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NGOs, ICTs and Information Dissemination in Asia and Oceania

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It can be no accident that there is today no wealthy developed country that is information-poor, and no information-rich country that is poor and underdeveloped.

- Dr Mahathir Mohammed

Introduction

NGOs working in developing countries are engaged in information dissemination at two levels. One is purely informational, the sharing of information within the organisation in order for the organisation to function. The other is more directly developmental: the use of information for sustainable capacity-building initiatives in a range of fields, including education, health, housing and agriculture. Focusing on the situation in Asia and Oceania, this paper looks at the way in which NGOs utilise information, and to some extent ICTs, for sustainable capacity building.

The Questions Asked

It is hypothesised that communication strategies that take into account the social nature of access, recognise the interaction between face-to-face and online communications, and combine Internet use with a broad range of other new and old media provide the best opportunities for sustainable development initiatives through the use of ICT.

To address this hypothesis, we ask a series of questions in the paper: How have NGOs' roles changed in the creation, validation and dissemination of information? What are the barriers to ICT adoption, and how might its potential be realized? What is an appropriate mix of ICT-based information dissemination and traditional print-based information? How do different cultures react when information is accessed remotely rather than face-to-face?

We also ask some potentially embarrassing questions, based primarily on our experience of the development scene in our region. Specifically, how well do NGOs collaborate with one another in sharing development-related information? What are some of the facilitators and barriers to more effective collaboration?

'NGO' Defined

For purposes of this paper we define 'nongovernmental organisation' or NGO as the third sector of development activity, that is, nonstate, nonbusiness, not-for-profit organisations with a global or regional outreach. According to some commentators, these NGOs have themselves developed at a phenomenal rate, especially in the final decades of the 20th century. Salmon, for example, refers to this as a global 'associational revolution' that is '…as significant to the latter twentieth century as the rise of the nation state was to the latter nineteenth century'. (Salmon 1994, 109) Indeed, anyone who spends time in some of the most needful countries in our region, Cambodia as an example, may be forgiven for thinking that NGOs have taken over the world – every vehicle, most office premises and even a number of hotels bear the logo of an NGO, ranging from the genuine heavyweights, to some of the very small organisations engaged in a single project of short duration.

NGOs in Asia-Oceania

These NGOs have evolved in the Asia-Oceania region against a rich backdrop of varied ethnic, economic, political systems (democracy, monarchy, communism, military rule) and indigenous values and philosophical traditions (Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, Islam and Christianity). NGOs were initially established in response to emergency relief provision and welfare services. Over time, this changed, and 'many [NGOs] subsequently moved into increasingly multi-sectoral, development-oriented programmes aimed at promoting the self-reliance [sustainable development] of their disadvantaged target groups'. (ESCAP 1994, 1)

The establishment of telecommunication infrastructures that formed the basis of ICT development in Asia and Oceania was the result of the work of colonial powers and their efforts toward the advancement and perpetuation of their interests. This was later reinforced by national development and the brand of economic development labelled 'globalisation' that is advocated in the 21st century.

From wireless and radio/radio telephone, to the message services of Morse code, cable and telex, to video and TV and satellite communications, the Internet and CD-ROM technology, mobile telephony, with the advent of the ICT revolution, national governments, multilateral agencies, regional development agencies, private corporations as well as nongovernmental organisations have collaborated to assist the development of countries in the Region. Among the notable outcomes of these initiatives are the rapid development of the telecommunications industry and the emergence of new ICT and multimedia industries.

In Asia and Oceania, where country populations range from significantly overpopulated (India, Indonesia) to small isolated islands states with low per capita incomes (Tonga, Tokelau) and with urban populations growing through rural-urban migration, information acquisition and dissemination is, or at least should be, a principal tool of sustainable development for NGOs. In the process of achieving sustainable development utilizing ICTs, NGOs have had to critically examine (1) issues of access (2) the forms of ICT that are relevant and sustainable vis-à-vis local resources and (3) the availability of information and technology skills to sustain any system implemented.

NGOs with a Focus on Women as an Example

The women's movement, amongst others associated with human rights, social justice, reproductive health and gender issues have been a dynamic force in the ICT awareness raising arena by NGOs, through the employment of a dynamic mix of ICT strategies based on technical assistance and advice, supporting community access, sharing best practices, advocating information standards and low-cost technologies and supporting local innovations.

The number of web sites established by women's NGOs and national machinery for the advancement of women has increased rapidly in recent years. Through new information technology, women's organisations are now able to network with one another beyond national boundaries and share information and resources with less expense. Local groups have become part of regional and international group networks, and have strategized networks, thus strengthening their capacity for sustainable institution building.

