decided to host an e-consultation for the following reasons:

- To increase the number of voices in the workshop. (There was overwhelming interest in attending and not all could be funded to attend)
- To widen the space for dialogue and discussion
- To facilitate the sharing of experiences, information and resources
- To share input from the workshop presenters (although there was not enough time for this).

The idea was to create a synergy between the workshop and the e-consultation through presenting the outcomes of the e-consultation at the workshop. We have also committed to circulating the final outcomes document of the workshop to those subscribed to the e-consultation

Who participated in the e-consultation?

The notice for the e-consultation was circulated via National, Regional and global email mailing lists which are representative of constituencies who would be interested in the theme of the workshop. It was also advertised on the workshop website.

We had a total of 50 subscribers from around the globe. Some email addresses we could geographically locate (some email subscribers had email addresses which we could not pin down to a location i.e. yahoo and hotmail accounts). Those we could locate were from:

Mauritius
Kenya
South Africa
Holland
Nigeria
Canada
Uganda
Denmark
United States of America
Pakistan
Ethiopia
Italy
Jordan
Ghana
Ecuador
Zambia
Democratic Republic of the Congo
Cameroon
Dominican Republic

What questions were asked?

We used four goals for the e-consultation, which were a distillation of the workshop goals. We presented “meta-questions” for each of the four goals to guide the discussions and frame the e-consultation. We encouraged participants to submit their own questions and welcomed contributions of resources, stories, websites and events.

Participants were asked to introduce themselves and share their work related to the topic. Although this takes time, it gives people a sense of who is subscribed and creates an environment more conducive to sharing. It makes the online space less intimidating and usually encourages those less familiar with mailing lists to speak. Often online spaces are dominated by those familiar with the technology and confident in the English language.

The list was conducted in English and runs from 11 February closing on 26 February 2004. The final workshop outcomes document will be posted to all subscribers.

A synopsis of contributions:

Here I've tried to distill the very rich contributions. This is difficult as even though the list was relatively small and the contributing time short, a lot of very interesting issues were raised and experiences shared. Given the time constraints, I am not able to distill without repetition.

Amongst those that contributed there was overwhelming support for the use of ICTs as a development tool. As **Sharon Mwalongo** a member of a women's media organisation in Zambia said:

I believe that ICTS are a vital tool for development and need to be available and accessible to all, particularly those in remote areas who are rarely covered in everyday life. Radio in particular is the most preferred and accessible media in Zambia, although the combination of the various ICTS leads to a more enhanced and informed society.

Although as **Irene Ossere** of the Congo said:

ICTS are a very great problem in Congo because women have not access to the information. The cause: no-development of media in rural areas.

There was overwhelming agreement that radio was the one communicative tool, which was currently useful, accessible and empowering for rural-based women. Although, it was pointed out that often radio is also not available to rural women.

Participants consistently linked ICTs to the development and empowerment of women and highlighted the fact that lack of ICTs meant lack of potential development by and for women. There was a strong link to harnessing ICTs for poverty alleviation and a sense that projects had to be sustainable.

Related to this, one contributor, **Nnenna Nwakanma** said:

It is my conviction that ICTs will be the dividing line between development and non-development.

Expectations from participants – what they wanted out of the e-consultation

- Learning from hearing about other experiences related to the topic

- Enhancing their work on the ground from the learning
- Innovative solutions to the challenges faced by rural women utilizing ICTs
- Finding out about existing networks related to the topic
- Wanting to hear of practical solutions to the challenges

The e-consultation has not ended so the questions relating to goal 4 cannot be presented here. I've tried to group the responses under the 3 goals although often there is cross-over between the questions. I've also quoted contributors rather than created a shopping list of what was said.

Goal 1. Explore the different strategies and platforms used by development organizations to facilitate rural women's expression of their issues and their concerns.

*** What are the lessons from and challenges of projects that use different media to capture women's voices?**

- Lack of relevant content for rural women even if they have access to radio
- Any information project must be embedded in a larger goal like producing relevant information, which will secure access to resources or improve women's leadership roles.
- Projects need to have a long life-span and not just be run for a few months

Maren Landschulze from the Dominican Republic gave the following challenges:

- *the generally low educational level of women*
- *women's time constraints*
- *no efforts on the regional or country level to use the Internet for development purposes - although the telecommunication infrastructure in the Dominican Republic is improving and more communities receive hardware and Internet connection*
- *no websites or discussion spaces for rural women.*
- *To the best of my knowledge no attempts to combine Internet with rural radio.*

Kazanka Comfort of Fantsuam Foundation said:

We are now looking at the possibility of engaging our members in home video production, because with the high illiteracy and strong oral tradition, we see this tool as a possible way to record and disseminate women's views and voices

Nnenna Nwakanma said

Capturing women voices through the media is influenced by many factors. City women are more open than the rural ones. But generally, getting women to talk needs "a bit of space apart". So women centers, meetings and associations are the best framework to get women voices to be heard.

