

Women making rural access possible in Uganda

by: Davis J. Weddi

Introduction

Initiative names: Enhancing Access to Rural agricultural information using ICTs

Implemented by: Women of Uganda Network (WOUGNET)

The funding or financial model: Fundraising and initial support by the Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Co-operation ACP-EU/(CTA); So far since last year, between Euro30,000 and 40,000 has been spent.

Timeframe: Three year project, currently one year old

Geographical area targeted covered by the project & target group: The project is implemented in Northern Uganda's Apac District. The main beneficiaries are the rural women farmers although the men are not excluded.

Background and context of the initiative

Northern Uganda has been at the centre of a two-decade long insurgency that has left the rural communities in a precarious pandemonium-like situation characterised by widespread poverty, high illiteracy levels and bad living conditions. But this insurgence just came at a time when the region was supposed to be eliminating these obstacles to achieving a dignified, civilised way of life. However, in the last 8 yrs, Apac district, where this project is located, has been relatively safe that is why WOUGNET have been able to establish the rural access project there, according to the WOUGNET Director Dr. Dorothy Okello.

A research study¹ undertaken in 2003, revealed that lack of information was the most limiting factor to increased productivity in Apac District. The rural farmers lacked information on how to improve quality of their products, improved seeds and crop varieties, source of inputs/implements, plant diseases, pests and their control, soil management and conservation, and improved skills. These factors limited the production levels of the rural farmers, hence they realised limited incomes and lived in poverty.

The economy of the district mainly depends on subsistence production, where 75% of the population in the district are engaged in subsistence farming². Commercial farming accounts for only about 3% of farming activities. The main crops are maize, millet, beans, simsim, groundnuts, sunflower, cowpeas, bananas, tobacco and cotton. This implies that farming is the main activity in Apac district, and the majority of farmers are women.

¹ Participatory Research on Information and Communication Technologies for Poverty Reduction in Apac District, Northern Uganda. WOUGNET Report presented at the WSIS, December 10, 2003, Geneva, Switzerland.

² Statistics provided is derived from the Report on Participatory Research on Information and Communication Technologies for Poverty Reduction in Apac District, Northern Uganda, December 2003.

About WOUGNET

One of the most successful women organisations in Africa, the Women of Uganda Network [WOUGNET] is a non-governmental organisation initiated in May 2000 by several women's organisations in Uganda to develop the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) among women as tools to share information and address issues collectively. The mission of WOUGNET is to promote and support the use of ICTs by women and women organisations in Uganda, so that they can take advantage of the opportunities presented by ICTs in order to effectively address national and local problems of Sustainable National Development.

Presently WOUGNET has 82 women organizations as members, located in urban areas and in rural areas where there is limited or no Internet access.

WOUGNET activities are carried out under four main program areas: Information sharing and networking, Technical support, Gender and ICT Policy advocacy, Rural Access, Institutional and Organisation Development.

It is under, its rural Access program, there is a project on "Enhancing access to Agricultural Information using Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) was initiated and was supported by the Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Co-operation ACP-EU/(CTA) initiated in the year 2005. A rural multi-purpose telecentre called Kubere Information Centre was established to improve access to agricultural information in Apac district. It is located in Apac town with close proxy to the district offices and other Non-governmental organisations. Apart from serving the District agricultural office and its partners, this centre also serves twelve parishes in the four sub counties of Apac, Akalo, Bala and Akororo, with rural women farmers groups established in each parish.

The main activities include:- Building capacity of rural women to access and use ICTs, through training programmes and active use of the ICTs, like radio and mobile phones and basic use of the computer; Strengthen member organisations to use and apply ICTs; generation of agricultural local content, Information collection, repackaging, and dissemination; documentation of the project activities through audio, visual and print materials; establishment and strengthening of an Information centre.

Others involved in the initiative

This Rural access initiative was WOUGNET's self-initiative given its background in ICT and development issues, financially supported by CTA _ Netherlands.

However, the project collaborates with a number of stakeholders, among which are intermediaries like the Local agricultural and community Development NGOs operating in Apac district, including the Volunteer Efforts Development Concerns – VEDCO, Agency for Sustainable Development – ASDI.

The WOUGNET project is on the local NGO Board of Directors in Apac District, the project also collaborates with the District Agricultural Officer, Veterinary Officer, commercial officer, District farmers organisation. The National Agricultural research organisation in the nearbycommunity of Ngetta is also strong partner of WOUGNET's project.

