



Livelihood Approaches

Policy Framework

1. Adapting Content to Local Context

Farmers often trust local (endogenous) information more than outside (exogenous) information. Although issues and problems can be illustrated with examples from elsewhere, farmers are unlikely to believe solutions, or be motivated to adopt them, without substantial discussion of locally specific examples. Therefore, information on food and agriculture should be focused on local agro-ecological conditions, weather and topography, as well as local cultural and economic aspects of production, marketing and processing. (Supporting communication between relevant local institutions may be more important than providing content from the Internet at local level, although the Internet and interactive television have been successfully used by farmers to discuss local problems with technical specialists who are far away). There is also enormous potential to enrich information in national and international information systems with specialized local knowledge. However, this requires both a detailed understanding of the local context and a sophisticated capacity to tailor information appropriately for both local and national or international audiences.

2. Building on Existing Systems and Working with Existing Policies

Many donor-driven information systems are overly ambitious, overly complex and over-designed. Initiatives are often planned and implemented from scratch, overlooking the fundamental organizational processes and institutional incentives that drive information use. They can also ignore the influence of potential “losers” who may subsequently resist implementation. Oversights generally fall into two categories: attempts to create new systems of communication rather than enhancing those systems which are already in place and accepted, and failures to recognize the ways in which the existing policy environment will affect the intervention.

Existing Systems

Experience shows that the most effective systems for providing specific information to specific users are simple and modest, and build on existing communication and data collection systems. There is a danger that the current focus on Internet-based information systems in developing countries will undermine rich and effective existing information networks. Through a better understanding of existing systems, project designers can enhance communications technology in ways that are relevant and appropriate to the users. Designers should also attempt to gain support from internal ‘champions’ who are advocating change take care not to disrupt local cultural values, and offer incentives to individuals for contributing information.

Existing Policies

Similarly, it is counterproductive to design interventions without full knowledge of the existing policies and their impact on:

- the free flow of information and communication in a society, whether vertical or horizontal, public or private;
- how revenue is generated and taxed; and
- whether content is heavily censored or completely unregulated.

An understanding of the current regulatory framework may provide crucial insights into why ICD systems do not currently exist, or any potential implementation problems relating to taxes, zoning or other administrative issues.

3. Addressing Diversity

The involvement of all stakeholders – men, women, young, old, from different social classes and ethnic groups – is crucial. Involvement is key to ownership and sustainability. Unfortunately, in many cases ICD initiatives in rural areas can divide stakeholders if their diverse positions and interests are not addressed. Initiatives that do not plan for the different ways that they may affect different segments of the population can exacerbate existing inequalities by benefiting some groups at the expense of others. Interventions that look at how to offer equal access to all groups, and that give diverse groups a voice in how the interventions are developed and deployed, can actually work to reduce inequality.

4. Building Capacity

There is a critical need to build capacity at all levels in methods of using information and increasing participatory communication to improve livelihoods. Intergovernmental agencies need greater capacity to work on international information technology infrastructure, policies and standards. International and bilateral agencies need capacity to help governments build partnerships with the private sector to develop national information systems and strategies. At the sub-national level, there is a need to develop and extend electronic networks, and to link these with rural areas. Local capacity in information collection, storage and dissemination will also need to be enhanced in order to bridge the gap between information providers and users. In this regard, local government and non-government institutions need to be encouraged and strengthened to provide more information locally. Education leading to basic literacy and numeracy, especially for marginalized groups, is a priority. Without such basic education, the local capacity to use and generate information is severely compromised.

5. Ensuring Equitable Access and Empowerment

Although the technological capacity to transfer information across large distances has increased rapidly in recent years, there is evidence that if it is not available to all it may simply perpetuate existing social, economic and political disparities. Television and radio remain much more widely accessible than the Internet, especially in Africa. Experiments with telecentres and Internet-linked rural community radio have shown that it is possible to make Internet-based information available to large numbers of people. The challenge is to apply these pilot approaches more widely in developing countries so that rural communities, and their governments, can manage information more effectively and develop communication strategies that are relevant and accessible to the poor.

6. Building Partnership Networks with Two-way Flows of Information

To promote sustainable livelihoods, information and communication systems need to be able to share information horizontally and vertically. Horizontal sharing takes place between organizations at the same level, such as between research institutes or farmer organizations. Vertical sharing takes place between organizations at different levels, such as between different tiers of government, or between national research institutes and local extension agencies.

Vertical systems work best between a few highly integrated hierarchical organizations that have compatible information systems, while horizontal systems thrive in an environment where many different organizations form a constantly changing network of partners wishing to share very specific information. In the new network age, a new model for information and knowledge sharing is needed with more flexible and participatory processes that operate within a loose but compatible global information network. Dynamic and flexible partnerships can be established between individuals and organizations at any level and can help reduce the boundaries between the levels. Partnerships within and between communities can help address problems of ownership, connectivity, sustainability and information literacy. They can also incorporate local and external knowledge that can directly benefit poor people. This partnership approach could replace the traditional process of a “one-way” flow of information from a scientific, information-rich core to a remote, information-poor community. The new approach would be based on dynamic information-sharing partnerships and a “two-way flow” of information at every level.

7. Adopting Realistic Approaches to Technology

The use of technologies in information and communication initiatives for development is expanding exponentially. One result is the problem of coordination, which has become a daunting challenge. The emphasis is now on developing a realistic set of compatible technologies to facilitate the exchange of information between different systems. Even in developed countries, there are few good examples of interventions that successfully integrate information technology into workable information management and communication strategies. The lack of suitable evaluation methodologies for the new technologies means that there is little effective monitoring and evaluation, making it difficult to even identify key lessons of interventions. Nevertheless, computer-based information technologies are increasingly being applied to rural development, even in the most remote circumstances, despite the fact that the vast majority of the rural poor, who remain the target beneficiaries of most development programmes, only use information that is communicated by word of mouth.

It is essential to be more realistic about information technology. In developing countries the most realistic approach is often to use a linked combination of old and new technologies. There are many good examples of innovative mechanisms that can bridge the gap between the Internet and rural areas by using existing technologies such as rural radio, rural service providers, or possibly high-frequency radio links or village Internet booths.

8. Information Costs

An important element in the design of interventions is how they will be financed in the long term. Until recently, it was assumed that information for agricultural and rural development was a global public good and should be made freely available to all. More recently, donors and governments have been shifting towards private-sector provision of

agricultural extension services and information, and poorer farmers are losing out. Capital investment costs for information infrastructure are high, but they are easy to calculate. In addition, there are many examples of successful cost recovery through charges for telephone use and advertising. It is more difficult to calculate the actual and hidden costs of providing information that empowers poorer farmers, and the social and economic benefit of doing so, without which it is difficult to justify public investment. Furthermore, the economic sustainability of information services is affected by factors such as the providers' ability to cover their own costs or, for services dependent on cost recovery, the customers' ability to pay and the profitability. More work is urgently needed to explore these factors, and to develop a new consensus on who should pay for information for poorer farmers and how sustainable information services can be provided. However, when designing interventions, it is important to clearly determine from the beginning whether the intervention should be viewed as a public good (e.g. a school or a hospital) whose unfunded financial sustainability does not need to be a goal, or as a business whose success depends on its being able to generate enough revenue to pay costs and break even.