Catherine Njunguna spoke of a video project she was involved in Kenya:

The project brought only women together and they had a chance to develop their confidence slowly as opposed to if we would have mixed the men. And as the women went round their poor informal settlements capturing their challenges their confidence grew. After the training, they did acquire a video camera and they even managed to capture issues such as forced evictions etc. And after the video, they wanted to venture into all this other ICTs e.g. Internet, E-mail, radio etc. Unfortunately there were no funds to move on.

*** In your view, do particular communication technologies and media platforms (television, radio, Internet, etc) lend themselves better to certain applications like facilitating policy inputs, economic empowerment activities, etc. targeted at women in rural areas?**

Maryam Katongo of Tanzania contributed:

Rural Women need information for their development, but finding the right means to deliver the message is very important issue. For example in rural Tanzania, Radio and newsletter is more effective followed by discussions at activity centers and social gatherings.

Sylvie Siyam from Camaroon said:

One of the best lessons learnt is the power of the radio. As someone says "radio is the rural internet in Africa".

Goal 2. Understand how to make existing information infrastructure more gender inclusive and responsive to the information and development needs of rural and disadvantaged women.

*** What are the opportunities and challenges facing rural information centres?**

John Dada of the Fantsuam Foundation noted:

Relevance of the technology and its affordability are challenges that drives our efforts in community radio, local assembly of computers based on solid state technology design, and free and open source software that can be used to address our multi-lingual needs.

The greatest opportunity is the Information gap - people are thirsty for information.

Challenges include - Masses of needy people, Poor infrastructure, less experts willing to work in rural centres, financial sustainability.

Maryam Katongo from Tanzania:

The problem of women getting chance to participate in discussion which touches their daily life is always under their spouse's opposition.

Miriam Byekwaso:

We also trying to close a gap between women in town and rural and between those who receive formal education and those without, by making easy to follow working structure and leadership.

The problems I have mostly experienced are traditional problems and others are Christian religious beliefs. Traditionally the women are not given opportunities like men, they are regarded as home keepers and not allowed to speak like men.

Miriam Menkiti:

I am of the opinion that there is a need to set up rural information centers specifically to provide information to women. They can go there to seek information on a wide range of issues including economic activities, where to receive micro credit, democracy, citizens participation in politics.

It will be necessary to provide materials in the local dialect in addition to materials in English a few literate ones such as readers could read. Otherwise interpersonal communication in the local dialect by the center staff would make illiterate women to feel relaxed to seek information or advice.

*** How can these information centres be used to facilitate rural women's development?**

- Deliberately mobilize the women to participate
- Train and mentor the women
- Economically empower the women

Uganda Development Services Experience shared by **Rita Mijumbi-Epodoi** learnt that although a resource unit was set up to respond to the information needs and is continuously updated with information that is relevant to women needs, not many women came out to the centre either because of distance, being timid, lack of time etc. The solution has been for us to go to them with the information, which is working out quite well. So dissemination to the women groups is important for women to get involved.

Women's Information Network, Nigeria

PATHS/DFID, which is supporting the radio programme "Diary of Persons Living With HIV/AIDS" provided a radio set for the women to listen to the programme. They hear a female PLWHA talking and they are getting more interested in the radio, overwhelmed by the courage of the lady who shares her story in the local dialect. For us here the most accessible medium is radio and it will lend itself better in reaching the rural women. We also use pictures from the events in our organisations newsletter, those who are literate enough read while the illiterate ones are just too happy seeing themselves in pictures.

Sylvie Syam

Many barriers can push away rural women from information centres but the most important are illiteracy and lack of self-confidence. The materials available are not in local languages. Even women who have finished primary school don't imagine that they can use the materials. They look at information centres as men space.

Marjan Besuijen noted that the example of the Uganda CD-Rom project based at Nakaseke was a project, which brought illiterate women into the information center. Often it is noted that illiterate women will not go into information centres because they cannot benefit from written media.

*** What strategies and processes have worked in the different contexts where you work/live, in making existing public access infrastructure more accessible for women and inclusive of their concerns?**

Sylvia Syam

The women trained felt first of all more valorized and now as trainers, they feel deeply responsible to transmit messages to their community. I think that women from the community should be part of the information centres staff or workers, so that it appears to the other women that the centre is not only for men or for the literate.

Alice Munyua spoke of the learnings from a community radio project in Tanzania: *For the women's groups it was important to ensure that programmes targeted at women for development were able to identify women from a multiplicity of angles. Angles that shape their perceptions and identities as subjects of struggles, as partners of communication, as mothers, as workers, as activists, as citizens and communication initiatives that address these broader issues and connect questions of gender and communications with the various ways in which race, class, culture, age, generation,*

history, colonialism and social division of labour, shape women's communication experiences, social participation and identities.

