

THE CHALLENGE OF ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATIONS ON DEVELOPMENT

Information and communications have always been crucial to development. People's abilities to manage their lives, protect their families, seize opportunities and prosper have always depended on the extent to which they can gain and apply knowledge, share experience, seek help and advice, voice their opinions and influence decisions that affect them.

Development agencies have long been concerned to improve people's ability to learn from one another, share ideas and experience, and use information and communications media for campaigning and empowerment.

In the last decade or so, new information and communications technologies (ICTs) have added considerably to the resources that people use for information and communications. These include many different resources in broadcasting, telecommunications, the internet and information technology. Some – such as community radio and mobile telephony – have achieved extensive reach in developing countries; others – such as the internet – are not yet widely distributed.

Almost everyone agrees that information, communication and ICTs have the potential to improve people's lives, including the lives of the poor, and can contribute to poverty reduction and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Much of our experience with ICTs, however, is very recent. There is therefore much uncertainty about their impact on the ground, and about the best ways for development actors to unlock their potential.

The Building Communication Opportunities (BCO) Alliance is a partnership of nine diverse agencies working in information and communications for development (ICD), including donors and NGOs concerned with policy development and project implementation. It was formed in 2004 to help its partners work more effectively and creatively with media and ICTs, and to investigate the impact they are having on the lives of the poor with whom they work.

This briefing summarises the work which BCO partners have undertaken to assess the impact of ICTs. It is intended for development professionals and others who are concerned about their potential and the challenges involved in working with information and communications media. It identifies key challenges and draws on four investigations undertaken by BCO in 2007-2008. These were concerned with:

- The impact of radio on social and political change
- The impact of information and communications on markets and the poor
- The impact of information and communications networking
- The challenge of impact assessment itself in information and communications work.

The briefing also draws conclusions from BCO partners' work and makes recommendations for development actors concerned with information and communications in development.



building communication opportunities

Summary and recommendations

Information, communication and ICTs are important issues in today's development agenda. Development agencies now pay more attention to the role of media, information and communication resources in promoting good governance, empowering communities, reducing poverty and meeting the MDGs.

Although donor interest in ICTs may have diminished since the end of the World Summit on the Information Society, technologies such as radio, television and mobile telephony continue to extend their reach throughout developing countries. The poor make use of them to improve their quality of life and opportunities. Changes are happening as a result in the way that people access information, resources and finance. The internet, too, is now reaching deeper into developing countries – more rapidly in Asia and South America, more gradually in Africa.

The BCO partnership is made up of a number of agencies with experience in ICD. BCO partners believe their experiences, and those of other ICD agencies, show that the impact of new communications resources and technologies – including community radio and mobile telephony – is significant. They believe it will grow as ICTs become cheaper and more widespread. ICTs represent an important new factor in the development environment, and offer new tools for achieving development objectives. They merit continued and growing interest and engagement from both donor and implementing agencies – and partnership between them to develop better understanding and involvement.

Strengthening the evidence base

The evidence base in this area of development is, however, weak. There is substantial evidence, dating back many years, concerning the value of information, communications and knowledge for development, and the relationship between the poor, information intermediaries and empowerment. However, much

has changed in recent years in the style, content and availability of communications media. In particular, liberalisation of media ownership and the advent of local and community radio have enabled new types of interaction between broadcasters and their listeners/viewers. We need to know more about the impact which is being achieved by different types of broadcast content, especially more interactive media.

The weakness of the evidence base is greater still where newer ICTs are concerned, particularly mobile telephony (now widespread in developing countries) and the internet (which is as yet less well distributed). The exceptional growth in mobile telephony in recent years has enabled people to interact much more effectively at a distance, impacting on family relationships and social and political organisation. It is beginning to have an impact, too, on financial relations, and is increasingly expected to provide the platform through which internet services will reach most people in developing countries. All these factors suggest the need for more attention to be paid to the potential impact of new ICTs.

