



# Fighting rural poverty

## The role of ICTs

What can information and communication technologies (ICTs) do for the world's 900 million extremely poor people who live in rural areas?

This question is crucial to the fight to enable rural poor people to overcome poverty.

The challenge of using ICTs to fight rural poverty is complex, and connectivity is only the tip of the iceberg. When a woman has to walk hours every day to fetch water, how can the Internet help? Even if she has access to the Internet, can she read what she sees on the computer screen? Is the information content relevant to her needs?

Farmers may be able to access market prices with a mobile phone, but if there is no road to their village, how do they use that information?

If people have no political voice, how can radio help them shape the decisions and policies that affect their lives?

ICTs, such as radio and the newer digital technologies like computers, mobile phones and the Internet, have tremendous potential to effect real change in the lives of rural poor people in developing countries. However, to be effective they must be not only accessible, but also meaningful. ICTs in themselves do not guarantee benefits to rural poor people.

The approach of the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) is to link social, economic and political empowerment to efforts to bridge the digital divide. The focus must be on people, not technology.



## A powerful alternative to digital technologies

Farmers in north-eastern Syria are going to the theatre to learn about topics such as crop infestation, artificial insemination and feeding methods for livestock.

Travelling theatre groups are part of the region's agricultural extension services. They visit communities in remote rural areas, bringing information that will help rural poor people overcome poverty.

The idea is not new. Syrians, and others, have long used theatre to convey messages to communities, especially where literacy levels are low.

Farmers talk with extension agents about their problems and needs. World View International Foundation, a non-governmental organization, then works with local theatre groups to develop entertaining performances about farmers' concerns. Following the

performances, farmers and other community members discuss the issues and together determine the best way to deal with them.

To date, more than 1 180 performances have been staged throughout north-eastern Syria.

The initiative was introduced in the late 1980s as a cooperative effort between the Syrian Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform, IFAD and the World View International Foundation. The idea is to provide agricultural information to farmers, in response to their demands, using a popular and informal communication tool with a proven record for bringing people together.

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### KEY FACTS

- More than 80 per cent of people have never heard a dial tone, let alone surfed the Internet.
- In Africa, with approximately 739 million people, there are only 14 million phone lines – fewer than in Manhattan or Tokyo.
- Sixty per cent of adults in the United States have Internet access, while in Africa only one per cent of the population is on-line – half in South Africa and virtually none in rural areas.
- South-east Asia is home to 23 per cent of the world's population, but only one per cent of Internet users.
- There are one billion illiterate adults in the world – about 25 per cent of the total adult population. Most web content is written.
- Four fifths of web sites are in English, a language understood by only one in 10 people.
- While there are only two telephone lines for every 100 people in Africa, there are 20 radios. Even in rural areas of Africa, most people have access to a radio.
- The typical Internet user is male, under 35, urban and English-speaking, with a university education and high income.

# Finding their Mayan voices

Children from Mayan communities in the Maxcanu region of the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico are using radio to create a bridge between generations, cultures and local communities.

Aged from 7 to 13 years, the children are developing and broadcasting their own radio programmes as part of a joint initiative between the Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas (CONADEPI) and IFAD.

Once trained in broadcasting and the use of radio equipment, the youngsters work as journalists, producers, audio mixers and technicians at a radio station known as La Voz de los Mayas (The Voice of the Mayans). They have full control over the radio station, choosing topics for

educational and social programmes, producing programmes and broadcasting news, weather and information to listeners in the Mayan language.

The children, who are often the only ones in their communities who can read and write, speak both Mayan and Spanish. As a result, they provide a communication bridge for older generations, who often speak only Mayan. In the process, they are learning about their own Mayan culture and providing a forum for cultural exchange in their communities.

The children hold roundtable discussions on the air, inviting community members to discuss issues that concern them. They tell stories, talk about their problems and needs, discuss social programmes and debate local issues. Listeners share information on how to resolve problems concerning their livelihoods and families' welfare. This dynamic exchange provides an on-air forum in which community members and the children feel they are part of a larger group and gain a greater voice in decision-making on issues that concern them. The round tables also generate topics for radio programmes.

The radio station has access to the Internet, which the children use to get

information on matters of concern to local listeners, such as crop prices and market opportunities, vocational training, and ways to access support and microcredit programmes. They also research answers to questions posed by local listeners and broadcast those answers in the local language.