Rationale of the initiative

According to the Project's program officer Janet Achora, WOUGNET has always wanted to reach out information to one of the least privileged districts in Uganda. Using this rural access project in particular, WOUGNET targets rural women farmers, who have no access to modern ICTs. For the case of Apac district where this project is situated, statistics indicate that the majority (89.7%) of the population is rural. The rest live in trading centres and in the main urban centre, Apac Town.

In Uganda there is an existing enabling atmosphere, which made possible the idea of such a rural access project. Uganda was one of the first countries in Africa to develop a policy on universal access to information and communication technologies (ICTs) and to implement a universal access fund, designed to support initiatives aimed at improving poor and rural populations' access to ICTs. Today, Uganda's universal access policy and rural communications development fund are generally seen as "best practice".³

The Development problem being addressed by this project

Achora says that access to information, knowledge and skills are key to improving the lives of rural populations. Though WOUGNET has made efforts to reach out to grassroots women farmers, there are still constraints that women face in accessing agricultural information.

One of the constraints was found to be the literacy levels of the beneficiaries in the project area, which are extremely low with only 16% having attained a basic level of education and above. (source of statistics: WOUGNET baseline study report, 2005).

Another constraint is lack of access to agricultural information which is a key limiting factor to increased productivity in Apac District

People living in Apac also lack of access to ICTs, including the basic one - the radio and yet there is widespread lack of skills to access information from ICTs, this is made worse by a prevalence of high levels of poverty, therefore affecting affordability of ICTs in addition to a general lack of appropriate mechanisms to disseminate information to end-users.

So WOUGNET came into the district just to try and address the above problems.

Application of ICTs to solve the problems

The project has employed various strategies using both traditional and modern ICTs to reach out agricultural information to the target group. The project employs a collaborative initiative of different development partners contributing to project implementation, hence minimizing resources. Third, an element of feedback is built-in, for example, questions raised by the women farmers are forwarded to agricultural officials in government and development institutions and their responses relayed back to the farmers. Fourth, the project uses a

³ FUNDING AND IMPLEMENTING UNIVERSAL ACCESS Innovation and Experience from Uganda:
http://www.idrc.ca/en/ev-87215-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html

mixed approach to access and to deliver information including weekly radio programs, face-to-face meetings with the women farmers, [WorldSpace satellite radio programs](#), and the internet.



A dissemination meeting being audio recorded and women group members using a mobile phone.

Networking

The project networks and collaborates with a number of organizations both locally and internationally. Specifically in Apac, the project hosts the OKN community reporter who collects and disseminates stories on agriculture, Health, HIV/AIDS and other development issues. These stories are fed to the national hub in Uganda and disseminated to the OKN [Open Knowledge Network] centre, which repackages, translates and disseminates the stories globally. Other partners include Volunteer Efforts for Development Concerns – VEDCO, Agency for Sustainable Development – ASDI and the project is on the local NGO Board of Directors in Apac District.

Mainstreaming the project



Kubere Information centre – the rural information centre.

The Kubere information center acts as the coordination point of the rural access project in Apac district. It is equipped with three staff namely: a team leader, an information officer and an information support officer.

Basically these three staff prepare radio programs in the local language, they conduct community meetings, they gather information and translate it from other

Being the only agricultural information centre in the district, the project has been mainstreamed in the main agricultural activities of the district. During the field visits, agricultural extension staff liaise with the project staff to effectively disseminate information.

agricultural partner in the district. They also train some of the women farmers on how to access information from the computers after it has been downloaded from the World Space satellite receiver. This information is downloaded and also used to enrich the local radio programmes scripts.

Kubere also acts as a dissemination point. It is located within a market place and has a big noticeboard used for pinning up vital information.

“People come here to clarify information they may have heard us airing on radio. They also come here to read newspapers and to view latest information like admission results for public universities,” says Janet Achora.

“We also have several publications that contain agricultural oriented information including market prices, post-harvest handling information. Other people come here looking for information on jobs. Women come to the center wanting news updates on the project while some women are training on basic computer knowledge,” Achora adds.

“The best and fastest women learners we have are Harriet Oloro from Alana parish, Cecilia Toga and Milly Oyuru both from Atik.

Participation in local Agricultural shows

According to Achora, the Rural Access project participated in the National Organic Agricultural Movement -NOGAMU exhibition for Northern region, this year took place at Apac Boma ground, under the theme “ Improving Rural food Security and Household income through organic farming.” With 250 individual members and 80 cooperate members in Uganda representing 30,000 smallholder farmers, NOGAMU was established to unite producers, marketers and trainers who are interested in promoting organic farming as a sustainable form of agriculture.



Adjudicators and members of the public at the project stall, during the show.

