

A Livelihoods Approach to Communication and Information to Reduce Poverty – Practical Approaches

Introduction

Information and communication are recognised as essential components of the development process, to empower poor communities and inform development agencies and policy makers alike, and for linking and informing decision-making processes at every level. Yet information and communication systems are rarely well integrated into development strategies and programmes. The rush to provide internet access in developing countries is threatening to replace well established and effective two-way communication systems with a one-way information delivery system, and create a digital divide between those who can afford it and those who can't. This paper describes a livelihoods approach to information and communication in development, which seeks to integrate the best elements of traditional communication methods and the new ICT revolution technologies. It is based on the results of a six-month study by FAO, DFID and ODI, which included a literature review and visits to Ghana, Uganda and India.

The livelihoods approach

The livelihoods approach has emerged through debate within a wide range of development agencies over the last decade. The approach incorporates a set of principles, an analytical framework providing a broad and systematic understanding of the various factors that constrain or enhance livelihood opportunities and how they relate to each other, and a developmental objective i.e. to enhance the overall level and sustainability of livelihoods and reduce poverty. The approach builds on some well developed field-level tools and methods, such as participation and empowerment, which are already well established in the work of many agencies, and highlights the need to better understand, and allocate resources to facilitate linkages between micro-level livelihood systems and their policy environment. Key principles for implementation include shifting the focus from resources to people and from livelihood constraints to people's strengths; stressing outcomes rather than outputs; prioritising diagnosis; demand-driven implementation and the establishment of feedback mechanisms; ensuring economic, institutional, social and environmental sustainability through the adoption of exit strategies in the early stages of programme implementation; fostering interdisciplinary teamwork, and encouraging innovative partnerships between communities and their organisations, and the public and private sectors.

The role of information in the livelihoods approach

Communication and information are critical components of the livelihoods framework, essential for linking and informing decision-making processes at every level: 1) to facilitate the acquisition and exchange of information by the poor necessary for developing livelihood strategies; 2) to improve communication within and between the institutions responsible for making decisions that affect livelihood options; and 3) to empower poor communities to participate in the decision-making processes.

A Livelihoods Approach to Communications and Information

A livelihoods approach to communication and information should build on existing strengths and opportunities and supplement and enhance, rather than replace existing systems. It should start with a detailed participatory assessment of the information needs and information and communication capacities of the target beneficiaries and stakeholders. This needs to pay attention to the role of information in relation to different livelihood assets at community level, engage with other stakeholders at all levels, promote two-way flows of information, and build a detailed understanding of the policies, institutions and processes influencing communication and the generation, communication and use of information. Implementation should seek to build capacity in and strengthen partnerships between

communities, civil society organisations, government departments, public and private sector service providers and international development agencies. A livelihoods approach to improving communication and information is likely to emphasise improved collaboration between stakeholders through existing mechanisms, for example face-to-face meetings, workshops and seminars, and improved reporting procedures, and only introduce new information technologies if necessary, which enhance and strengthen existing technologies rather than replace them.

Information needs for rural communities

Rural communities need up-to-date information on sources, availability and cost of inputs for production, also on the potential of different techniques and technologies used for production, processing and marketing. However, the information that is often most relevant to improving livelihoods is non-technical, including the role and responsibilities of different institutions in the provision of key services including health and education, and where to go and who to ask for more specific information. Rural communities increasingly need information about off-farm activities, about rural development projects and policies and how to participate in and influence government processes. It is important that this information is available in an appropriate format and language, and that rural communities have the capacity to analyse and act on it.

Specific situations create specific information needs and user participation in planning and implementation is vital. Although the principles of participatory needs assessment are simple and well understood, there is no single standardised method, and a situation specific blend of different methods will be needed to fit each particular social and institutional setting and political context. Similarly, a combination of quantitative, qualitative and participatory action-research concepts and methods will be needed to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of any communications and information intervention.