> For example, of the 83 NGOs which registered in 1999 for a regional high-level intergovernmental meeting to review regional implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action in the Asian and Pacific region, 68 had their own email address, which was used for communication with ESCAP, the meeting organizer. Considering that in 1995, at the time of the Fourth World Conference on Women e-mail communication among the majority of women NGOs in the Asian and Pacific region was virtually non-existent, that number is significant. At the time, of the entire United Nations system, only the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) maintained a server with web and gopher sites. The Beijing Conference was the first UN world conference to actively use on-line information dissemination.' (Horie 2003, 1)

On the other hand, while new information technology has given women the opportunity to share information and interact on a scale that was hard to imagine at the time of the Beijing Conference, in terms of political, economic and social participation women's worldwide presence in this new information technology remains low. Women in developing countries, among other minority groups, are especially challenged in terms of effectively accessing the information highway to reach alternative sources of information.

The Asian Women's Resource Center (AWORC), the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) and Isis International Manila are conducting research which seeks to assess the situation of women's organized groups in Asia, the Central Asian Republics, and the Pacific; their level of ICT use, how ICT is used in their work, and what their training and networking needs are, towards furthering women's empowerment through the use of ICT. For countries in the Central Asian Republics and the Pacific subregions, which are less developed than other subregions in terms of the Internet accessibility for women's organisations in-depth, subregional studies have been conducted to

make situation analysis on the Internet use and access among women's groups. Women's organisation in this research is defined as non-profit and non-government women's groups at grassroots and national levels which work on any aspect of women in development.

In 2001, the Secretariat of the Pacific Community Pacific Women's Bureau, in collaboration with AWORC, conducted the Pacific section of the baseline survey which revealed that within national women's machinery's in the 22 Pacific Island member countries and territories of the Pacific Community, the use of ICT as an advocacy tool by Pacific women in both government and civil society is limited. (Cass and Williams 2002)

Elizabeth Cass, a member of the survey team reported that

> the survey also highlighted a need, outlined by the respondent countries, to provide ICT training in order to improve the use of ICT so that advocacy and networking on gender inequality could be achieved with multi-layered spin-off benefits such as the creation of online networking and proactive use by Pacific women of electronic/online media. The publication assessed the use of ICTs by women's groups in Asia & 8 Pacific Island countries (Federated States of Micronesia, New Caledonia, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Vanuatu & Fiji). The survey found that very few Pacific women's organisations used the Internet as a networking tool and highlighted the need to improve the capacity of women in the Pacific to \make full use of ICT to support their policy & advocacy work. High cost of access, and skills & training were factors that prevented women's groups from using ICTs. Three phases: research, train the trainers and two week online advocacy workshop for Pacific women who meet the selection criteria: i.e./ are in information roles, which can best benefit from ICT technology and share online advocacy through information and innovative use of ICT and content. (Cass, e-mail communication, 2004)

The NGO DAWN (Development Alternatives for Women in a New Era), whose base was in the Pacific from 1998-2002, is composed of women in academia from Africa, Asia, the Pacific and Caribbean. DAWN analyses economic development policies and their implications for women. It has a strong information power base that includes research as a normal part of its activity. DAWN has four themes: the Political Economy of Globalisation; Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights; Political Restructuring and Social Transformation; and Sustainable Livelihoods and Environmental Justice. Its target audience is government and the international arena, and its role is to determine and recommend alternatives for the development of women. The DAWN website is well developed and its links with other online advocacy units through DAWN's association and strategic partnerships with specific development networks and organisations that work on similar issues as DAWN are important to the achievement of the network's goals. These working partnerships, through ICT links, provide a wider outreach for DAWN, and the opportunity of focused impacts. Through such partnerships, DAWN seeks to engender influential development organisations.

The Ecumenical Centre for Advocacy and Research in Fiji (ECREA) and the Pacific Concerns Research Centre obtained funds for an automated integrated library system (Alice for Windows) for their resource centres. This is an excellent example of collaboration between NGOs in terms of funding and personnel expertise. The resource centre is accessible through the website at <http://www.ecrea.org.fj>.

Internet Access and ICTs in the Region

The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in 2003 was an opportunity for government and NGOs, institutions and private and business sector organisations to take stock of ICT development goals. This exercise confirmed the degree to which certain barriers to ICT exist, and the extent to which NGOs are caught behind these barriers.

