Engendering Universal Access to ICT in Rural Areas

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of community access to information and communication technologies (ICT) has gained widespread attention as a strategically vital response to the perpetual lack of affordable access to ICT and ICT services in the developing world, particularly in rural and peri-urban[1] poor areas. Community access is not in itself a new idea; however, it provides an encouraging policy approach to overcoming the wide disparities of access and, as such, to provide opportunities for developing societies and historically disadvantaged regions and populations to participate in the newly emerging social and economic orders. This article focuses on community access centers as essential to facilitate access to ICT for women in rural areas in the developing world.

TOWARDS UNIVERSAL ACCESS: THE NEW POLICY DIRECTION

Universal service is traditionally defined as access to a telephone in every household. While the percentage of households with telephone service is high in developed countries, it is quite low in most developing countries. According to the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), by 2003, 96% of households in high income or developed countries have a telephone. In contrast, only about 13% and 37% of the households in Africa and Asia, respectively, had a telephone. In terms of teledensity, high-income developed countries had about 71 lines per 100 inhabitants, while countries in Africa and Asia had on average 5.5 and 14 lines per 100 inhabitants by 2003 (ITU, 2003). When we look at the urban-rural disparity in developing countries, the figures are even more depressing. While about 60% of the population in developing countries live in rural areas, more than 80% of the telephone lines are in urban areas. Women are a large percentage of rural populations and women-headed households are increasing everywhere.

The magnitude of this problem—*the access gap* (or the digital divide)—has led to a recent rethinking of universal service policies for developing countries. Indeed, a telephone line per household may not be economically or technically feasible for many developing countries. Therefore, the wider concept of *universal access* to ICT has become the focus. This new approach to universal service provides a shift from the concept of a "telephone per household" to wider "community access" to telecommunications and related services. In fact, it not only broadens the definition but also changes the concept of access to telecommunications to mean access to ICTs. ICTs include, in addition to traditional telephony, faxing services, computer services, photocopying, electronic mail, Internet access and access to an array of local, regional and national information previously available only to a few.

Community access centers, or telecenters, have recently become a development option to address the lack of access to ICT in many countries of the world, particularly developing countries. They offer an alternative model for access in areas traditionally lacking telecommunications infrastructure, such as rural and peri-urban areas, and provide an array of ICT services, training and resources needed for communities' development.

Despite their potential, community access centers will most likely function and be successful within a specific policy environment, one that develops and promotes the necessary support systems and appropriate policies to allow for sustainable centers (e.g., ensure gender equity in the implementation process, promote pricing policy that favors

discounts for community access centers' services, financial incentives that promote investment where it is most needed, among others). If policy makers want to contribute to universal access in their countries, experience around the world shows that they should focus their attention on the demands of their rural and peri-urban population, and community access centers provide an option worth investing in.

COMMUNITY ACCESS CENTERS: A GENDER PERSPECTIVE

Despite greater awareness and evidence on the impact of gender analysis in development work, women and girls continue to benefit marginally from developments in ICT and access to services in many countries and environments. Women's ability to benefit from the access to and use of ICT as tools for social and economic empowerment is constrained in a number of ways, including social and cultural factors, income levels, education levels and illiteracy, and lack of knowledge on the potential of ICT, among others. According to a recent report, the following are some key socio-cultural factors that constrain women's use of ICT, particularly in rural areas (Gurumurthy, 2004, p. 24):

- *Cultural attitudes discriminate against women's access to technology and technology education.*
- *Women are less likely to own communication assets—radio, mobile phone.*
- *Women in poor households do not have the income to use public facilities.*
- *Information centers may be located in places that women are not comfortable visiting.*
- *Women's multiple roles and heavy domestic responsibilities limit their leisure time. Centers may not be open when it is convenient for women to visit them.*
- *It is more problematic for women to use facilities in the evenings and return home in the dark.*

Gender analysis and considerations are often neglected or integrated only too late (Hafkin & Jorge, 2002). Even in community access center projects, which tend to be community focused and supposedly more aware of community needs, gender has not become an integral part of the planning equation. A few centers around the world have committed themselves to targeting women and women's needs; however, they have encountered tremendous difficulties. Most of these problems

Figure 1.

Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA): Promoting ICT Use Among Women

SEWA, India, is a member-based organization of poor, informal-sector women workers. Two-thirds of its members live in rural areas and are home-based workers, vendors, manual laborers, service providers and producers. SEWA's ICT unit has been exploring the use of ICT as a tool to increase the efficiency of rural micro-level enterprise activities to secure poor women's livelihood. SEWA has successfully taken an integrated and holistic approach to the use of ICT for rural development, such as providing its members with access to information; training them with communication tools and customized software; technical training on repairing their tools; generating job opportunities; and also providing child care and health care. Some of their current activities on ICT include:

- Imparting basic computer training for semiliterate women before they are introduced to communication tools, such as Internet and customized software for their micro-enterprises
- Providing technical training, such as maintenance and repairs of their tools
- Providing loans for mobile phones for informal sector workers; that is, vegetable vendors
- Proving health advice and nutritional information by linking with hospitals via video conferencing for villagers who are laborers and service providers who do hard physical work to earn a living and survive; that is, construction workers and salt workers
- Exploring various partnerships with different medical institutes and organizations for providing better access to health care services for its members; that is, telemedicine.

Source: Dhara Patel, coordinator, ICT, Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA), India, presentation at the World Bank, July 2003, cited in Financing ICTD: A review of trends and an analysis of gaps and promising practices, the report of the Task Force on Financial Mechanisms for ICT for Development, UNDP (2004).