



The Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), UK Department for International Development (DFID) and the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) undertook a study in 2001-2 to analyse the role of information in livelihoods, and make recommendations on how agencies can capitalise on and integrate the best elements of traditional communication methods and new information and communication (ICT) technologies within the livelihoods approach. This included a literature review and field trips to Ghana, Uganda and India.

Information and communication are recognised as essential components of the development process, yet these systems are rarely well integrated into development strategies and programmes. The rush to develop internet access in developing countries needs to be adjusted to the context of already established and effective communication systems, and attention needs to be paid to bridging the rural **digital divide** between those who can afford access to the new technologies and those who cannot.

Rural communities, their institutions, government and other agencies all have well developed local communication and information networks, and many people still trust what they can hear and see first hand above other information. Television and radio can reach a wide audience in many developing countries, and access to the internet is growing throughout the developing world. In addition to the current emphasis on extending technologies and internet access, consideration needs to be given to bringing in appropriate content such as that derived from communities' rich, vital and experiential knowledge of agriculture. The latter has always circulated in local informal networks, and new hybrid communication systems are needed which can integrate existing information and networks, to inform and be informed by the internet.

The study examined the role of communications and information in **livelihoods approaches**, which have emerged through debate over the last decade and are being adopted by governments and development agencies to eliminate poverty and increase food security in developing countries. The underlying principles are people-centred and reflect the diversity of poor people's livelihoods and the need to analyse these in a holistic manner. They stress the inter-relationship between community-level activities and the broader policy and institutional framework ("the rules of the game"). They recognise that people's priorities and opportunities change and that interventions which seek to reduce poverty must be dynamic and respond to these evolving opportunities. The principles also acknowledge that "sustainability" encompasses economic, environmental, institutional and social parameters. Information and communication are critical components of livelihoods approaches, essential to supply the information required by the poor in order to make decisions on their livelihood strategies, and to supply information required by institutions responsible for making decisions about the policies and processes to support those strategies.

Improved communication and information alone however are not sufficient for improved livelihoods. Stakeholder participation in decision-making processes, and building multi-sectoral collaboration and partnerships between them are also crucial. This wide range of stakeholders, from farmer to international support agency, all have their own specific information needs and delivery preferences. Sustainable development and the elimination of poverty also demand attention to national political economic and social processes, international relations and trade.

The study identified **seven key recommendations** for improving the contribution of information systems to poverty elimination and food insecurity.

Determine who should pay: Information for agricultural and rural development was until recently considered a global public good to be made freely available to all, but donors and governments are increasingly relying on private sector delivery. Although the capital investment costs to develop information service infrastructure are high, there are many examples of successful cost recovery through charges for telephone use and advertising. There are examples where rural communities are prepared to pay for agricultural and market information, but poorer farmers often lose out because they cannot afford to pay. The private sector is reluctant to cover the cost of developing infrastructure in remote and poor areas, unless forced to do so through regulatory mechanisms, or to cover the actual and hidden costs of providing information that empowers poor people, or of gathering, processing and circulating valuable indigenous knowledge. There is not enough data on the social and economic benefit of improved communication and information to poorer farmers to encourage and justify public investment. More work is urgently needed to explore this issue to develop a new consensus on who should pay for information for poorer people.



Ensure equitable access: There is substantial evidence that if new information systems do not reach the poor, they may exacerbate existing social, ethnic, gender, economic and political disparities. Television and radio are more widely accessible than the internet, especially in Africa. There are however good examples in Africa and Asia where telecentres, internet-linked rural community radio and electronic information services, specifically designed to ensure access by the poor, have had positive livelihoods and governance outcomes. The challenge is to apply these pilot approaches more widely to enable rural communities, and their governments, to manage information more effectively, and to ensure information is also integrated into, accessible through and complements more traditional media such as radio, television and face-to-face communication.

Promote local content: Rural communities trust internal and local information more than external information, and are unlikely to adopt external solutions without substantial discussion of locally specific examples. Improved access to locally-relevant information is essential for poverty reduction. Farmers and their communities need information on local agro-ecological conditions, weather and topography, local cultural and economic aspects of production, marketing and processing, and non-agricultural information on topics including health, education and governance. Supporting communication between local institutions may be more important than providing new content from external sources. Internet technologies provide enormous opportunities to share information locally, and to enrich local, 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 information systems are overly ambitious and complex, and over-designed. They tend to overlook the fundamental organisational processes and institutional incentives that encourage people to use them. 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. There are good examples of innovative mechanisms to bring information from both the internet and rural areas through rural radio, or village internet booths run by local people, and these systems are often designed to meet the specific demand for the communities they serve.

Build capacity: There is a critical need to build capacity at all levels. Intergovernmental agencies need this 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 which support the implementation of national pro-poor policy. Local capacity in information collection, storage and dissemination needs 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 key to improving local capacity to be able to access and generate information. Improved knowledge and skills in governance and enterprise are vital if poor people are to be able to capitalise on an increasingly decentralised, globalized world.

Use realistic technologies: Information and communication initiatives for development are expanding exponentially. Most promote the latest technology leading to a perpetual race to keep up. The emphasis should be on developing a realistic set of compatible technologies to facilitate the exchange of information between different systems. There is also little effective monitoring and evaluation of information initiatives, making it difficult to even identify the key lessons. It is essential to be more realistic about information technology. In developing countries the most sustainable approach is to use a combination of, and link, the old and the new technologies.

Build knowledge partnerships: There are many good examples of traditional systems that share information between organisations at the same level, for example research institutes or farmer organisations, and systems that share information between organisations at different levels, for example different tiers of government, or national research institutes and local extension agencies, but few that can do both. The new "network" age allows much more flexible approaches, in which dynamic "knowledge partnerships" can be established between individuals and organisations at any level. Multidisciplinary knowledge partnerships that can develop mechanisms to deal with the problems of connectivity and information literacy at community level, and link with national and international systems offer the potential for a dynamic two-way flow of information at every level.