

"COMMUNICATING WITH THE RURAL POOR: DOES INFORMATION MAKE A DIFFERENCE?"

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SUMMARY

Non-aligned nations, struggling to gain control of their communication resources from the undue outside influence of the free flow of information, have declared their intention of devoting these resources to reaching national development goals that include equity and rural development. The U.S. government, the World Bank and a number of other aid giving institutions have given priority to assistance to the poor majority in Third World countries. One approach that is increasingly popular among nations to achieve a better result in this effort is to create a mix of physical and information resource inputs for rural development.

1. Assumptions: Some assumptions behind this approach are that putting more emphasis on information will; be more equitable because information is not a physical good with zero-sum qualities; that investment in information may be less costly than in physical resources; that information projects are easier to implement than others; that rural development is primarily a technical problem to which information can be directed for a technical solution; and that information can create significant change in poor rural areas. All of these assumptions are critically examined for their questionable basis in empirical evidence.

2. Information Environments: there are a number of studies that touch on the information environment of the rural poor but there has been no comprehensive study of this. From a variety of sources, we may conclude that the rural poor are isolated from much useful information by a series of filters: thus they are often physically isolated, illiterate, perhaps not speaking the dominant language, without media access (even radio) and suspicious of information coming from a government long negligent of their needs.

Constraints: The main constraints facing information projects are both external and internal. The external ones are the isolation of the poor themselves, the structural limitations to applying appropriate information, the credibility gap between government and the poor. Those internal to projects include the lack of leadership for the poor constituency, lack of planning capacity, the limitations of large government bureaucracies, appropriate learning/teaching strategies, trained people and existing local level organizations through which the poor can participate.

Impact: There is some empirical evidence that information can make a positive contribution in the areas of agricultural productivity, health and nutritional practices and nonformal adult education. Although there is some positive evidence that a trade-off between resource and information investment, much of this evidence has not been tested on a large scale for the rural poor.

Policy Alternatives: With some political and administrative preconditions (political commitment, critical mass, participation of audiences, integrated development approach). A mix of information and resource investment for the rural poor may be of benefit to the poor majority in Third World countries.