Existing policies, institutions and processes

There are a number of international initiatives to help build developing country communications and information *policy*. Commercial-sector organisations are engaging policy makers in discussions regarding the potential for private sector involvement, while many inter-government agencies and international agencies are developing international guidelines and standards to help developing country governments establish effective policies and institutions to improve communications and information capacity. In most developing countries there is a complex array of separate and often contradictory policies in different institutions seeking to improve information and communication, and there is an urgent need in some countries to harmonise policies at national and sub-national level.

There are also a bewildering number of *institutions* involved in developing and delivering communication systems and services and information at international, national, regional and local level. FAO, UNDP and others are all involved in providing advice and practical support to governments and other national organisations, and bilateral donors and international NGOs are increasingly interested in communications and information issues. At a national level, government departments, private sector organisations, non-governmental organisation, research institutes, parastatals and the media are all involved. There are fewer institutions involved at regional and local levels, although most district-level government offices in most countries have information officers, the private sector is often involved in infrastructure development, many bilateral and non-governmental agencies have communications and information projects, there may be local newspapers and radio stations, and local communities are themselves vibrant communication and information institutions.

Communication and information *processes* are well established in most countries. Rural communities, their institutions, government and other agencies all have well developed communication networks for local information dissemination, although 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 especially radio, reach a wide audience in many countries, but public service broadcasting is collapsing, and is being replaced by commercial channels which tend to broadcast music and entertainment rather than educational programmes. Most developing countries are rushing to join the internet age. India, in particular invested heavily in telecommunications infrastructure over the last decade, and now has internet connectivity down to District level throughout the country. African countries, slower off the mark, with fewer resources, and greater dependency on donors, are relying on private-sector investment. Much of rural Africa still doesn't have a telephone service, so despite an increasing quantity of agricultural information available on the internet there is very little access to it in most rural communities. It is wrong though to assume that that without access to the internet, communities do not have existing information systems of any substance, and an over-emphasis on internet connectivity runs the risk of losing farmers' rich, vital, experiential knowledge of agriculture, much of which circulates in local informal networks, and of undermining trust and social systems.

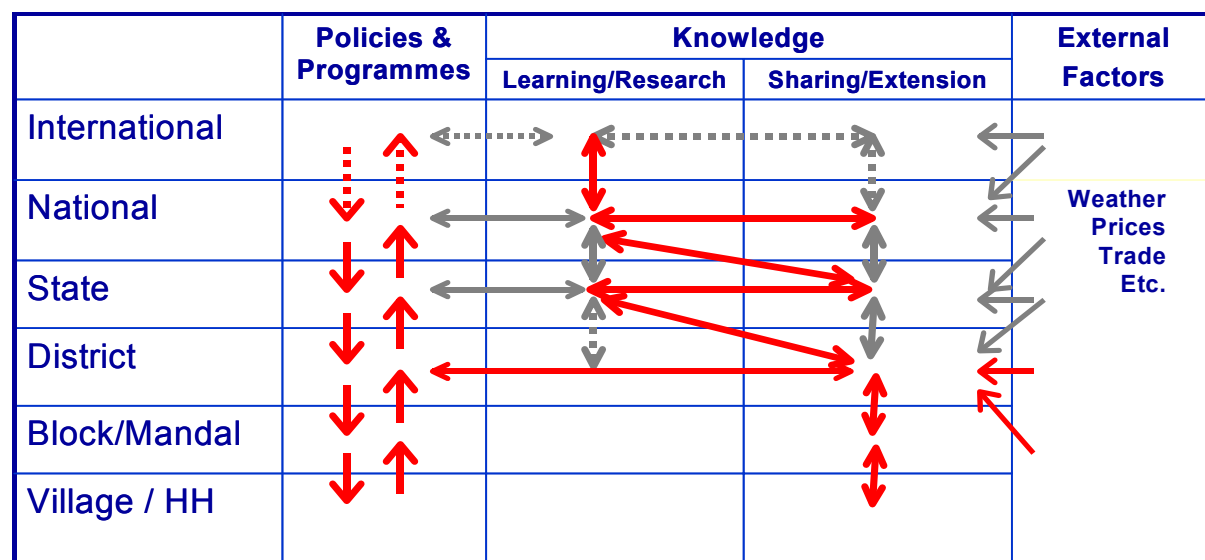
There are however, many innovative examples of computer and internet-based communications and information systems in developed and developing countries that demonstrate the potential for building new communications and information systems that can handle widely varying, rich, data, and make it easily accessible to anyone with a computer and internet connection, and the skills to use them. Internet technologies provide new opportunities to build new knowledge networks that can cross national, ethnic, social and organisational boundaries and contribute simultaneously to local and global learning.

