



Enabling the rural poor to overcome poverty

IFAD Vice-President's opening remarks: IFAD's panel discussion - Eradicating rural poverty by connecting rural communities

Your Excellencies,
Colleagues,
Ladies and gentlemen

Good morning and welcome to IFAD's panel discussion on eradicating rural poverty by connecting rural communities.

This morning the panel will discuss the lessons emerging from the First Mile Project, an IFAD-supported initiative in Tanzania, and how we are documenting – through photography, video and text – the learning and change that takes place during the life of the project.

The First Mile Project is about:

- people
- information and communication technologies
- learning and sharing

But, before I talk about the First Mile, I would like to outline IFAD's approach to the use of information and communication technologies – ICTs in rural development programmes and projects.

Information and communication technology is a powerful tool for rural development. However, before ICTs can make a meaningful contribution to improving the lives of rural poor people, certain conditions have to be met. These relate to ownership, local content, language, culture and appropriate technology. Access to ICTs becomes important only once these conditions have been met.

We see ICT as a tool, not the SOLUTION

Technology is really only an instrument. Content and how the technology is used are what make the difference.

It is crucial that the emphasis is on communication processes, and learning and sharing - not on technology itself.

We distinguish between information and communication

- Information does not generate change
- Communication implies participation, sharing of knowledge in a horizontal way, and respect for diversity and culture. At IFAD we consider this as fundamental to our commitment to strengthen the capacity of rural poor people and their organizations to overcome poverty
- We consider participatory communication as a process to strengthen the capacity of local people and their organizations to direct their own development

IFAD's approach to the use of ICTs in its development initiatives is to focus on people and not technology.

Let me go back to the First Mile Project.

The term "first mile" - which we have borrowed from our sister organization FAO - refers to bridging the connectivity gap that separates a village with no electricity and no telephone line from the nearest online computer.

For many years, people working to enhance telecommunication infrastructure and applications have referred to rural communities as being at the "last mile of connectivity." The concept of the "last mile" carries a lot of negative connotations and compels us to assume the perspective of an urbanite looking down at the rural margins. Titus Moetsabi was the first to turn this statement on its head and help us think instead of rural communities as being at the "first mile of connectivity." This term expresses a more equitable and far less urban-centric view of the challenge of providing everyone with the option of connecting themselves to the rest of the world and all it has to offer.

When Titus stood up and coined the phrase at a "rural connectivity" workshop organized by FAO and attended by many southern African grassroots rural organizations in Harare in February, 1997, there was an audible "ah-ha!" from the participants. He re-energized the group and gave us a fresh way of looking at the challenge. Perhaps it is Titus' experiences as a popular poet and communication for development practitioner that gives him the ability to help us recognize the power behind the words we use to describe technical and developmental realities.

The First Mile Project – now in a two-year pilot phase - considers rural communities as the starting point of connectivity, not the end point. The project is supported by Government of Switzerland and implemented in collaboration with the IFAD-funded Agricultural Marketing Systems Development Programme (AMSDP) in Tanzania and Technical assistance is provided by the International Support Group

The First Mile Project helps small producers, processors, traders and others in the market chain communicate better, form partnerships and learn from each other, so they can have better access to market information and negotiate fairer and more collaborative market relationships.

The project is about:

people: small farmers, traders, processors and others in the market chain learning to work and think collaboratively, not competitively, to build fairer and more efficient market relationships.

technology – mobile phones, radio, email and the Internet, and how these tools can be used to help farmer groups in isolated communities access relevant market information and communicate more effectively with others in the market chain.

sharing and learning – using intermediaries to link farmer groups to the Internet, providing online mentoring and learning, building trust and cooperation among participants as a way of encouraging knowledge sharing and learning.

It tackles two challenges:

- access by rural poor people to information and knowledge, and to ICTs such as mobile phones, the Internet and email
- their access to other key people in the market chain, including traders, processors and even consumers

Its most immediate task is to work out how small farmers can connect through intermediaries to the Internet to get market information and to communicate with other farmer groups, with groups of processors and traders, and directly with consumers as they build their own producer-to-consumer market chains.

IFAD's goal is to better use ICTs in the fight against rural poverty. To this end, the panel discussion will focus on the following five thematic areas and issues:

Build collaboration before infrastructure

What are the conditions that need to be in place for farmers, traders and processors to see the benefits of sharing information and ideas and working collaboratively to build fairer and more efficient market relations?

Blending the old and the new

What are the benefits for rural poor people of blending old and new technology? What is the potential impact for increasing the effectiveness and reach of market chains?

When local innovation drives technology, it also drives change

How can local appropriation of ICTs make market chains more efficient?

Local knowledge is relevant knowledge

How can ICTs help rural poor people generate and share their local knowledge, particularly in relation to market chains?

Public and private roles

What is the role of publicly funded agencies in fostering collaboration among rural entrepreneurs along a marketing chain?

Allow me to finish by saying that I am looking forward to hearing the perspectives, views and insights of our distinguished panelists and to a dynamic and fruitful discussion.

Thank you