We also need to recognise that women in rural Africa have assumed the responsibility of managing their communities as an extension of their domestic roles and as a result community development. Women shoulder additional responsibilities of forming local groups to demand services and promote networks for survival and mutual help.

Judith Gracey from the DIMITRA team brought up the topic of convergence:

Through the work of Dimitra's partner organisations, and during many of the workshops and discussions to which the project has participated, it has often been suggested that one effective way to reach rural populations is by combining modern and traditional information and communication tools. There is no one recipe for success and appropriate methods need to be used according to the context, in order to reach grassroots populations and make their voices heard.

Goal 3. To explore how a broadcasting model is used in different parts of the continent to address rural women's issues and concerns and broaden their participation in decision-making over matters that impact on their living conditions

***How are radio and television broadcasting being used to advance women's human rights?**

Miriam Menkiti from Nigeria:

This is done through radio and television programmes some of which are entertainment drama, interviews with women activists, radio discussions and talk shows. Aspects of women's rights issues are discussed on the programmes.

Emem J. Okon from Nigeria spoke of the Development Through Radio Project whereby rural women are formed into radio listening clubs and are taught to record their own programmes. The challenges here she says are:

- Funds to pay for airtime.
- Electricity to charge the rechargeable batteries,
- Transportation system in riverine communities.
- Facilitators don't go as often as they should.
- Difficult to bring the women out to the upland.
- The communal clashes in the Niger Delta region has also disrupted a lot of things.
- The women need a safe and peaceful environment to continue for sustainability.

Maryam Katongo of Tanzania says *Radio is more convenient and easy to use for rural information and women empowerment. But the same challenge of getting volunteers. We should find strategies, which can attract youth to participate in sensitization and follow-up of programs. Otherwise, if there is no listeners groups who can be assisted in responding, then producers of the programmes will not understand the impact of their effort. I believe many youth are longing to do something, especially educated rural youth.*

*** How can we use radio for women's empowerment?**

(Answers duplicated throughout the e-consultation)

Radio can be used to implement open and distance training programmes to empower rural women by giving them the skills to be able to become efficient actors in the development of their community and not only beneficiaries.

*** What are the strategies and opportunities for linking rural women with radio?**

Sylvie Siyam shared some strategies from PROTEGE QV's experience.

- the relevancy of the content of radio programs (field survey to really identify the needs of the rural women)
- the accessibility of the messages (language used should be the one practiced by the most, time of broadcasting corresponds to the time of listening, that means after farming hours)
- the affordability of the material (radio sets available in homes)
- community participation (the speakers should belong to the community, and preferably women they know, their mates, so that the subjects are addressed by someone who is supposed to have the same problems)
- Educated mothers are less hampered by social and cultural inhibitions and become able to contribute more effectively to the society, to the quality of their children's education, and to the management of the household.

***What are the difficulties experienced in linking women with public, private and community broadcasters? And does this make a sustainable impact on their programming?**

Miriam Menkiti shares:

After several years of advocacy by our association Nigeria Association of Women Journalists Enugu State chapter to give women a voice in the media, more and more women are now bold enough to grant interviews and participate in media programmes. It depends on what issues you are seeking a woman's opinion, if she feels it is too controversial, she may not comment, if not she will give her views and will not be afraid of being quoted.

4. To highlight different training initiatives that specifically target rural women, as well as initiatives that facilitate the work of ICT trainers.

We did not have sufficient time to devote to questions relating to Goal 4. Here are the synthesized contributions. We only received responses to the first of the 3 questions.

* What training initiatives that specifically target rural women are effective and sustainable?

Sylvie Siyam from Cameroon:

In Cameroon, we have radio programs in local languages broadcasted by agricultural department and health departments, on subjects specific to rural women. The speakers are usually women. But these programs are sustainable because they are funded by the government, in partnership with international organizations. It is really important to address the problem of sustainability, in particular for private initiatives.

Sylvie asked participants to respond to the issue of **sustainability**.

Miriam Byekwaso from Tanzania contributed the following:

We first of all need to train women in international languages such as English and French to enable them interact with different situations across the World especially on the Internet. By enabling them to speak international languages it will create confidence for them because for instance in Tanzania, most of the Women have got a message but they can't explain it in the way that everyone can understand, translation from their local language may be needed but there are some terminologies that are difficult to translate. Some terminologies in Developmental field are new to the local communities, which makes them think that all the things are new to their society.

Women have to be trained in presentation techniques and give them practical presentation opportunities by giving them a theme that they should present to A group of animals, or somewhere in the field by letting them imagine that they are talking to people, the following step will be presenting to the people.

On the issue of sustainability, Miriam commented:

We should Sensitize and Mobilize the women on the importance of these trainings, some times we can give them opportunities to train women's groups so that they get used to it. They should also learn simple training techniques.

*What are the ingredients that make these effective?

*What initiatives that facilitate the work of ICT trainers are working and why?