It is essential before starting any communications and information programme to develop and understanding of this complex matrix of policies, institutions and processes, who communicates with who, its strengths and weaknesses, and to identify possible mechanisms for cooperation and collaboration. Each country will be different, but Table 1 and Figure 1 provide an example of the results of a preliminary communications and information mapping exercise carried out by the recent DFID / FAO / ODI study in India.

Table 1 – Policies, Institutions and Processes involved in information services in India

	Policies	Institutions	Processes
International	World Trade Agreement	UNDP, FAO, CGIAR	Doha Meeting; CGIAR Review
National	5-Year Plans; National Agriculture Policy; National Agricultural Extension Policy	Line Ministries; Indian Council of Agricultural Research; National Institute of Agricultural Extension Management (MANAGE); Broadcasting Authority.	5-Year Plan preparation and implementation; National Agricultural Technology Project (NATP); Agricultural Research Information System
State	State Development Plans, Andhra Pradesh 2020 Vision	State Agricultural Universities, State Ministries, Samaikya Agritech, State Media and Broadcasters	NATP; Research-Extension Liaison
District	District Development Plan	District Planning Board; District Dept of Agriculture, KVKs.	NATP; Gyandoot; Agricultural Marketing Committee
Block / Mandal	Block Development Plan	Women's Group, CBOs	Watershed management schemes; Block DA
Village / Household		Panchayat Authority; Families; Women's groups; Traders	Livelihood strategies

Figure 1 - Livelihood-relevant information flows in India¹



Practical Issues

Although there are many examples of apparently successful approaches in many developing countries, and much qualitative evidence of the benefits to rural communities, there is little empirical data of the impact on livelihoods. This is due in part to the pace of change in information and communications technology, and in part to a general lack of effort and methods to evaluate the impact of communication and information projects. There is an urgent need to evaluate these pilot approaches to learn more about which are the most effective. In the meantime the evidence seems to suggest that the most appropriate approaches are those which strengthen local systems and indigenous knowledge, introduce new technology carefully, ensure that poor people have access to it, and can use it to their own advantage, and seek to incorporate indigenous knowledge systems within it. The study identified seven key recommendations, to promote a livelihoods approach to communication and information systems

1. Determine who should pay

Privatisation is the predominant paradigm in development economics today, but experience has shown that the private sector is unlikely to invest in communication and information systems in remote poor areas, or in systems for which the poor can afford to pay. It is important therefore to work with international agencies, intergovernmental organisations and national government to develop a new consensus on who should pay for information for poor communities. There are enough examples of opportunities for income generation emerging from new information infrastructure, for example advertising on commercial rural radio stations (see Box 1 – Voice of Teso, Uganda), to justify government investment in the short term, and of new forms of public-private partnership in information service provision. Voucher schemes, group management of resources, and income-generating information services have all been used successfully to build more sustainable publicly funded systems. But new tools, and greater effort is urgently needed to gather empirical evidence to ascertain the benefit of improved information, especially for poorer farmers, to justify continued public investment in the medium term.

¹ Solid Arrows indicate frequently active links; Dotted arrows indicate infrequently active links; Red arrows indicate links requiring strengthening.

