Chapter 10
Quest for Economic Empowerment of Rural Women Entrepreneurs in Tanzania:
ICTs Leapfrog the Digital Divide

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ABSTRACT

"The digital divide is really diminishing, and it's the mobile phones doing it, not the PC" Len Waverman, London Business School, 2010, p. 3

Microbusiness decisions of marketing food crops depend on critical information in a rapidly changing supply chain environment. Because rural women deal with mostly perishable goods, the uses of cell phones have emerged as important communication tools in the supply chain particularly in decision-making and managing risk-taking. A variety of anecdotal evidence suggests that cell phones have leapfrogged the technology and seem to overcome transport deficits that were for centuries endemic to rural and remote areas which have been poor and underdeveloped. As with any new technology, cell phones provide opportunities as well as challenges. However, little is known about Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and the role Cell-phone Mediated Communication (CMC) play in the context of high demand of information that is critical to small-scale marketing of perishable goods. Consequently, what happens in this precarious business environment when women are confronted with risk-taking and decision-making? Do they use CMC to augment stakes or expedite the enterprise?

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This case describes field research investigations that were conducted in Tanzania from June 2008 to June 2009 to examine access to, and use of cell phones by women residing in rural villages and in a nearby urban center. Rural villages were considered critical in this study as key players in the wellbeing of traditional rural families.

BACKGROUND, RATIONALE AND METHODS: CELL PHONES, THE NEW AGE TECHNOLOGIES

The principal rationale for this study was to compare the characteristics of two groups of women entrepreneurs—heavy and low users of CMC tools of phone calling, text messaging and beeping, particularly to understand how they make decisions and take risk over their purchasing habits. The data was necessary to enable researchers to determine the suitability of establishing a business enterprise in a rural village near Moshi in Northern Tanzania, targeting women as a way of addressing the U.N. Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the internationally agreed-upon goals to reduce poverty, disease, hunger, gender inequality, and environmental degradation by the year 2015 (United Nations, 2005), and policies affecting their wellbeing.

The use of CMC technology stands out as a unique and emerging convenient mode of communication for community development. For example, at a recent presentation (March 2008) titled "Will Science Save or Destroy Africa?", the National Science Foundation's Director for International Collaboration, Wayne Patterson, identified Cell phones as a technology that is rapidly transforming the African continent. He concluded that these CMC technologies are revolutionizing the ways in which people communicate and CMC seems to change the way people do small business, particularly among historically marginalized groups like women entrepreneurs. Unlike computer access to the World Wide Web, cell phones are the single technology that is accessible to women, and can facilitate the small-scale entrepreneurial initiatives of rural, as well as urban women. However, little is known about existing opportunities to enhance the wide use of mobile phones for development and collaboration or for economic empowerment of rural women entrepreneurs. What then can be done to strengthen and facilitate the use of mobile phones as a tool for advocacy in responding to the United Nations MDGs in East Africa? How is ICT and mobile communication impacting these populations? What contribution do these tools make toward human wellbeing and rural development?

The theoretical assumption behind this study was that the ability of women in Africa to sustain the livelihoods of their households will occur largely through small, agriculture-related enterprises in which the optimal use of CMC technology may result in increased income for women. When household income is generated and managed by women, it is likely to be used for children's school fees, uniforms, books and school supplies as well as for medical care, better quality food for the family and improvements to the home environment. These quality of life improvements result in fewer missed days of school and more years of schooling for children (Commission, 2005). The result of having a sustainable livelihood is to discourage early marriage and the resultant pregnancies that frequently result in poor maternal outcomes for young girls. As confirmed by many researchers, the education of girls is the best strategy for reducing infant and child mortality, a critical issue in developing countries (Bloch & Beoku-Betts, 1998). Tanzania is no exception.

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