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Using New Communication Technologies
To Improve The Status Of Women

By

Santhini Jayawardena
USING NEW COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES TO IMPROVE THE STATUS OF WOMEN

by Santhini Jayawardena
Intermediate Technology Sri Lanka

How do new communication technologies relate to Intermediate Technology? Are they two contradictory concepts which are mutually exclusive? What does Intermediate Technology have to do with women? What does Intermediate Technology mean anyway?

Intermediate Technology (IT) focuses on the role technology plays in development and supports local initiatives that promote sustainability and self reliance. It does not advocate a return to traditional society. It tries to show that there are alternatives. Our strength is technology. But our approach to technology and technology development needs some explanation.

IT's definition of technology is not confined to hardware: it takes into account skills, processes and relationships of production. IT helps small producers develop technological solutions to the problems of daily life. Securing the benefits of technical change, we believe, is about people and how they choose, use and control technology.

Development activities of the state and the private sector more often than not ignore the needs, wants and capabilities of a large number of people. Among these people (who are frequently defined as disadvantaged groups) women tend to be even more disadvantaged.

In the process of prioritising national development objectives, a large number of people become invisible and often, the implementation of development activities just makes them more vulnerable. Developments in science and technology reinforce this situation. This is inequitable and unjust and in the long term simply not sustainable.

Intermediate Technology (IT) tries to use technology to reduce the vulnerability of people. Even though our strength is technology, we are primarily a development organisation. We work in multidisciplinary teams and we work closely with small producers, the users of technologies, and organisations that represent them.

There are no universally appropriate technical solutions. Different circumstances exist in different communities and call for different forms of technology. To make informed choices, people - both men and women - need to understand their options, and to know what is possible, and choose what suits them best. We recognise that the impact of technology on women and on men is different and try to identify key differences between the (changing) roles and needs of women and men when designing technology.

IT’s strength is its capacity to innovate. The way we are organised and the kind of people we have in the organisation stimulate creativity. IT Sri Lanka (ITSL) is an unusual organisation also because we are predominantly women - seventy percent of the staff are women. This ratio extends quite definitely and positively to the senior management team.
Because we believe that our efforts are part of a wider context in which there are numerous other actors, we have recognised that we cannot and should not work in isolation. We have close links with other NGOs, with the universities and research institutions, with government - both central and decentralised administrations - and with selected private sector organisations.

We have learnt from the experiences of these organisations. And we attempt to influence organisations and people to adopt approaches to development which we believe will "reduce the vulnerability of small producers and their communities".

IT, the organisation, which is now in its third decade recognises that sharing "messages" most effectively often means resorting to the use of new communication technologies - technologies which cannot by any means be described as intermediate. If "resorting" implies a certain reluctance on the part of the organisation to compromise on what may be considered its "intermediate" principles, this certainly isn't the case.

Our work underscores the need to inform, influence and inspire people. Not just people who may be described as beneficiaries but also - often more importantly - development workers, bureaucrats, policy makers and even the private sector.

In addition to using more conventional communication methods like interpersonal and group discussions, radio, posters, and newspapers IT is committed to using new communication technologies - like e-mail, computer databases and video - to achieve its objectives.

IT drew up an international communications strategy this year that included a high component of work within what could be defined as new communication technologies. While part of the strategy was aimed at improving our Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (PME) system, the main thrust of the Strategy was about making our communications work more effective.

NETWORKING

Our activities are increasingly networked. This helps us transcend local project experience and exercise considerable leverage in the policy arena, with minimal investment. We have recognised that an effective way to influence development is through participation in networks or forums locally, nationally and internationally. This facilitates the useful sharing of information and prevents the wasteful duplication of work.

IT offices - in Bangladesh, Kenya, Peru, Sri Lanka, Sudan, U.K. and Zimbabwe - are setting up internal local area networks. A remote area network connecting all offices is being created through a dedicated Internet node which has just been set up in IT Peru. The ITDG documentation database will be located on the node.

ITSL today has three technology programmes - Energy, Agro-processing and Rural Transport. The Research and Policy and Communications Programmes enhance our capacity to be a "learning organisation". By this we mean identifying the needs to which we can be responsive, synthesising the experience of our village based projects, redirecting our efforts so that they can be more effective, and sharing our experiences with a wider audience.
The Communications Team comprises a coordinator, two project managers and a communications assistant. We work with several freelance producers and consultants. Documentation work involves maintaining a library, and computer databases on relevant subjects. Making links with information centres both nationally and internationally has been greatly facilitated by the use of e-mail.

VIDEO

Video facilities in ITSL includes a high-8 camera, a VHS vcr and monitor. Most of our productions have involved hiring independent production companies with which the communication team works closely.

Video has definite advantages: visual impact, intimacy, immediacy, and the facility to pause and review. But it very rarely works on its own and needs to be part of a larger communications package i.e. part of a communications strategy.

Video is being used by IT for distinct purposes and audiences.

- Routes\(^1\), a documentary on rural transport needs was produced to influence transport planners to look beyond the general perception of transport problems of urban people and to look more closely at the transport needs of rural people - including the particular needs of women.

To most planners and experts transport is associated with buses, trains, ports, airports and the development of highways. The needs of the 70% of Sri Lankans people who live outside Colombo in scattered households in remote and scattered village communities are peripheral. What are their needs for mobility and access? How do their children get to school? How do women mill their rice and collect water?

The video documentary supplemented a study that IT carried out in collaboration with two universities and the Transport Studies and Planning Centre.