Box 1 – Voice of Teso (VoT), Uganda

VoT is a commercial station in Northern Uganda. VoT is producing educational programmes, including “I work for myself”, a package of programmes for small businesses, which is very popular and has attracted sponsorship from several advertisers. VoT staff are confident they could do the same with other programmes provided the package was very attractive, with lots of interaction with local people and local music. They believe that commercial radio can be a very effective medium for dissemination of information even in very remote areas.

2. Ensure equitable access

New systems must deliver the right kind of information in the right format, for poor people. The wrong information, in the wrong format, or, if information is only available to wealthier groups, may accentuate existing inequalities. It is important therefore to identify and empower the most marginalised groups and ensure they can access the information. But this takes time, and most communication and information programmes have a very short time-frame. There are opportunities to use government’s and multilateral organisation’s own information systems to demonstrate how new technologies and approaches can be used to make public information more accessible (see Box 2 – The Gyandoot Network in India), and improved networking is needed between organisations involved in communication and information projects to learn more from each other, about how to ensure equitable access.

Box 2 - The Gyandoot Network, Dhar District, India

The Gyandoot network is an intranet linking 68 computer kiosks in villages up to 100km away from the local government offices in Dhar, the district capital. It is designed specifically to provide access to poor farmers to a wide range of services including information on market rates, agricultural information, and information on education and health care. The server is managed by the government at District level, while the kiosks are managed by private entrepreneurs, who charge a small fee for each service. Up to 10 to 15 people use each kiosk each day, which provides a modest salary for the kiosk operator.

3. Promote local content

Poor people need locally-relevant information, in the right language, to meet their immediate needs, and it may be more useful to promote more information sharing between local institutions than bring in new information from outside. It is important therefore to promote information as a catalyst for community initiatives and encourage the adaptation of new technologies within decentralised and locally owned processes (see Box 3 – The Crops Research Institute in Ghana). To do this will require capacity-building programmes for micro-level information managers to help them to be able to generate appropriate information for the local context, to develop new mechanisms to link ICTs with traditional face-to-face communication, and to develop new systems to manage the integration of external and local information. Systems to link micro and macro level information will enable better information flows between local users and policy makers, and ensure the right information is available at each level.

Box 3 – The Crops Research Institute, Ghana

CRI’s research mandate covers all food and industrial crops except cocoa, coffee, shea nut, coconut, oil palm, sorghum and millet which are the mandated crops of other research institutes. Research objectives include inter alia development of improved crop varieties and production technologies. However the institute is increasingly involved in providing training, developing extension materials, fact sheets, farmers handbooks and other materials in local languages for government and non-government projects. The CRI recently worked with Sasakawa Global 2000 to run farmer field schools, on-site trials, and produce supporting posters and flip charts.

4. Strengthen existing policies and systems

Communication policies in many countries (and organisations) are fragmented and unclear and further work is needed to make them effective. Many existing communication and information systems work well, and new systems should seek to build on them. It is important therefore to understand the existing policy framework and work with local policy makers to harmonise and improve policies (see Box 4 – Communication for Poverty Eradication, Uganda), although more empirical data about the value of new communication and information initiatives is needed to inform the policy debate. The emphasis should be on supporting existing information systems at community level, identifying existing information system infrastructures that can be improved or enhanced with appropriate new technology, and encouraging multi-disciplinary, cross-sectoral, inter-organisational communication and information systems that can inform rural development strategies (see Box 5 – Agricultural Information Systems in India). There are also opportunities for promoting the integration of internet, ICT and traditional information systems within the new pluralistic approaches to agricultural extension, for which it will be important to develop methods for making external information sources compatible with the requirements of existing systems rather than the other way around.

