

The Problem of “Unpluggedness” of Women in Africa

About 80 per cent of humanity has access to radio or television, while only about 5 per cent has access to the Internet. The convergence of the new and old information and communications technologies (“digital convergence”) heralds new opportunities (“digital opportunities”) by means of which both the Digital Divide and the Information and Knowledge Divide, in all their manifestations can be narrowed, broken, bridged or even transcended within and among countries and regions.

The new information and communication technologies (ICTs) are changing the way in which ordinary people interact with society and the way the wider society involves individuals in this evolutionary process. Living and working in a wired community has implications for more freedom, flexibility and opportunities to decide how citizens would like to be governed in a world with many interactive stakeholders.

Within the democratic process, all stakeholders are expected to play a major complementary role in the formulation and implementation of good public policy for enhancing sustainable human development, economic growth and well-being. Good governance creates political incentives for its citizens to participate and be enlightened. This form of participatory democracy has shown that an enlightened population can create economic incentives of a very special kind. Voicelessness, like vulnerability, deserves attention. In most development countries, it's mainly the women who are voiceless.

In Africa 70 – 80 per cent of our population live in rural communities. Of this population, more than 60 per cent are women. A typical rural community in Africa does not have electricity, telephones or a post office. The roads to the rural communities (villages) are impassable, which means that during the rainy season accessing these communities is next to impossible. Literacy rates are very low, and the majority of the population is illiterate. The majority of the illiterate are women. This therefore means that newspapers—which are mainly written in English for Anglophone Africa, French for Francophone and Portuguese for Lusophone Africa—cannot be read by the majority of our population. In Zimbabwe, the leading daily newspaper prints close to 100,000 copies per issue for a population of over 12 million; this gives an indication of how many African people are able to have access to a newspaper. The price of a newspaper itself is prohibitive, especially noting that African women are the poorest of the poor. This also shows that the majority who are women can only communicate in their local languages.

This then brings us to electronic media. Due to the fact that television is powered by electricity, this medium is not accessible to rural communities. Since the price of television is high you will find that even poor communities in urban areas cannot afford to buy one. This narrows the communication spectrum to radio. Radio is still the most appropriate communications technology in sub-Saharan Africa. It uses local languages. Radio sets are relatively cheap, easy to carry and easy to operate. This has become the most popular form of communication in Africa and is the medium that is listened to by most of our women.

It has been observed that those who generate, publish and disseminate information are the ones whose perceptions of the world shape development policy and programs. It is imperative therefore that women participate in the production and dissemination of information with a view to influencing decision-making on development priorities, planning of programs and allocation of resources.

Related to the above point is the need to promote women's full participation in problem-solving initiatives and development processes. Women's presence and voice in the national legislature of many African countries has undergone a steady decline. Therefore, the need to strengthen women's lobbying and advocacy work cannot be over-emphasized. These activities require that women be fully equipped with facts, figures and other information on issues of concern if their views are to be respected by decision-makers and program planners. As it is, there is a lot of information on HIV/AIDS produced by women's organizations which has seen limited or no circulation, yet it could be very useful in decision-making on an individual and group level, and in lobbying and advocacy for gender-sensitive policies and programs. This situation is partly due to the neglect of the information needs of women, partly due to the lack of access by women's organizations to the mass media for information dissemination purposes, and partly due to the lack of gender sensitivity in the media sector.

Community radio broadcasting, which has been an essential consequence of the liberalisation wave in broadcasting in many African countries, has been of immense benefit to grassroots communities in the rural sector of developing countries. With its unique and expanding reach and influential outreach, Internet radio can help to extend the digital domain to encompass more of Africa's grassroots communities. Radio broadcasting has embraced the digital revolution well ahead of television and the new media. Internet radio is currently a reality and is estimated to have a global audience approaching 15 million people. It is a platitude that conventional radio broadcasting is characterised by unique reach and influential outreach. Internet radio is already generating significant changes in the business and social practices of broadcasting. In some cases developing countries are significant world participants in Internet-delivered radio and digital radio satellite networks, with operational models that were only recently under development in technologically advanced nations.