The WOUNET’s Rural Access project was invited to participate in the above exhibition and exhibited publications on agriculture, food security, HIV/AIDS and posters on improved seed varieties. In addition to exhibiting, a lot of advocacy was done the program and activities. The stall attracted a lot of interest as it was

the only information stall in the agriculture sector. The project won an award in the category of "Information and relevancy" to the theme of the day. In recognition of the work it was doing in disseminating information to rural women.

The project has also participated in other shows that have been organized by local partners, "Agency for sustainable Development- Apac" and Action Aid Uganda.

On the Impact of this project

Economic Impact

The project has just completed one year, which was a pilot phase and no external evaluation has been done to assess the Economic and social impact. Achora the Project's in-charge says the impact evaluation done at the end of the first year was more of an insight and improve implementation in the second year.

"Although given that the project provides market information and has connected the farmers to the district farmers organisation, they have access to markets like the World Food Programme and receive seeds through the same organization," says Achora. WFP buys local produce from the farmers in Apach and in addition to paying cash for it, they also supply seeds to them. The food bought by WFP is used to feed the people who have been residing in the displaced people's (IDP) camps of Northern Uganda where a 20 year-insurgency has left millions homeless.

Empowerment in the economic position of end users

In the area of empowerment, although there are no statistics since no study has been done as well, Most of the women farmers stood and were selected in this year's local council elections. This is as a result of the empowerment, the women have got and can speak out.

Intentional, unintentional indirect beneficiaries

Members of the community who do not belong to the twelve parishes where the project operates and others, benefit from the agricultural information through the weekly radio programmes, dissemination meetings, word of mouth and the information Centre.

Social Impact

Some recipients of the project, especially the ones who took the initiative to early enough, have taken on top positions in the local councils because they want their voices to be heard, now that they are empowered with the knowledge. A woman called Jacinta who also leads the Opoi women's in Apac managed to campaign and get elected to the sub-county Local council, as because of the empowerment.

"Women feel socially empowered, because they now this information. They contested in elections. They feel they can do something, they can cause change, not only in their homes but in the communities."

Awareness of ICT for development

Yes, because when the project was starting, people did not understand the whole concept and thought that ICTs were only for the literate. But almost all the target group has a very low or no literacy level, and yet have embraced the project holistically he project has been greatly localized.

Embedding

According to Achora this project is prescribed in the National ICT policy of trying to reach out information and ICT initiatives to the rural population. There are also other organisations in the country that have an almost similar approach to implementing rural access programs. There is [Council for economic empowerment of women in Africa] CEEWA and [Busoga Rural Open Source and Development Initiative] BROSDI.

Feedback

One recipient of the project's products, Harriet Oloro has decided to storm the project offices at Kubere and demanded to be taught how to deal with the computer. She claims she wants to be able to access the information on her own. The problem here is that her low literacy level has become a challenge to WOUGNET.

According to Achora, groups of women normally turn up at Kubere demanding to be taught. Some of them are very grateful for being given an opportunity just to touch a phone, and they get more excited when they learn how to use it. With that life changes for the better.

Lessons Learned

There is a lot to learn from the WOUGNET Rural access project, its implementation comes with a lot of challenges, therefore it is important that intended beneficiaries are involved right from project design, inception and throughout the implementation stage.

The WOUGNET project tries to bring out the opportunities and potential benefits that ICTs can offer irrespective of gender, infrastructure inadequacy, literacy and geographical location.

Asked if ICTs are a sustainable solution, Achora said, "yes they can be sustainable if community involvement is considered important."

And because local indigenous knowledge is an important aspect of any information project, the WOUGNET Rural access project has learned from the farmers it serves and the information is captured and stored in audio or video, radio scripts form. "The application of the information in the field by others is where value has been added," Achora says.

For further information contact the iConnect team: editor@iconnect-online.org

www.iConnect-online.org is a knowledge sharing platform for Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in sustainable development. iConnect draws content from its partners, links resources and expertise and encourages collaboration. For the International Institute for Communication and Development (IICD), the host of iConnect, this is a way to share experiences, lessons learned and ideas, and interact with communities and people with an interest in development and the applications of ICTs. These experiences can lead to a better understanding of the actual benefits of ICTs for Development (ICT4D). The core of iConnect will be a series of locally written articles on the impact and the use of ICTs for development. The articles have a strong focus on fact finding; objective information on ICT4D practices from a southern perspective: Southern content written by Southern people. i4d is the iConnect partner for Asia, and ECA is the iConnect partner for Africa, disseminating the articles to their public.