Box 4 - Communication for Poverty Eradication, Uganda

The need for improved information highlighted in the Poverty Eradication Action Plan, and addressed through its communication strategy, has spawned a rash of communication strategies in sectoral programmes (e.g. the Plan for Modernisation of Agriculture), and their component parts (e.g. the National Agricultural Research Organisation (NARO) and National Agricultural Advisory Service (NAADS) communication strategies). Most are driven by the organisation rather than information users, some are weak or fail to focus on disadvantaged groups. Most stakeholders stressed the need for greater coherence and coordination within and between these strategies, for agreed procedures and standards, and for effective monitoring and evaluation of communication activities

Box 5 - Agricultural Information Systems in India

The Indian Council for Agricultural Research, which coordinates all agricultural research in India, is developing national-level databases to enable all Indian research institutes to share information. The Council is collaborating with the Indian Agricultural Statistics Research Institute to develop a Project Information Management System for the National Agricultural Technology Project. The system will include databases and text documents, a "Monitoring Module" to detect problems with implementation, a "Production System Module" with information on production systems from research institutes in all 5 Agro Ecological Zones in India; a "Mission Mode Module" for each institution; and a "Competitive Grant Proposal" system. IASRI is also responsible for Data Warehousing for agricultural data in India and are currently working with 13 research centres across the country to develop databases for a range of different resources/technologies.

5. Build Capacity

Strengthening human capacity is at least as important as new technology. Capacity building is needed at all levels, from international and bilateral agencies down to community level – to equip people with the new skills necessary to develop and manage new systems. It is important therefore to promote standards for information management within international policy processes and share the experience of information strategy making between governments (see Box 6 – FAO's COAIM). Support is also needed for national government through the provision of training packages and information management resources to help them to promote livelihoods approaches and develop appropriate training materials for field-level organisations. Organisations, community groups and farmers also need training in information collection, storage and dissemination including the use of innovative formats for local audiences based on the local culture (see Box 7 – United Nations University, People, land and environmental change).

Box 6 – FAO’s Consultation on Agricultural Information Management

One hundred and sixty one representatives from all 91 Member countries attended FAO’s first Consultation on Agricultural Information Management (COAIM) in June 2000. Capacity building was identified as a key issue, and it was recommended that the FAO, through the World Agriculture Information Centre, continues to focus on this by providing training in member countries and developing international standards. The COAIM conference also recognised the importance of developing standards and ensuring appropriate use of ICTs. Many standards such as the AGROVOC vocabulary already have wide support, and FAO is currently developing the Standard Generalised and Extensible Mark-up Languages (SGML and XML) which will greatly simplify the incorporation of diverse documents into information systems.

Box 7 – United Nations University, People, land and environmental change

This project is being run simultaneously in a number of regions around the world. Ghana forms part of the West African cluster and there are six demonstration sites in the country. In the Northern region the demonstration site centres on the village of Zugu with a total of 33 villages included within a 10 mile radius. The emphasis is on local knowledge sharing and different activities such as botany, herbal uses for trees and plants, weaving for women’s groups are developed according to local needs, demands and experiences. Specialised training courses are developed and where necessary teachers and facilitators are brought to the village to provide extra support. Classes are located at the central village but those from the neighbouring villages are able to work on demonstration projects in the village and are included in the teaching schedules. The project focuses on capacity-building rather than traditional extension approaches and university staff and students assist the communities to develop their own problem-solving techniques and solutions.

6. Use realistic technologies

There are many examples of over-ambitious communications and information systems that have never worked effectively in developed as well as developing countries. The most effective systems use realistic technologies that enhance and add value to existing systems. It is important therefore to develop models for realistic approaches to information technology that can be expanded as the infrastructure and resources become available and to provide a forum for discussing and evaluating experiences that contributes to lesson-learning within governments and development agencies. Approaches to link mass media with the internet offer the potential to maximise access to new information, while delivering it using media with which people are already familiar (see Box 8 – Buganda Central Broadcasting Service, Uganda).

