Livelihoods Approaches to Information and Communication in support of Rural Poverty and Food Security – Key Issues

Livelihoods Approaches are being widely adopted by governments and development agencies to reduce poverty and increase food security in developing countries. Information is a vital component, essential for linking and informing decision-making processes at every level, yet is rarely integrated into livelihoods programmes. At the same time information and communication technologies are expanding rapidly into many developing countries, creating a digital divide between those who can afford state of the art telecommunications and internet access and those who can't, and threatening to submerge well established and effective traditional information systems. This note summarises the results of a six-month FAO research project to analyse the role of information in the livelihoods approach, and make recommendations on how agencies can capitalise on and integrate the best elements of traditional communication methods and ICT revolution technologies within the livelihoods approach.

Sustainable Livelihoods approaches have emerged through debate within a wide range of development agencies over the last decade. Although there are different interpretations among agencies, there is broad agreement on the principles of the livelihoods approach which include focusing on people, using participatory approaches to help them to manage their assets more effectively and facilitate linkages between micro-level livelihood systems and the policy environment, stressing outcomes rather than outputs, fostering interdisciplinary teamwork, and encouraging partnerships between government, communities and the private sector.

Information and communication are critical components of this approach, essential to supply the information required by the poor in order to make decisions on livelihood strategies, and to supply information required by institutions responsible for making decisions about the policies and processes to support those strategies. Improved information alone however is not sufficient for improved decision making. Decision-making is a political process and stakeholder participation in decision-making processes, and building multi-sectoral collaboration and partnerships between them are also crucially important.

Livelihoods approaches involve a wide range of stakeholders including farmers and other community actors in projects and programmes, local governance institutions and 'interface' institutions such as technical services, NGOs, and private sector organisations and national-level development agencies, national NGOs, policy makers and international support agencies. Each stakeholder group in each situation has its own specific information needs and delivery preferences. A highly differentiated participatory information needs assessment is an essential early activity in a livelihoods programme.

Rural communities, their institutions, government and other agencies all have well developed information networks for local information dissemination, and many people still trust word-of-mouth information, and what they can see with their own eyes above other information. Traditional media such as television and radio can reach a wide audience. Although access to the internet is growing throughout the developing world, North America and Europe still account for 89% of all Internet hosts whereas Africa has only 0.25%, and the "Digital Divide" is widening. It is wrong though to assume that nothing can be done without access to the internet. This runs the risk of losing farmers' rich, vital, experiential knowledge of agriculture, much of which circulates in local informal networks, and there is a growing interest in systems which seek to integrate existing informal communication systems and networks in developing countries into new information systems, that inform, and are informed by the internet.

The research identified seven key recommendations for improving information systems for sustainable livelihoods in developing countries: determine who should pay; ensure equitable access; promote local content; build on existing systems; build capacity; use realistic technologies; and build knowledge partnerships.

Determine who should pay:
There was, until recently, an assumption that information for agricultural and rural development is a global public good and should be made freely available to all. More recently donors and governments have been shifting towards the 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 and 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, cost recovery, or profitability is only one of a wide range of factors influencing the sustainability of information services. More work is urgently needed to explore these issues, and develop a new consensus on who should pay for information for poorer farmers, and how sustainable information services can be provided.

Ensure equitable access:
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. There are however good examples in Africa and Asia of initiatives where poor people have access to and control over electronic information services with positive livelihoods and governance outcomes. 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 to enable rural communities, and their governments, in developing countries, to manage information more effectively and develop communication strategies that make information that is relevant to people's livelihood needs accessible to the poor.

Promote local content:
Farmers trust endogenous and local information more than exogenous information. Although issues and problems can be illustrated with examples from elsewhere, farmers are unlikely to believe solutions, and be motivated to adopt them without substantial discussion of locally specific examples. In this context information on food and agriculture should be particularly 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 has been successfully used by farmers to discuss specific local problems with remote technical specialists. There is also enormous potential to enrich information in national and international information systems with specialised local knowledge although 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.

Build on existing systems:
Many donor-driven information systems are overly ambitious, overly complex, and over-designed. They tend to overlook the fundamental organisational processes and institutional incentives that drive information use and ignore potential 'losers' who may subsequently resist implementation. Experience shows that the most effective systems are simple and modest, and build on existing databases and data collecting routines to provide specific

information to specific users to inform decisions for which they are accountable. Strong support from internal 'champions', and clear rewards to individuals for contributing information, are also important factors. There is a danger the current focus on internet-based information systems in developing countries, will undermine rich and effective existing information networks. There are many good examples of innovative mechanisms to bridge the gap between the internet and rural areas through rural radio, high frequency radio links or village internet booths, and rural service providers.

Build capacity:
There is a critical need to build capacity at all levels to improve information for 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 sub-national level there is a need to develop and extend electronic networks, and 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. Education leading to basic literacy and numeracy, especially for marginalised groups, is a priority for improving local capacity to use and generate information, and local government and non-government institutions need to be encouraged and strengthened to provide more information locally, for local dissemination, and to contribute to national systems.

Use realistic technologies:
Information and communication initiatives for development are expanding exponentially. Coordination is impossible, and 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 the successful integration of information technology with realistic information strategies. There is little effective monitoring and evaluation due to the lack of new approaches to evaluation appropriate for the new technologies, making it difficult to even identify the key lessons. Nevertheless computer-based information technologies are increasingly applied to rural development, even in the most remote circumstances, despite the fact that the vast majority of the rural poor, that 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 combination of, and link the old and the new technologies.

Build knowledge partnerships:
Information systems for livelihoods need to be able to share information horizontally between organisations at the same level, for example research institutes or farmer organisations, and vertically, between organisations at different levels, for example different tiers of government, or national research institutes and local extension agencies. Vertical systems work best between few highly integrated hierarchical organisations with compatible information systems. Horizontal systems thrive in an environment where many different organisations 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 operating within a loose but compatible global information network. Dynamic and flexible partnerships can be established between individuals and organisations at any level and the boundaries between the levels effectively disappear. Community knowledge partnerships that can develop mechanisms to deal with the problems of connectivity and information literacy and incorporate local and external knowledge can directly benefit poor people. This 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 with dynamic information sharing partnerships with a two-way flow of information at every level.