A joint responsibility

Much of the literature in this field is disappointingly shallow, rooted in aspirations rather than hard evidence. This is not surprising, as the resources and technologies concerned are relatively new. However, much can and should be done to improve the evidence base. BCO partners believe that all who are concerned about ICD should focus more on the real impacts (positive and negative) which have resulted from media and ICTs to date – both those attributable to their increased use within society and those achieved through development initiatives that make use of them. More rigorous assessment can help us learn, from experience, whether and where ICTs have been more or less effective in promoting development goals, empowerment and the inclusion of the poor.

The BCO impact assessment which is summarised in this briefing has been a challenging but valuable exercise for BCO partners. It has helped them identify a number of areas in which well-planned and inclusive use of information, communications and ICTs has facilitated success (and also areas in which it has been less successful). It has also enabled them to review their evaluation and impact assessment practice, identifying areas in which this could contribute more to the global evidence base and the improvement of their future work.

All development actors – donors and implementing agencies – have an interest in and responsibility to contribute to experience-sharing in this area. BCO partners believe that they should work together to build a more rigorous approach to impact assessment that suits the particular circumstances of this rapidly changing development field.

Understanding ICT deployment

The difficulties associated with impact assessment in this field are considerable, but illustrate the importance of learning from experience in order to improve the quality of future work. BCO partners believe that impact assessment in this context should not be about “proving the case” for ICTs but about understanding how they can be most effectively deployed.

Two areas of rethinking may be required by development actors concerned with ICD in order to build more effective joint working in this area.

- Instrumentality and empowerment: Distinguishing more clearly between instrumental initiatives (such as those concerned with mainstreaming ICTs in development programmes) and those which focus on empowerment, policy change and the intrinsic value to the poor of communications

access and resources. ICTs offer developmental gains in both areas, but the value – and the ways in which impact is achieved – are different.

- ICTs in context: Developing more rigorous impact assessment tools which will increase understanding derived from experience – in particular concerning the relationship between ICTs and their context. This will help development actors to anticipate more clearly the lasting and sustainable changes that are likely to result from the widespread availability of ICTs within society, and from development work that builds on this.

Communications as a development objective

Lastly, BCO agencies believe that those concerned with information and communications in development should look at communications itself, as a development objective in its own right, as well as at its relationship with mainstream development goals. They believe, for example, that ICD work should not be judged on the basis of its contribution to the MDGs alone, but also that of its wider contribution to empowerment and social change. BCO partners will continue to explore these issues in collaboration in the future.

Information, communications and development: The impact challenge

Information, communications and ICTs interact with the lives of the poor, and with development initiatives, in many different ways. Some rely on governments, businesses and civil society to be effective. But many of the ways in which information and communications affect the lives of the poor depend on whether they have the opportunity to use them and on how they choose to do so.

This briefing summarises the outcomes of work on the impact assessment of information and communications in development, which was undertaken by the Building Communication Opportunities (BCO) Alliance in 2007-2008. BCO partners work with communities around the world to maximise the contribution which information and communications make to their lives. Their work includes:

- Promoting affordable access to information and communication resources.
- Supporting the use of information technology to improve service delivery.
- Promoting community engagement in developing health, educational, small business and other applications.
- Encouraging press and radio freedom and building the expertise of journalists and media professionals.
- Supporting initiatives that use information media to empower the poor.
- Advocating policy changes that help achieve these objectives at national and local levels.

Advances

The last decade has seen remarkable change in the information and communication environment in developing countries. Most households now have access to broadcast radio, and in many countries broadcasting reform has greatly increased the diversity of information and opinion in broadcast content. Communities worldwide are seeing services improved through telecommunications, computing and the internet – the last of which also offers access to previously unavailable information resources. Mobile phones have made telephony accessible for the first time to most people in developing countries, including the poor, enabling them to maintain family relationships, obtain help in times of crisis and take advantage of new opportunities. Communications resources are becoming more available to the poor and contributing to their efforts to overcome their poverty.