It must be remembered that in developing countries of Asia and the Pacific Internet access has become available only recently. In the Pacific, for example, the Internet arrived as a viable communications technology in Fiji in 1995, and in Tuvalu in 2000. At present approximately 25 per cent of Pacific islanders have regular access to ICTs, primarily through their workplaces, a few secondary and tertiary educational institutions and a few public centres and Internet cafes. (PIFS 2003, 3)

The number of Internet subscribers ranges from very high (on average 1:5) in Singapore, Hong Kong, Australia, New Zealand, Japan and Niue (where access is free), to very low (1:1000) in countries such as the Solomon Islands. (PIFS 2003,3) Users in only three Pacific countries (Papua New Guinea, Samoa and Tonga) have a choice of ISPs, while users in other Asia-Pacific countries are served by monopoly ISPs. And then there is the matter of control, with Viet Nam as a good example – there the government has recently introduced even stricter controls over what may be accessed on the Internet, and the general public have been enlisted as observers of Internet use. Internet café owners are now required to report any 'suspicious' use of the Internet by their customers (as reported in *Viet Nam News* in June 2004). One could list several other countries where Internet use is heavily proscribed, and where alleged misuse can lead to serious consequences. Whilst NGOs may feel safely outside this net, they may be rather surprised about how much is known of their Internet traffic, and how various government authorities regard them as a result.

ICT development is largely an urban phenomenon. Nearly all Internet users are located in capital cities and a handful of secondary urban areas. In rural Viet Nam, for example the more remote villages often have no electricity, or a very sporadic power supply, and about 40 per cent of the population is without a telephone. In terms of affordability, Pacific islanders as an example typically face connectivity charges that are among the highest in the world. Subscription and usage charges for dial up access to the Internet range from US$3 to US$175 per month, with an average of US$50. (PIFS 2003, 4) On an annual basis this amounts to one quarter to one half of the average annual per capita GDP in many countries and is clearly unaffordable by the majority of people. This scenario differs from region to region.

The price of full-time Internet access via a 64 KBPS leased line varies much more widely than does that of dial-up access, from US$700 to US$5000 per month. (PIFS 2003, 4). These prices are, on average five times higher and range to as much as 20 times higher, than in APEC developing countries. (PIFS 2003,4) Where aid is involved in *access,* many developing countries have problems with continuation of the project. Projects often lock countries into technology and equipment brands that may hinder development.

Institutional use of the Internet in the Pacific falls behind the ASEAN countries but is more in line with the SAARC countries and is slowly catching up with the rest of the world. Nevertheless, it is not uncommon for government departments to lack access to basic e-mail, and to continue to rely exclusively on fax and phone services. As a rule, telecommunication links are poor (e.g. inadequate bandwidth). Whilst the links may exist, the quality and speed

varies throughout the region, and it is these variations that prevent access to and the exchange of information

All of this is exacerbated by an often negative government view of ICT developments, and efforts to hinder these developments. This might include, depending on the country, the deliberate application of outdated regulatory frameworks, or the failure to introduce appropriate legislation guiding ICT developments.

Furthermore, there is a lack of trained personnel with knowledge of ICTs for the organisation and dissemination of information. This also is more applicable to some developing countries in the Asia-Oceania region than others. Viet Nam now has a very energetic and well-trained cadre of computer and ICT professionals, whereas for the Pacific the lack of trained personnel and the migration of such personnel are significant problems - this is equally true of many countries in Southeast and South Asia, such as Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar.

Zwimpfer (1999), commenting on trained personnel, stated that there was a notable change in this arena is the presence of information officers and the like who are responsible for information acquisition, validation and dissemination. Those NGOs fortunate to have donor agency funding are the ones who have been able to include such a position in their structure. This means qualified personnel in information provision which has enhanced the capacity of many NGOs to meet their information and advocacy needs. The awareness of the activities of NGOs has increased hundred fold in developing countries in the last ten years

What we have, then, is a set of pretty effective barriers to more widespread ICT use by NGOs in the region, as well as government departments and the general population. To summarise, these are:

- Urban focus of ICT development
- High cost of access
- Limited bandwidth
- Unreliable/limited electricity supplies
- Lack of trained personnel
- National priorities in other areas of basic need
- Government suspicion of the Internet, and repressive controls

Information Dissemination by NGOs

No one with any experience of NGOs in the Asia Pacific region will doubt that, for the most part, they do an excellent job of disseminating high quality information to their constituents. This can be observed in every field in which NGOs are engaged, from agricultural development to housing, clean water, health care, education and family planning. They recognise the value of information in formats accessible by their constituents and work very hard to provide this information in the form of pamphlets, videos, radio broadcasts, training sessions – whatever is effective in their specific circumstances. In many countries this is the only information available to people, especially in rural and remote areas, and in general it is well received because it has been geared to the literacy and comprehension levels of the local population.