The Voice of the Mayas radio station is part of a larger network of more than 20 stations in the country, each run by

children and each covering a radius of roughly 20 km. The network reaches 954 municipalities in 16 states and is broadcast in more than 30 indigenous languages and Spanish. It has a total audience of about 22 million, of whom 5.5 million are indigenous peoples. The network is a joint initiative of IFAD and CONADEPI, through the Rural Development Project of the Mayan Communities in the Yucatan Peninsula.

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## Women entrepreneurs go global with e-commerce

Rural women in Latin America and the Caribbean are selling shampoo, textiles, leather goods and other handmade products over the Internet, through an IFAD-supported programme.

Along with other small producers in the region, they are being helped to start and run small businesses by the Rural Microenterprise Support Programme in Latin America and the Caribbean (PROMER).

A web site provides news, as well as information and help on how to start a small business, and useful links for rural microentrepreneurs. Through on-line chat rooms, users can have their questions answered about market access, the environment, project proposals, business management, quality improvement in rural products and other issues.

The web site also has an on-line shop called La Gallina, which enables women microentrepreneurs to showcase their products and services with photos and descriptions. Products like textiles, pots and handmade leather goods, and organic and natural products made with

local materials are sold through the site. About 400 rural microentrepreneurs market their goods through La Gallina.

PROMER is also developing a network of entrepreneurial promotion centres where women and other microentrepreneurs can get information, support and guidance on how to set up and further develop microenterprises. There are currently two centres, in Honduras and Venezuela, that are cofinanced and managed by indigenous peoples' organizations. The centres also offer access to the Internet.

Through the centre in Danlí, Honduras, a group of 14 women started a small enterprise that produces and exports shampoos using natural aloe vera from a local cactus variety. The women made commercial contacts through the Internet and currently export most of their products to the United States.





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## LINKS

For more information on livestock and rangeland systems, visit:  
<http://www.ifad.org/lrkm/>  
<http://www.fao.org/PAAT/html/home.htm>

For more information on IFAD's activities related to gender and PROMER, visit these sites:  
<http://www.ifad.org/gender>  
<http://www.progenero.org>  
<http://www.promer.cl>

For general information on IFAD and its knowledge-sharing activities, visit:  
<http://www.ifad.org>  
<http://www.ifad.org/rural>

For information on the World Summit on the Information Society, visit:  
<http://www.itu.int/ws>

# Knowledge sharing helps farmers fight tsetse fly

Development experts believe that knowledge sharing is helping to fight an insect-borne disease that plagues poor farmers in sub-Saharan Africa.

African sleeping sickness, carried by the tsetse fly, threatens an estimated 60 million people in sub-Saharan Africa. Currently, more than 500 000 people are infected.

The disease also has a huge impact on cattle raised in the region. Called African animal trypanosomiasis (AAT) when it affects animals, the disease kills about 3 million cattle each year, causing a major loss of income for farmers in the region and poses a health risk to an additional 50 million cattle.

IFAD is fighting these problems in a number of ways. Working with international partners, it is using communication tools to reach as many people as possible with relevant information. Combining use of geographical information systems (GISs) with the Internet, e-mail conferences, printed materials and opportunities for face-to-face discussion, communication initiatives are reaching farmers and rural communities, government officials, researchers, policy-makers and international organizations.

IFAD staff believe that wide dissemination of information about ways to control the tsetse fly is helping

to reduce both the incidence of the disease and the cost of fighting the insect pest.

IFAD supports research to develop safe tsetse fly control technologies. It also provides specialists and policy-makers with practical information and suggestions for solutions through its web-based Livestock Rangeland Knowledgebase (LRKB) network. Through information sharing on-line and direct contact among programmes in sub-Saharan Africa, research findings on new bio-control methods for the tsetse fly will be made available to project groups for testing and application in Ethiopia, Kenya, United Republic of Tanzania and Uganda.

IFAD is a partner in the Programme Against African Trypanosomiasis (PAAT), an international alliance of agricultural and human health organizations seeking sustainable solutions to the problem. Information is shared through a web-based information system, that includes use of GIS, a resource inventory and a knowledge base. There is also an Internet discussion forum, which now has over 250 subscribers.

## More than song and dance

Song, dance and skits are helping rural poor communities in the Chhattisgarh tribal region of central India to learn about and find solutions to social and economic problems.

These and other traditional forms of entertainment and communication are part of a new IFAD-supported project in the region. Local actors travel between communities to inform and stimulate discussion, especially among women, about male drunkenness, domestic abuse, women's rights, dowries, water-saving techniques in drought areas, the benefits of saving and other issues.

Performances are in local languages, one of the reasons why they have been successful in reaching large numbers of people. The groups have reached more than 10 000 households in 300 villages.



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