Shaping policy for rural empowerment
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Numerous critiques of 'Training & Visit' and other agricultural technology-transfer approaches have led to a chorus of calls for 'demand-driven extension'. Concurrently, there is growing recognition that farmers and rural community members have demands for information and appropriate learning methods that are not being met. Demand-driven extension involves a shift from public sector extension delivery to a negotiated system through which farmers and rural community members determine their needs and have some control over extension services which are delivered by public, private, NGO or farmer organisation providers.

The call for demand-driven extension opens the door for examination of how ICTs can be cost-effective and practical tools for facilitating and channelling farmers' demands, and addressing those demands. However, forget, for a moment, about fancy ICT applications and wonderful new telecommunication technologies that might benefit agricultural extension. Those are the fruits of universal access, and they are grown and enjoyed most by people who have access to telecommunication networks. To grow and enjoy those fruits, people in rural communities, and the organisations that serve those people, must first have the fertile soil that germinates creative applications and innovative ways to use the technologies. That fertile soil is a telecommunications environment which supports access to national and international telecommunication networks in rural areas.

Creating that environment is the major challenge ahead. Advocates of improved agricultural extension delivery must step up to the challenges of understanding, learning about, and advocating for universal access policies and supportive telecommunications regulatory environments. Only when access to telecommunication networks is a reality can the creative energies, entrepreneurial attitudes, and practical imaginations of rural stakeholders generate beneficial and sustainable ICT applications and practical ways to employ technologies.

Rural organisations involved in agricultural extension should become proactively involved in shaping and monitoring national telecommunications policy. For the principals of these organisations, advocacy for telecommunications policy reform is certainly unknown territory. Is asking them to become involved in this policy area an impossible challenge? I do not think so. For example, in El Salvador – the think-tank-cum-advocacy group FUSADES (Foundation for Economic and Social Development) helped to push new concepts for telecom reform that went beyond the conventional approaches undertaken elsewhere in Latin America and resulted in significantly increased rural telecom penetration. In Guatemala, the Center for National Economic Research and the Guatemalan Entrepreneurial Chamber provided highly targeted support to convert telecommunications policy concepts into appropriate legislation and to help build political support. Again, their efforts resulted in the implementation of policies that substantially increased rural telecom penetration. In 2000, in Trinidad and Tobago, the Network of Trinidad and Tobago NGOs for the Advancement of Women undertook national consultations related to Universal Access and Women in the ICT sector and

introduced the concept of Sustainable Human Development Values as a central element for policy debate with respect to the 'Telecommunications Bill 2000'. The virtual exclusion of women in the telecommunications decision-making process was a primary impetus for their national consultation and its participants formed a network that continued to work as an effective advocacy group for 'rural telecommunications'. The costs of these advocacy activities in Central America and the Caribbean were low-ranging from $10,000-$20,000).

In general, rural and agricultural organisations are absent from national policy dialogues that help create and/or shape access to telecommunication networks in rural areas. These three examples – there are likely several more in other developing countries – demonstrate that rural organisations can indeed effectively exercise influence on national telecommunication policies; that their efforts have a remarkable impact on rural access to telecommunication infrastructures and on sustainable use of ICT applications that support agricultural development; and that the investments the organisations need to achieve this impact are modest.

Any examination of the potential role of key ICT applications like the telephone and the Internet in agricultural extension is severely challenged as long as rural areas of developing countries are without access to the basic telecommunications services. Any resulting programmes and projects remain totally dependent on access to these services. Telecommunication policy therefore rises to the surface as a primary enabler or obstacle of demand-driven extension. Rural organisations involved in agricultural extension can no longer remain silent about national telecommunication policies.