

## Information and Communication Technologies

# ICTs: Giving ACP youth a voice

*For the first time in the recent history of rural development there is a possibility of creating an infrastructure that dramatically reduces the isolation of rural life. Although ICTs may seem a fragile basis on which to build far-reaching change, a meeting organized by CTA showed that they can speed up the exchange of knowledge and ideas between urban centres and rural communities. In countries struggling to maintain basic amenities, it is the towns that interface most closely with global society. Experiences from ACP countries confirm the strategic role ICTs can play in linking rural youth with the rapidly changing realities of modern life.*

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Many village youngsters in ACP countries (ACP: Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific) would recognize and identify with the experiences of personal deprivation and powerlessness described during the Observatory meeting organized by the Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Cooperation (CTA) in September 2004 in the Netherlands. Young people have become increasingly reluctant to commit themselves to agriculture and rural life because they see it as hard and lonely work, offering unpredictable rewards and few opportunities for education, healthcare and leisure. These attitudes and the resulting demographic shifts pose a serious threat to ACP countries whose economies are linked to the productivity of their agricultural sector.

Those attending the Observatory had experience in integrating Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) into their organizational strategies and programmes to benefit rural youth. While the problems of rural youth differ in many ways from those of their urban peers, both groups have much in common. They all belong to a generation whose future is being shaped by globalization, a process which has stimulated curiosity and created new ambitions. ICTs have already played an important role in this process and nowhere is this clearer than at the interface of urban and rural life. Mobile

phones, emails, and on-line forums and programmes not only reinforce local and global interconnectivity, they also enable governmental and non-governmental organizations to provide – via «www» and complementary technologies – distance learning, lifestyle support and counselling, healthcare, social contacts, and commercial and administrative information as well as much appreciated leisure opportunities.

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## ICTs: from campus to farm

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Considerable thought and skill are required to identify those ICTs or combination of ICTs that are most suitable for local situations and problems. To reach farmers in rural Kenya, for example, the Nairobi University Agricultural Students Union (NUASU) uses a combination of internet, radio, and mobile phone to reach farmers in the rural areas and facilitate its agricultural outreach and extension programme.

Ten years ago, Michael Muriuki Waigwa, the president of NUASU used to walk six kilometres every day to and from school, spend long hours searching for firewood and water and, together with his family, regularly went without food when drought destroyed their harvest. Today, he and his fellow students use ICTs to bridge the rural-urban divide and ensure that agricultural information gets to those who need it most.

This is an enormous achievement. Village children are particularly vulnerable to imbalances in the distribution of communication technologies. They are less exposed to modern technology than their urban counterparts, they learn their science from books (if they are lucky) and they are unlikely to watch television or touch a computer keyboard.

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## Working on literacy

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In ACP countries much still needs to be done at the education and training level to create a technically literate generation able to use, manage and maintain ICTs. In

### CTA and its mandate for Youth

CTA's mandate is to improve access to agricultural information and support ICM capacity building amongst rural organizations in ACP countries. Among the themes currently defining the context of CTA's work are Youth and ICTs.

In September 2004, CTA's ICT Observatory meeting on Giving Youth a Voice inventoried how ICTs were being used in the interests of rural youth. Additional documentation on the ICT Observatory on Giving Youth a Voice, September 2004 (and contacts) can be found on the CTA website [www.cta.int](http://www.cta.int). A report on this meeting has been published – in English and in French – in the CTA «highlights» series.

the absence of widespread government intervention and support, many NGOs and civil society organizations have tried to fill this gap. In South Africa, for example, Operation Fikelela has developed a programme to tackle the livelihood problems of young people by providing them with the skills they need to use ICTs for educational, employment, and problem solving purposes. Like many other organizations whose activities are built around ICTs, Operation Fikelela is run by young volunteers who operate a successful computer lab consisting of ten refurbished computers run on open-source Linux software. In the lab young people learn to become computer literate and use internet resources and e-correspondence to prepare for and find work. The connectivity provided by the net also allows them to access e-learning opportunities and study in a flexible and affordable way. The success and sustainability of the project has encouraged the supporting NGO Ikamva Youth to set up similar learning centres for impoverished rural youth throughout the Eastern Cape.

