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UGANDA

Dorothy Okello is Coordinator of WOUNET, whose mission is to promote and support the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) by women and women's organisations in Uganda. Dorothy has been active in the area of getting more women, small-scale enterprises and rural communities engaged in the information society for development via gender & ICT policy advocacy and via programme implementation and monitoring & evaluation. Dorothy is also a member of the Strategy Council of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs Global Alliance for ICT and Development (UNDESA-GAID). WOUNET is the Dimitra partner for Eastern Africa (Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Tanzania and Uganda).

Information and communication strategies to fight gender inequalities in access to land in Africa – The case of Uganda

1. Introduction

Over 80% of Uganda's population of 29 million is rural-based and depends almost entirely on agriculture at various levels for livelihoods. It is widely held that access to accurate and timely information by rural populations can not only increase agricultural productivity, it will also result in enhanced economic and social development. Indeed, the Ugandan government recognises that information is key for all kinds of programmes such as the Poverty Eradication Action Plan, the Plan for Modernisation of Agriculture (PMA), and Prosperity for All. Given the central role agriculture plays, it is therefore important to understand and address gender inequalities with respect to ownership, access and right to use land in Uganda.

Uganda does provide a showpiece of work on gender issues at both government and NGO levels. In her paper entitled "Working in Gender and Development in the Ugandan context", Mary Ssonko¹ indicates that Uganda has demonstrated the ability that something can be done to bridge the gender gap between men and women, but that a deeper analysis of the same presents a very complicated situation especially when it comes to the grassroots level in rural areas. On the one hand, NGOs are advocating for changes and women's groups are struggling to help women to meet their daily survival needs and to transform their lives. On the other side of the story, there are deeply embedded cultural beliefs and practices, economic policies by the government and continued rhetoric that seems to have no effect on the gender relations at the household level other than increasing the workloads of women.

Mary Ssonko's observations supplement findings of a recent WOUNGNET study of rural women in 15 parishes in Apac District, Northern Uganda. The April 2008 study indicates that rural women in Apac District acknowledge that governance issues are a concern to them, in addition to domestic violence, health and education. The women

called for more information, awareness and sensitisation in the areas of health, livelihood, gender, education and good governance. Many women expressed great desire to know their rights saying, 'We hear we have rights as women. But we do not know our rights. Can we be educated about our rights? Our husbands should also be educated about our rights'. The majority of the women earned their livelihood through agriculture. They indicated their need for agricultural information decriing their limited knowledge of improved agricultural practices. The women expressed a need to be trained in functional adult literacy so that they would be able to read and write. They decried heavy workloads and domestic violence in their households. Most women reported being barred from women's meetings, and consequently having to bribe their spouses with bits of money so that the men can go off to drink while the women go and attend the meeting.

Consequently, WOUNGNET would like to address different issues regarding women's status in Uganda, in particular through the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to disseminate information as well as to provide a channel for women's voices and concerns.

2. The WOUNGNET experience: Empowering women through ICTs

WOUNGNET is an NGO initiated in May 2000 by several women's organisations in Uganda to develop the use of ICTs among women as tools to share information and address issues collectively. According to findings from the 2003 WOUNGNET Evaluation Report – which used the APC Gender Evaluation Methodology (GEM) tool that is useful in assessing initiatives using ICTs for social change – WOUNGNET activities had increased awareness and participation of women in ICT-related activities, as well as increased information sharing and networking among women and women's organisations. However, the benefits were still limited to those organisations that had access to

Internet, leaving out the majority of women and women's organisations in the rural areas.

Though efforts had been made to support women's organisations in the rural areas to explore ICT opportunities in their activities, through awareness workshops, seminars, print materials, etc., this had been done on a limited scale. There was still lack of adequate capacity for women to explore ICTs to their full potential in their activities. Constraints included:

- Inadequate skills and knowledge in ICT use and application in their daily activities.
- Lack of ICT centres where they could exploit ICTs in their activities.
- Lack of connectivity to access the information disseminated online by WOUGNET.
- Lack of information translated in the local language to meet the needs of the diversified members.
- Lack of diversified methods of disseminating information that would satisfy both urban and rural women.
- Lack of technical skills to address problems such as computer break down and maintenance.

Following the 2003 evaluation, WOUGNET's overall objective was revised to strengthen the use of ICTs among women and women's organisations, to build capacities in ICT use and application, and to expand activities to reach out to women in the rural areas. Currently, WOUGNET's activities are conducted under the guidance of the 2008-2010 Strategic Plan with the overall goal to enable women and women's organisations to strategically and innovatively use ICTs for sustainable development. There are three major programme areas: Information-sharing and Networking; Technical Support; and Gender and ICT Policy Advocacy.

Under the Information-sharing and Networking programme, a project on "Enhancing Access to Agricultural Information using Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in Apac District" (EAAI) was initiated in 2005 to develop and improve information and communication systems so as to enable easy access to agricultural information for rural women farmers. According to a research study² undertaken in 2003, findings revealed lack of information as a key limiting factor to increased productivity in Apac District. The rural farmers lacked information on how to improve quality of their products, improved seeds and crop varieties, source of inputs/implements, plant diseases,

pests and their control, soil management and conservation, and improved skills. Lack of such information had limited the production levels of the rural farmers, hence limited incomes and increased poverty.