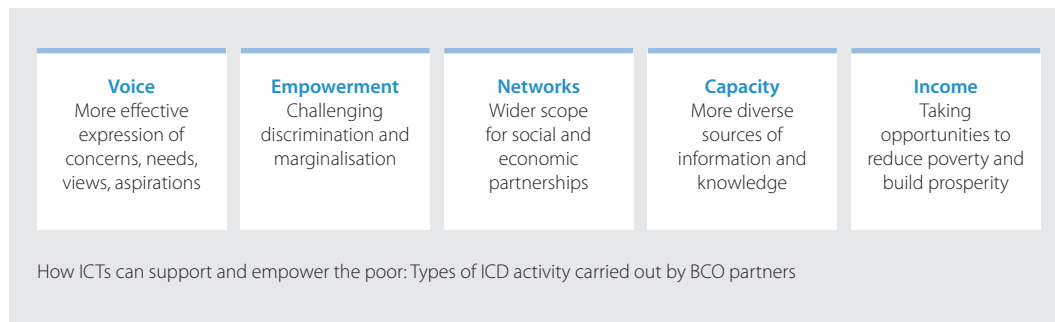
Development engagement

There has been much discussion about ICD amongst development agencies in recent years, culminating in two meetings of the World Summit on the Information Society, held in 2003 and 2005.

Some development agencies have invested substantially in policy and capacity-building interventions to promote access to ICTs and improve management of e-government and other information technology initiatives. Others have concentrated on “mainstreaming” ICTs in development: facilitating applications

that use ICTs to achieve established development goals, including the MDGs, in other sectors such as agriculture, health and education. Infrastructure, however, has been almost wholly financed by the private sector.

BCO agencies have been involved in both policy and instrumental initiatives concerned with ICTs, emphasising ways in which these can support and empower the poor. One way of categorising these interventions is shown in this diagram.



The evidence base

The evidence base of the impact of ICTs is still weak because most experience is recent and many ICT initiatives have been experimental pilots.

Although there is a growing body of experience in using media and ICTs for development, the evidence base around this is still weak. This is largely because most experience is recent, while many ICT initiatives have been pilot projects which have experimented with different methodologies. As a result, there remains much disagreement, particularly between advocates of ICTs for development (ICT4D) and those who are more sceptical. Some falling-off in interest in ICT4D has been observed since the end of the World Summit on the Information Society process in 2005.

BCO partners believe that information, communications and ICTs have real value in development and can make a substantial difference to the poor. However, they also recognise that some claims made for ICTs during the past decade have been exaggerated and led to uncertainty on the part of donors and mainstream development actors.

BCO believes it is important – for both development actors and the poor with whom they work – that debates about media, communications and ICTs should identify how information and communications resources can be used most effectively to achieve lasting and sustainable improvements in people’s lives. They believe this requires an open-minded approach, better understanding of the ways in which people use information and communications resources, and more effective assessment of the impact of experiences which have been completed and are underway. They hope this briefing will contribute to that approach.

More debate is needed about how information and communications resources are best deployed. This requires:

- An open-minded approach
- Learning how people really use the tools
- More effective assessment of past and current experiences.

ICD: Impact assessment

Impact assessment has been described as “the systematic analysis of the lasting or significant changes – positive or negative, intended or not – in people’s lives brought about by a given action or series of actions.”¹

Purpose

Its purpose is essentially threefold:

- To identify what changes have occurred in people’s lives following a development intervention.
- To understand how far these can be attributed to that intervention.
- To learn from this so as to improve future practice.

BCO partners have been concerned with the need to improve impact assessment of ICD initiatives, to build a better evidence base of experience, and to enable more effective use of resources and technologies in future. This aim was addressed in one of four studies commissioned through the BCO impact assessment, some of whose conclusions are summarised here.