Box 8 - Buganda Central Broadcasting Station (CBS), Uganda

CBS is a commercial private radio station belonging to the Buganda kingdom which has broken the rules of the FM format, by broadcasting in Luganda, emphasising Buganda music and introducing educational programmes. It has also worked with a number of development projects to produce drama series and talk shows which are educational, yet still get audiences large enough to attract commercial sponsorship. A series on small scale enterprise development is now operating independently, fully funded by commercial sponsors. CBS has developed a network of four local FM stations around Uganda, which broadcast in local languages, which are interested in a similar approach. Much of the material they use is gathered from the internet, produced in a central production unit, then made available to the stations on an internet web site.

7. Build knowledge partnerships

New internet technologies provide enormous opportunities to build new knowledge partnerships that cross national, ethnic, social and institutional boundaries. But for this to happen it is important to encourage more pluralistic and decentralised networking that involves greater participation and two-way information transfer, and to develop innovative partnerships to encourage decentralised information management and knowledge transfer, using new technologies where appropriate. Knowledge partnerships will only reach community level though, if the technology is available, and local people have the skills to

gather material from outside and make it accessible to local communities, and the skills to gather local information and make it accessible to others. This is starting to happen in some communities (see Box 9 – Sneha Mahila Women’s Group, India), but it is often difficult to promote connections with appropriate intermediaries, for the information to flow up to policy level. This is an area where external agencies can play a useful catalytic role (see Box 10 – FAO’s livelihoods approach to communication in Uganda).

Box 9 – Sneha Mahila Women’s Group, India

Sneha Mahila in Maheshwaram Mandal (sub-District) in Andhra Pradesh is a federation of women’s groups. First established in one village as “Thrift and Savings” group by the Department for Rural Development, it has grown into a substantial rural bank with nearly 7,000 savers from 474 women’s groups in 53 villages. Group members save a small amount weekly, and can then borrow larger amounts of money to invest in small enterprises. The programme recently acquired a computer and trained 4 women to use an accounting package (for the bank) and the internet. They use it to find out agricultural prices, weather information and other agricultural information. Although they find the internet useful, they complained about the lack of information in the local language, and are planning to set up their own website to publish their own information, and provide links to other relevant information in the local language.

Box 10 – FAO’s livelihoods approach to communication in Uganda

FAO is building a programme to help the government of Uganda to develop communication and information systems in Uganda to support the Poverty Eradication Action Plan (PEAP). The programme will support a range of activities to ensure that two-way communication is established at all levels from the village to the Ministry of Finance. Work with the Department of Agriculture in Soroti to help systematise information emerging from farmer field schools and make it available to other farmers, will feed into and benefit from work with the Uganda National Farmer’s Union, which is building a National Farmer’s Network, and the National Agriculture Research Organisation’s Client-Oriented Agriculture Research and Dissemination project, which aims to make the results of research available in accessible formats for farmers. Work will also be undertaken to harmonise the communication strategies of the Plan for Modernisation of Agriculture and the National Agricultural Advisory Service, with the poverty Eradication Action Plan, to ensure information systems in the Agricultural Sector – seen as the engine for the PEAP – work efficiently. Finally, work with the Ministry of Finance and Central Bureau of Statistics will help to improve data availability for monitoring the impact of the plan.

Conclusion

It is clear that there is considerable scope to develop improved communication and information systems which incorporate both the advantages of face-to-face transfer of local knowledge, and of more flexible information storage, management and delivery of information through the internet and mass media, and can bridge the two. However although there are many examples of apparently successful approaches in many developing countries, and much qualitative evidence of the benefits to rural communities, there is little empirical data of the impact on livelihoods.

Communication and information play a vital role in livelihoods approaches, and the principles of the livelihood approach provide useful guidance to the development of communication and information systems. Effective communication and information are vital for poor people to develop improved, sustainable, livelihoods, for decision makers responsible for setting the policy context, and people involved in the institutions and processes within which they live, and to strengthen communication between them all. The emphasis of the livelihoods approach on people, their assets, the policies, institutions and processes which influence their lives, promoting multi-sectoral partnerships and focusing on outcomes rather than inputs, also provides a useful framework to guide communication and information initiatives.