### Mobile infrastructure

Creative ways are also being found to deal with the basic lack of ICT infrastructure in the rural areas of ACP countries. In Jamaica, the Container Project has succeeded in bringing the infrastructure available in the towns into the countryside by setting up a highly mobile and self-contained facility with computer terminals and other multimedia equipment. The project aims to stimulate the development of local resource centres and provide training for those living in remote areas. At the moment 70 percent of those using the Container are young people between the ages of 13 and 30 years.

### Rural-urban dialogue

The connectivity provided by ICTs can help young people develop the social insight and skills they need to articulate their problems and concerns. The St Francis Community in Guyana has recently established an internet café to enable young people to discuss the problems faced by their communities as well as their own personal difficulties with their peers elsewhere in the region. The aim is to provide young people with the tools they need to protect themselves against drug abuse and sexual trafficking. The programme also tries to encourage them to place their personal experiences in the wider context of ongoing advocacy dialogue and debates.

Similarly Yam Pukri, in Burkina Faso, uses a mixture of conventional and digital communication to create an internet-based forum where young people can freely discuss their problems and concerns. Already sufficient information has been collected on the status of child labour to support demands for protecting children's rights.

### Improving rural livelihoods

Experience shows that when opportunities become available, young people are quick to integrate ICTs into their livelihood strategies. Training capable young people in the skills needed to manage and use ICTs not only empowers them but also directly benefits their local communities. Combinations of internet and mobile phones, for example, enable the downloading of information on health matters,



Photo: GlobalAware

Via Internet rural areas even in the Sahara are connected to the «modern world».

agricultural prices, loans, weather conditions and government and administrative regulations from the web for further dissemination via mobile phone or radio. Africa Network for Health Knowledge Management and Communication, for example, uses educated, computer literate but unemployed youth as «knowledge brokers». As «brokers» they support rural health workers by helping them access advice via the internet from larger medical centres, create databases of patients' records and search the web for the latest information on specific diseases and treatments.

### Responsible citizenship

The CTA Observatory on youth and ICTs concluded with the presentation of a series of recommendations to ACP-EU

ambassadors and policy makers at a specially arranged meeting in Brussels. Arguing that rural youth have limited options to actively seek and share information and to communicate with others because of the isolation and material poverty of their communities, Observatory delegates recommended that there should be clear policies and regulations to ensure affordable access to and use of ICTs.

As the experiences presented during the Observatory had shown, one of the advantages of ICTs was that they made it possible to make more intensive use of the knowledge and resources already existing within a society. They also enable and intensify the diffusion of information and the transfer of knowledge between peer groups and generations and bridge the urban and rural divide.

In the context of the needs of rural youth in ACP countries, ICT technologies have an important role to play in helping young people acquire the technical and commercial skills they need to develop secure livelihoods and maintain their personal health as well as the health of their environment. ICTs are synonymous with the interconnectivity that characterizes globalization and, if well mediated and adapted, have

the potential to take young people beyond the boundaries of their communities and bring them into contact with their urban peers – young people with similar problems, ambitions and interests to their own. For a generation caught in the potentials and problems of increasingly rapid social, economic and environmental change, the stimulation and facilitation of such information-rich dialogue is essential.

Despite local successes, however, the full integration of ICTs into rural youth policy has been constrained not by the demands of the technologies themselves but by the reticence of policy makers and planners to capitalize on the opportunities for harnessing the technologies to advance the interaction of rural youth in the wider society. Many are not aware of the benefits they can bring to marginalized groups such as rural youth. In this respect, the connectivity that ICTs facilitate between peers is an important part of the process of enabling young people to articulate their concerns and needs and get their voices heard in civil affairs and policy making processes.