



Chapter XIX

Communication Shops and Telecenters in Developing Nations

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Bai Yuxiong, a farmer from a poor area in northern Shaanxi Province [of China], traveled at least 500 kilometers to Yangling Agrosience town to learn about prices of Qinguan apples and the value of a small pumpkin variety he grew....At Yangling Information Center, for the first time he saw the computers and heard about the Internet. He saw the director of the information center typing some things on a computer. In a short time he got all he wanted from the computer.... He knew the price of the apple. And his small pumpkin was found to be of a very precious kind, an indispensable delicacy for Japanese state banquets....Computers opened his eyes and his new [export] venture. (Li, 1999)

Information and Development

This chapter deals with the importance of information for the development of rural areas, and especially with providing the institutional structures for helping people gain access to the communication technologies that are instrumental to information flow in the 21st century. We start with a reminder about the potential value of information, then move to the role of information and communication technologies (ICTs), and then concentrate on the emergence of community-based communication centers (telecenters).

A recent book by Fraser and Restrepo-Estrada (1998) provides excellent documentation using concrete case studies that show where a systematic approach to providing access to information has made a significant impact on the welfare of rural and urban people. Their examples range from family planning successes in Indonesia and immunization programs in Colombia, to agricultural development in the Philippines and Mexico. They also note the consequences of inadequate infor-

mation. Referring to situations in the Philippines, they report that a mountain tribe is losing its land to “land-grabbers” because the tribe doesn’t know about existing laws that could protect them; and a farmer traveled by sea and land for seven hours to buy seeds, not knowing that a fellow farmer three kilometers away had them for sale.

The 1998 World Telecommunications Development Report summarizes several situations related to the value of information to the population:

In rural southern Ghana, petrol stations are able to place orders with suppliers by telephone when previously they could only be made by travelling to Accra; in Zimbabwe, one company generated US\$15 million of business by advertising on the Internet; in South Africa, lives have been saved since citizens have been able to call the police from strategically located community payphones; in the mountains of Laos and Burma, yak caravans employ mobilephones to call ahead and find the best route to take during the rainy season to bring their goods to market; and in China, a little girl’s life was saved when her doctor posted her symptoms to an Internet discussion group and received an immediate answer. (International Telecommunications Union, 1998)

The central and vital role communication and information play in the lives of people was officially recognized by the UN General Assembly in December 1997 when it endorsed a statement on the Universal Access to Basic Communication and Information Services. The statement concluded that the “introduction and use of information and communication technology must become a priority effort of the United Nations in order to secure sustainable human development.” The statement also embraced the objective of establishing “universal access to basic communication and information services for all” (ITU, 1998).

Traditional interpersonal means of providing rural people with information have long been acknowledged as being inadequate. Government extension systems, for example, have been plagued by the social, cultural and educational gap between the agricultural scientists and technicians and their clientele, the poor training of the technicians, and their lack of understanding of farmers’ problems (Fraser and Restrepo-Estrada, 1998, pp.16-17). In recent years, governments typically have sought alternative solutions to labor-intensive and expensive face-to-face community contacts, including greater use of radio, television and other media.

Information Technology

The dramatic introduction of new communication-related technologies in the latter part of the 20th century significantly accelerated the exploration and trial of innovative information systems. These technologies included miniaturization, portability and consumer-friendly innovations in conventional media such as radio and television, as well as the linking of computers and telecommunications to mass and specialized information systems. Thus, at the turn of the century, we speak of a telephone in every village in India and China, and women operating telephone

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