

African Women and Economic Development: Investing In Our Future
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ICTs as tools of Democratization (Summary)

Introduction

1. The democratisation process in Africa has only just begun and in most cases the full emancipation of citizens is yet to be achieved whilst in others the re-emergence of civil society groups offers new forms of political, economic and social governance. The strengthening of information and communication channels in all countries will become an urgent if not critical ingredient in this process. Evidently, information and communication technologies can support popular participation of citizens, in particular women.

While the principles of freedom of expression have become globalized. Fax, electronic mail, communication satellites have made it impossible for political authorities to deny their citizens access to external information. However, the popular participation of women in key decision-making as full and equal partners with men, particularly in politics and governance, has not yet been achieved.

The interaction between communications and the social wellbeing of African countries will be radically redefined over the next few years. Global economic liberalisation of telecommunications, the rapid deployment in most developing countries of the internet, mobile telephony and other new technologies and the changing political environment are all coinciding to make the last years of the twentieth century a definitive moment in how countries adapt to and exploit these changes. Compared to the industrial revolution that helped one part of the world to develop rapidly while leaving behind others, and bringing benefits of intractable social and environmental problems, the information revolution promises potential advantages for all. At the same time, this revolution has major implications globally for the organization of society, concerning employment, training requirements and human relations in general.

With access to channels of communication, women can express themselves so much more and strongly influence women's contribution to the democratisation process. Undoubtedly ICTs have the capacity to greatly enhance

people's participation in the democratic process in developing countries, and in many instances they are already doing so. However, while providing new opportunities for social and political dialogue, they could also lead to an increasing disenfranchisement of the already marginalised as the gap between the information rich and information poor - those with access to information technologies and those without - widens. Africa in particular is in danger of being left behind. Yet a society's ability to develop is determined by its ability to access information, so that information and access to information technologies are no longer a luxury, but a human need and - by inference - a basic human right.

The effectiveness of government policies to a large extent will determine who eventually gains access to ICT resources in many countries. In South Africa, widespread competition in the Internet market led to low prices and a rapid diffusion of services. In Ethiopia for example, those favouring privatization as a means to generate greater accessibility to information say government monopoly over Internet services is incompatible with moves to spread Internet-use.

The Study: ICTs as tools for democratization for African women

This study provides an overview of the democratisation process and the emergence of civil society in Africa, outlining the level of participation of women in the electoral process so far. It further provides insights, glimpses and examples of how ICTs are being used throughout the continent for empowering women and the links with women's rights.

New technologies have characteristics similar to those of the alternative media, and suited to the needs of women's networks because of their decentralized and horizontal nature. The essential difference from the mainstream media is their relation to space. The challenge facing women is to maintain the Internet as an open communication system with democratic access to information and not as a centrally controlled medium. For women's organizations, this may mean establishing and defining their own spaces or influencing the character of on-line culture in favour of gender balance and non-discrimination.

The study also examines the potential of the new information and communication technologies for the advancement of women and illustrates how networking, research, training, sharing of ideas and information have been made infinitely easier through relatively affordable computer-mediated communications such as E-mail, Internet, hypertext and hypermedia.

Case Studies

There are several case studies illustrating the application of ICTs, one of which follows:

* The Community of Living Water, an organization based in the Western Cape in South Africa works with the "Masizakhe" (meaning 'building together') group of women in Kayamandi. The purpose of the project was to support women's organic gardening activities. ICTs were used in two ways: to deliver information on organic

gardening techniques and resources, and to teach English language skills via CD-ROM. Two web sites in particular were used by the group - one at Ohio University, and the Life magazine Gardening Encyclopedia. Reading skills, initially developed by use of CD-ROMs, were supplemented by adult education information found over the Internet. This use in fact sparked a community initiative to donate used clothing to finance the women's enrollment in additional adult education courses available on the local network, SangoNet. The use of ICTs for adult education in South Africa provides a useful reference point for other women's groups on the continent.

There are a number of problems associated with the use of ICTs in Africa. These are:

- i) the small number of potential users having both the skills and equipment to benefit from access to electronic information networks;
- ii) the scarcity and high costs of equipment, software and information compared to situations in the North;
- iii) lack of reliable and accessible physical telecommunications infrastructure;
- iv) telecommunications monopoly, associated with overly restrictive regulations and high costs,
- v) lack of interregional networking and cooperation,
- vi) Lack of awareness and limited political will by governments.

Despite these difficulties, women's access to ICTs continues unabated. For instance, groups such as Abantu for Development, SangoNet, ENDA and the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) have been conducting training for women's groups. APC has supported or established networks for women in Africa as well as in Asia and Latin America, targeted at key actors in the development process.

In the APC Women's Networking survey, a Kenyan woman commented specifically on her experience at an APC training session in South Africa and wrote: "My experience with e-mail was very basic. The workshop enabled me to articulate a proposal for increasing connectivity among adult educators on the continent and amongst members. It gave me enough knowledge of e-mail to be able to train other people in basic elements of e-mail. As a result, we held a workshop and connected a number of organisations".

A woman in South Africa, recently working on a campaign for women's reproductive and health rights, posted a message to the APC Africa Women mailing list concerning campaigns and information from other African countries. Women from two other African countries responded with information on precedent legislation, which could help the advocacy campaign in South Africa. In another case, a Senegalese woman, unable to find data locally on the number of women Ministers in African governments, contacted the international APC women's network through its mailing list. A woman in Geneva with access to UN agency information was able to fax relevant information to Senegal, so that her colleague was able to use this information to support advocacy concerning women's participation in African governments.

Current training initiatives in different parts of the continent should continue to overcome the difficulties of weak

infrastructure and actively promote training further afield into rural areas, finding ways and means of interfacing new and old media technologies for women who have no access to computers or electricity.

The study concludes with recommendations that enhance the use of ICTs by the main actor in society, namely, governments, women's groups and international organisations. The momentum already gathered through the examples given in this study will gradually coalesce into a critical mass, which will accelerate the pace of the information revolution for African women.