On the other hand, NGOs have an abysmal record when it comes to inter-agency information sharing and dissemination. In most instances with which we are familiar the NGOs working

in the same field and same countries never share information beyond the most superficial level. This applies to the largest UN agencies and the smallest single-issue NGOs. In Viet Nam, as an example, there are several agencies involved in development programmes for children. In some of the largest agencies there is an intensely competitive spirit, which mitigates against any sharing of information. This strikes us as unreasonable and a waste of resources; since these are not commercial enterprises, they should not regard their information as restricted or commercially sensitive, but rather should be sharing in order to strengthen what they do through better quality information that results from cooperation. The smaller organisations often do not share information because, in their view, they lack personnel and cannot afford the time involved in collaboration. The returns of sharing, of course, may include more efficient delivery of services, and therefore a saving in both time and money.

What the NGOs must do is reassess their view of information sharing and come to an understanding that by collaborating with one another there can be significant gains in service delivery without loss of autonomy. This is a key priority for them. And one good source of information to help achieve this priority is Fahamu <http://www.fahamu.org.uk/index.html>, an NGO dedicated to strengthening the work of not-for-profit and other non-governmental organisations through the use of information and communications technologies. Fahamu produces and publishes CD-ROM-based learning materials especially for this sector, designs and manages websites, runs training courses (including online courses), and provides support for Internet-related work.

The Information Mix in NGOs

What the current picture demonstrates in the Asia-Pacific region is a wide diversity in the use and application of ICT initiatives for sustainable development. Whilst for some, access and use of ICT is integral to achieving their development goals and objectives, there are those NGOs for which this is a purely hypothetical issue. In the middle are those who have access and use ICT and are much in need of training, financial assistance, changes in national and regional telecommunications policies, etc. Regardless of the category into which an NGO falls, due consideration and thought needs to be given to this issue and reflected in plans for ICT development of the countries of the Asia-Pacific Region through a set of guidelines.

In discussions on the development of availability of and access to ICTs for NGO information dissemination in the Asia Oceania region, an appropriate mix of ICT and traditional modes of information dissemination must be undertaken in order to fit both the local situation and the information dissemination needs of the NGOs. Based on what we know of NGOs and on our experience in the region, the following are some possible scenarios:

High Level Capability

In this scenario NGOs linked to international networks and donor agencies. There is regular funding with qualified full-time (paid/volunteer) and/or part-time personnel with specialist skills (e.g. research skills and management knowledge of NGOs). ICTs (e-mail and limited Internet) are an accepted part of daily work for database management of office resources, and an organised information resource collection of print and multi-media. Examples in this category are UN-associated NGOs, DAWN and ECREA. *Goal: 50 per cent print-based, 50 per cent ICT-based*

Medium-level ICT Capability

This category applies to many national and local urban-based NGOs that rely on a combination of local and overseas funding. They might use PCs for office management, and have a working collection of print and multimedia materials. There would be a minimum of one full-time, multi-skilled staff member plus a combination of part-time and voluntary workers with ICT and information experience. *Goal: 70 per cent print-based, 30 per cent ICT-based*

Low Level Capability

Here we are looking at totally rural-based informal NGOs operating with voluntary personnel. They may or may not have access to any ICT, and if so this is likely to be shared - e.g. phone and fax. There is a very limited (file and a few pamphlet boxes of handouts brochures) collection of print and multimedia works, if any. *Goal: 80-100 per cent print-based, 20 per cent ICT-based*

The degree of combination of ICT and print resources will affect the attitude of information seekers and users. The reaction of people to the different forms of information disseminated by NGOs will, amongst other issues, be strongly influenced by cultural factors in their preference for face-to face or remote access communication. For the larger sectors of populations in Asia and Oceania ICTs are both daunting and exciting. In some cultural settings the face-to-face can often be more comforting, but this is dependant on the subject of the issue and context in which the information is being accessed or shared. In certain instances, the face-to-face can be culturally uncomfortable, and remote access is the preferred way of dealing with a sensitive or difficult issue at hand. On the other hand, for cultures where the face-to-face may lead to stigma of a sort - e.g. a man seeking counselling for violent tendencies will appreciate the remote access format of advice using audiotape, film and e-mail. An NGO focussing on domestic violence issues is likely to use a combination of the two - remote access to disseminate information generally, combined with face-to-face counselling for greatest effect.

Conclusion

Non-government organisations are vital components in the development process. Their ability to communicate with those whom they serve, national governments and local, regional and international organisations is heavily dependant on their capacity to inform all stakeholders of issues related to their objectives and purpose. ICTs are a means to facilitate this. However, in acknowledging the different levels of development of ICT capability of NGOs the best opportunities for sustainable development initiatives rest with a combination of ICT- and print-based initiatives. The presence of qualified information providers in NGOs is no longer a luxury but an essential part of their personnel needs. For many NGOs this is a reality, for some a dream that could come true and for many not even something that they can dream about. Our responsibility is to try and bring all NGOs onto a level playing field.

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