The strategy adopted by IT to influence transport policy makers has resulted in an assurance that rural transport issues will be included in the National Policy Paper on transport.

- IT recently collaborated in the production of a video documentary on women’s involvement in the development of low income squatter settlements\(^2\). This was an extension of a series of (training) video programmes meant specifically to guide project officers to run community workshops to achieve maximum participation, and sustainability in development initiatives.

The programme describes the difference women can make when they are involved in a real way in decision making on the development of their settlements.

- IT encourages its staff to carry out consultancies for organisations with similar objectives (a maximum of twenty days a year is recommended). This made it possible for me to direct a documentary on the inequities of women in the estate sector of the country. Plucking Pays\(^3\) was produced by the Network of Sri Lankan Women Professionals on Women in Rural Development. It was an attempt to influence estate management companies to comply with the recently enforced legal requirement to pay the salaries of women workers to the women themselves.
A significant seventy per cent of the women did not collect their salaries themselves. The women's network had, in fact, been instrumental in "forcing" the Employer's Federation to send the directive to the estate management companies requesting their immediate compliance. However, the estate management companies did not take it seriously.

The video was part of a larger campaign run by the network to coincide with International Women's Day.

- Shelling and cleaning cashew nuts - the most difficult, painstaking and monotonous activity of cashew processing - is considered a woman's job. Thousands of women make a living on it. Women who engage in processing for a long period of time develop physical ailments like chronic back ache.

Access to information on technology and markets is limited and women are dependent on the dictates of middlemen.

A documentary on women cashew processors is presently being produced to describe initiatives women have taken to improve their negotiating power - through organising themselves, accessing credit, and by using technologies that add value to their produce.

The video will share the experiences of a group of women cashew processors with other women processors and community organisations.

- A five-minute video titled *Burning Dreams* on the problems of open hearths for cooking and the benefits of improved clay stoves was produced for the Beijing conference. The video expresses the views of women potters who want women scientists and technologists to think about problems faced by rural women when they plan research projects.

- The Once and Future Pavilion at the Beijing NGO Forum was video taped by Chinthu Munasinghe of our communications team and the "footage" offered to a national television station which produced a post Beijing programme.

- ITSL maintains a close relationship with producers in Rupavahini - the national television station with the widest coverage. *Ruwamara* - the women's (alternative) weekly programme recently featured the story of Karunawathi, a woman from the dry zone, who uses a bicycle trailer. The bicycle trailer is now modified to suit the needs of women.

- Priyanthi Fernando, our Director (a woman), was interviewed by Rupavahini on her views on Beijing.

Internationally, IT conducted a research project on women's technical and scientific knowledge and innovative skills. This project was called 'Do-it-Herself'. The project began with 22 case studies from Asia, Africa and Latin America and highlighted the technical knowledge and skills that are employed every day by rural women and the ways in which the skills are used. Technologies are continually innovated and adapted in response to the difficulties that disproportionately affect the lives of the poor.

The project translated its research work visually into a poster/photo-exhibition and a series of radio dramas. A series of television programmes for general audiences are also being produced: *Pain, Passion*
and Profit has already been broadcast on national television in Britain and screened at dozens of workshops. Science for Survival is another documentary which deals with similar themes: bio-diversity, indigenous farming, women's knowledge and women's technology. Vandana Shiva describes the managerial, economic and scientific skills of rural Indian women as a recognition by women of diversity and complexity.

Using the audio-visual resources available a training pack for use by local NGOs is being produced. The package will improve the capability of field workers (both women and men) to recognise and work with women's technical skills and, through this, to enhance women's technical capacity.

CONCLUSIONS

IT makes a conscious attempt to portray the "real" situation of women and men, to define and describe their needs and changing roles, to understand the social structures and relationships that maintain people in conditions of poverty, and to communicate these issues to people who are in positions to do something about it.

We have recognised that video can be used as part of a communications campaign or package to influence or inspire a wide range of very specific audiences. Video can help improve the effectiveness or impact of influence strategies.

It is critical for an organisation which is technology oriented to be particularly sensitive to gender issues. We try to exploit our ability to influence people in a more subtle or subversive way than for example more overtly activist women's organisations.

In addition, the fact that IT, which is considered more a technology rather than a women's organisation, is sensitive to gender issues has had a positive influence on the work of partner organisations - both NGO and government.

We recognise that most communities and community organisations have considerable information needs but limited resources to locate and access such information. Organisations like IT therefore need to make use of their access to new information technologies to facilitate information flows more widely.

We also need to facilitate the sharing of information between communities. No less important is the conveying of messages from communities to government officials and political actors who may be forced to recognise the economic and political implications of listening to what people say.

As an Economist, E.F. Schumacher the founder of IT, saw the relationship between technology and economics:

*the main content of politics is economics, and the main content of economics is technology.*

As a humanist, he recognised the important link between technology and social change:
I know no better way of changing the system than putting into the world a new type of technology - technologies by which 'small' people can make themselves productive and relatively independent.

Putting into the world a new type of technology requires communication: whether through conventional or new information technologies. We have recognised the benefits of using new information technologies for sharing information with a larger number of people. This we believe can help make people relatively independent.

1. *Routes* was produced with Focus, a private video production company. The script was written by a member of the Communications team.


3. Produced with Focus productions for the Network of Sri Lankan Women Professionals on Women in Rural Development.

4. Produced with Focus Productions.

5. This was shot by a member of the communications team using a Hi-8 camera and edited and directed by women freelances.