The *Development Through Radio (DTR) Project* that is popularly known as the *Radio Listeners' Clubs*, was developed and launched by the organisation to give rural people access to radio and thus enable them to have a voice. Through training, the project encourages and develops leadership qualities among women for self-reliance, and community-to-community interaction. It facilitates information exchange between clubs so that they can share experiences, and links rural people with policy makers and non-governmental organisations that offer, respectively, solutions and resources. This project is unique in it uses participatory methods of development. Emphasis is placed

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on dialogue and debate on critical issues affecting communities. The process boosts women's confidence and empowers them to become assertive so that they search for solutions to problems they face. By facilitating the sharing of experiences between DTR groups, the project helps to strengthen individual groups. Due to its success, non-governmental organisations also use this unique platform for their advocacy programmes such as voter education, land rights, women's rights, violence against women, and also highlights issues related to HIV/AIDS.

Virtual Newsroom: This is a ground-breaking project designed to ensure that there is a positive portrayal of issues concerning marginalized groups. FAMW, in partnership with a British non-governmental organisation called Worldwoman, is training about forty female journalists from Zimbabwe, Kenya, Uganda and Ghana to become proficient writers so that they can publish stories about all aspects of society. The stories will be distributed through the Worldwoman website, and will be downloaded by *Development Through Radio*, community radio projects, our partners, and the international audience. Other countries will also be brought on board in due course. The virtual newsroom will boost programmes showcasing Africa's positive attributes instead of the stereotype images of hunger, war and disease which are common.

Deployment of community Internet radio broadcasting may be attempted as an extension of conventional community radio broadcasting, with the objective of putting into practice the convergence between radio and the Internet within the context of Internet-based community access centres for grassroots communities. Internet radio (or WebRadio) is already a practical reality in a number of developing countries, including some in Africa. Community Internet radio broadcasting remains an option in the short term.

Significant and rapid advances in information and communications technologies (ICTs) in all aspects of human endeavour have gained increased visibility in recent years, primarily as a result of the proliferation of the delivery of basic social/public services and improvements in the effectiveness and efficiency in service delivery. There is need to create "knowledge workers" and/or systems analysts to interact with grassroots community members—and particularly women—to articulate, analyse and specify user requirements for content development and/or selection within the context of Internet-based community access centres. Information analysts (who may be synonymous with "knowledge workers") need to select and suitably represent information on government service delivery for the optimum benefit of grassroots communities at community access centres. This can be achieved by the linkage this programme has to existing structures.

The creation of Internet-based community access centres (CACs) at the grassroots community level will seek to take advantage of suitable existing physical infrastructures

as earlier indicated that is on hand in community radio stations and Development Through Radio projects, which can be suitably modified to satisfy a grassroots effort to bridge the digital divide and bring rural communities closer to the centre or hub. These peripheral centers can provide greater access to information and to services to people in rural communities, where people would otherwise have no such access to computer facilities, than the single office location where bureaucratic delays are often encountered after a long journey to the town center. In Africa, lack of access to technology is a major barrier for many individuals, and the empowerment of marginalised groups in rural areas can benefit by the use of ICTs being deployed in Community Access Centres (CACs)

In particular, the deployment of ICTs in Grassroots communities within the context of Internet-based CACs does have positive impact on the empowerment of citizens and communities, through a wide range of mechanisms from passive information access to active citizen participation:

- Informing;
- Representing;
- Encouraging;
- Consulting; and
- Involving the citizen in decision-making

The digital society is progressively changing the way the world *transacts*. Fostering community presence in the 'global village' through virtual showcase marketing of grassroots community products and services (handicrafts, etc.) within the context of a marketplace is one mode of approach in which grassroots community business and enterprise can be digitally enhanced.

It is important to note that sustainability of development initiatives is enhanced when, as the starting point, they are founded on what the target group knows, and then build on that foundation. It is therefore important that the information, knowledge, experiences and aspirations of women be documented and disseminated through the various media. This approach promotes a sense of ownership of the project by the target group.

As presented above, this gives shape to a model of digital convergence for application to grassroots communities and shows how such a model can be effected by technology and a people-centred approach to development. The model assumes that a minimal level of national information and communication infrastructure (NICI) exists, which will facilitate the realisation of living and working in a wired grassroots community. It will contribute to a collective digital future within the context of a vibrant and diverse mosaic of cultures and voices within diverse grassroots communities.