The EAAI project is implemented in 12 parishes/villages of Apac District.³ The project was initiated with financial support from the Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Cooperation ACP-EU (CTA), and targets grassroots women farmers as the main beneficiaries while not excluding men or the youth in the project activities. Located in Apac town, the Kubere Information Centre (KIC) was established to act both as an Information Resource Point as well as to support project implementation and two-way linkages with the women farmers. Local agricultural content has been produced and disseminated via radio and SMS messages as well as on audiotapes, video tapes and CD-ROMs. The content is made available in the local language, Luo, and disseminated to farmers.

In order to ensure timely dissemination of relevant information to farmers, the EAAI project has applied a number of collaborative strategies. WOUGNET has teamed up with a community radio in Apac to ensure delivery of information that is packaged, transcribed and formatted into a series of weekly radio programmes. Established in 1999, Radio Apac serves the target district and has got a good listenership in the community. In addition, WOUGNET has partnered with existing sources of agricultural information including the Agency for Sustainable Development Initiatives (ASDI⁴) and Volunteer Efforts for Development Concerns (VEDCO) – both NGOs based in Apac – and the Apac District Agricultural Office. Furthermore, a question and answer service is also available to assist farmers in providing a technical back-up. This has been done in collaboration with the National Agriculture Research Organisation (NARO), the local coordinator of CTA's Question and Answer Service and with the FAO/NARO Agricultural Research and Extension Network (ARENET) project that seeks to use the Internet to bridge the gap between researchers, extension workers and farmers.

At regional level, WOUGNET has also addressed the concerns of rural women as the Dimitra Project's partner for the Eastern Africa region, covering the five countries of Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Tanzania, and Uganda. In line with the project's main vision of consolidating and extending



its network in Africa, promoting information exchange by strengthening information and communication skills and updating and disseminating information on gender and rural development issues, WOUGNET established National Dimitra partnerships in Ethiopia, Kenya and Tanzania, and developed potential relationships in Somalia.

However, in all these initiatives WOUGNET is yet to specifically address gender inequalities in access to land and their impact on rural populations in Africa.

3. Information and communication strategies – the way forward

Gender is widely recognized as a critical development issue in the area of ICTs. It determines the access, use and application of ICTs among men and women. In Uganda, women's awareness and use of ICTs is nearly three times less than that of men.⁵ The National ICT Policy has 14 objectives that

include ensuring gender mainstreaming in information and communication programmes and in ICT development. The strategies for gender mainstreaming are to:

- take into account gender information needs and interests of both men and women in all information and communication programmes;
- develop mechanisms for increasing women's access to information (especially in rural areas), so as to reduce the gender information gap;
- use non-discriminative gender sensitive language in information and communication programmes;
- ensure equal participation in all aspects of ICT development.

As an information and communication strategy to address gender inequities and their impact for rural populations in Africa, the WOUGNET April 2008 research indicated above



recommends radio to be the most relevant medium for reaching out to rural women.

Further recommendations include to provide rural women with relevant information at appropriate times of the day when they have diminished most of their day's chores; to provide the women with functional adult literacy programmes; to strengthen communication channels between rural women and their leaders; and to facilitate the coordination of stakeholders including civil society organisations, local government leaders and civil servants to meet and agree on shared strategies to reach out to people at grassroots level and to get their views.

In order to consolidate the already existing information and communication strategies, WOUNET recommends the use of participatory development communication (PDC). This would facilitate key stakeholders to jointly reflect on a common community problem and come up with their dif-

ferent ways of addressing the problem and to achieve a common goal. The participatory process would involve women to reflect on their development objectives and on the definition of the related information and communication needs. It would provide a chance for rural women to indicate how ICTs may facilitate their development process.

The PDC approach is opposed to a situation where outsiders define the information needs of women and how to communicate information to the women. PDC has been proved to facilitate the empowerment of beneficiaries in addition to facilitating them to adopt improved technologies which they make use of for their development. PDC also gives a chance to beneficiaries to actively participate in the communication process while making use of communication technologies they have identified. As part of the strategy, women beneficiaries will be trained in operating different ICTs so that they are enabled to later work in areas of their interest and concern.

1. 'Working in Gender and Development in the Ugandan context' by Mary Ssonko Nabachwa, PhD Student. Full paper can be retrieved from http://www.wougnnet.org/Documents/working_in_Gender_and_Development.doc
2. Participatory Research on Information and Communication Technologies for Poverty Reduction in Apac, Northern Uganda. WOUNET report presented at the Institute@WSIS, 10 December 2003, during the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in Geneva, Switzerland.
3. The villages of Atik, Abedi, Apac, Kungu, Awila, Apoi, Aumi, Agege, Angic, Adyeda, Bar Akalo and Adyang, in Maruzi and Kole counties.
4. ASDI, <http://www.wougnnet.org/Profiles/asdiug.html>.
5. Tusubira, F. F., Kaggwa I., and Ongora J. (2005). "Uganda". In A. Gillward (Ed.), *Towards an African e-Index: Household and Individual ICT Access and Usage across 10 African Countries* (Chapter 11). South Africa: The Link Centre, 2005. Available from: www.researchictafrica.net/modules.php?op=modload&name=News&file=article&sid=504



