



Chapter V

Poverty Reduction through Community-Compatible ICTs: Examples from Botswana and other African Countries

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Abstract

ICTs are an integral part of both scientific and lay cultures. However, scientific know-how, whose significant features are high expertise and highly trained personnel, is dominant while traditional cultures are gradually receding. The use of ICTs shows great potential for creating access boundaries between the rich and poor. Out of this awareness, this chapter invites readers to rethink basic questions: What are ICTs? What have been their benefits for the rich and poor? While these questions cannot be answered in detail here, few important points are presented emphasizing that ICTs do not function in a societal vacuum. The type of access to ICTs that the poor need is not that which only enables them to be like others in using ICTs. They, much more than other sectors of society, have an increasing need to effectively manage their lives, and community-compatible ICTs can be employed for this purpose.

Background

The key operational concepts in this chapter are poverty, information communication technologies, and community-compatible ICTs. Even though these are concepts in common usage in the various disciplines, for the purposes of elucidation, they are briefly defined in the discussion that follows. For each of the concepts, the definition is expanded to highlight some of the fundamental issues that are relevant to the theme of this chapter.

Definitions and Fundamentals of Poverty and Information Communication Technologies

Poverty

Clearly, many definitions of the word poverty reflect the economic impact of being poor. In Botswana, for example, poverty is seen as a “consequence of a narrow economic base, which limits opportunities for gainful employment” (Republic of Botswana, 2004, p.17). To illustrate, in 1993, an estimated 47% of the population lived below the poverty datum line of approximately P100.00 (\$20) per person per month. Poverty here is simply viewed as a state in which a family’s income is too low to be able to buy the quantities of food, shelter, and clothing that are deemed necessary (<http://www.econ100.com/eu5e/open/glossary.html>). Perhaps it is this narrowness of focus that has led Botswana to develop a poverty line (PL) that considers only six categories of items as constituting the basic needs of a family in Botswana, namely, (a) food, (b) clothing, (c) personal items, (d) household goods, (e) shelter, and (f) miscellaneous (Central Statistic Office [CSO], 1991). Such an analysis may mislead because it oversimplifies the complex nature of being poor. It portrays a picture of poverty being measured in monetary and material possessions. Unfortunately, this type of understanding perpetuates a pervasive attitude of looking at the poor as the helpless and hopeless, hence giving those in power unprecedented capacity to determine how the poor should live their lives.

It is observed here that “most countries of the Sub-Saharan Africa are predominantly rural in character: roughly 70 percentage of the population live in the rural areas” (Bryceson, 1995, p. 8). It is in these rural areas where most of the poor people reside. According to the *Botswana Millennium Development Status Report 2004*, the “rates of poverty are higher in rural areas, mainly because of fewer opportunities for formal sector employment” (Republic of Botswana, 2004, p. 21). In these rural areas, the means of survival are relatively non-monetized and predominantly agricultural. Agricultural production using a plough or hoe and livestock keeping are at a subsistence level. It can fairly be said that “animal and plants constitute human food and their importance is obviously great” in everyone’s life (Mbiti, 1988, p. 50); it is thus important to have them among the indicators of poverty, especially in Africa. It seems not right, therefore, to measure poverty solely in terms of money (mostly earned through employment in the formal sector).

A more complex picture may appear if we think and expand the definition of poverty to include poverty in the noneconomic sense, as is the case in this chapter. For purely ana-

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