Challenges

It is never easy to assess the impact of development interventions. In particular:

- The social, economic and political environment in which initiatives take place is often in a state of flux, dependent on factors outside the intervention itself.
- Development initiatives rarely take place in isolation, and are usually affected by other interventions addressing the lives of the poor.
- The data required to establish benchmarks for assessing change are often unreliable or absent.

1 Chris Roche, *Impact Assessment for Development Agencies*, Oxfam/Novib, 1999.

- It is difficult, and sometimes ethically challenging, to compare the experience of an initiative’s target groups with that in other communities.

Lasting and sustainable change – or impact – only becomes clear some time after an intervention is concluded, while development actors need to learn lessons quickly if they are to improve their practice.

Impact assessment and evaluation

Evaluation assesses the outcomes of stated objectives. Impact assessment looks at intended and unintended outcomes. It also considers the changes to both beneficiaries and other groups affected.

There is sometimes confusion between impact assessment and evaluation. Evaluation, commonly built into the design of development programmes, assesses an intervention’s outcomes against its stated objectives. Impact assessment is more wide-ranging, concerned with lasting changes that can be attributed to an initiative *whether or not* they formed part of its objectives. It therefore includes intended and unintended outcomes, positive and negative changes, relating both to target beneficiaries and other social groups. The broader understanding gained through impact assessment is important to all in the development process: funding and implementing agencies and, above all, those whose lives are affected by their work.

Specific challenges for assessing the impact of ICD

BCO partners have reviewed their own evaluation and impact assessment experience since 2004. One key question for them has been whether impact assessment requirements for information, communications and ICTs differ from those in other development areas.

A key question for the BCO partners has been whether impact assessment requirements for information, communications and ICTs differ significantly from those in other development areas.

Development activities undertaken by BCO partners and ICD agencies can be divided into two groups:

- Some are primarily *instrumental*, seeking to use information and communications resources and technologies to improve delivery of services to the poor. Many such examples can be found in the health and education sectors, the distribution of agricultural information, and e-government. Activities like these *aim to achieve direct impact on the lives of target groups*.
- Other interventions are more concerned with *empowerment* and changes in the policies affecting people's lives. These include work with the media, including radio, as well as advocacy and campaigning. Their impact on people's lives is indirect, as they *seek to change the context in which the poor live over time rather than improving present circumstances*.

Approaches to impact assessment for instrumental initiatives that use ICTs are similar to those in most mainstream development work, but can be *more challenging*, for several reasons.

- **Communications and ICTs play a cross-cutting role within development.** Access to radio, telephones or the internet affects outcomes not just in one particular field (such as health or education) but across the range of development sectors. ICTs also have significant impact on people's lives outside development initiatives – for example, changing the ways in which families interact in the diaspora, arrange remittances, etc.
- **The evidence base for ICT activities is weak because of the recent appearance of many ICTs.** There are few benchmarks against which the performance of new ICTs can be measured; and few existing impact assessments with which new evidence can be compared. It will take time to build up a more substantial body of reliable evidence.

- **The pace of change in information, communications and ICTs is very rapid.** New resources and technologies continually become available. Rapid adoption of some ICTs, particularly mobile telephony, has changed the ways in which many things are done within communities, altering the context for development initiatives that use media and ICTs while they are being implemented. People's behaviour also changes over time, as they become accustomed to using new resources. These factors make it more difficult to anticipate outcomes of ICT initiatives and require more frequent changes in implementation strategies than in other development sectors.
- **In the case of ICTs, because of the pace of technological development, the technology of choice at the end of a project is likely to be different from that at its inception.** As a result, more attention must be paid to how people adapt to new resources and technologies than to delivery mechanisms themselves. In most other development interventions, the technology that is most appropriate for implementation does not change between inception and evaluation.

Impact assessment of initiatives concerned with empowerment and policy change is even more challenging than for instrumental applications. The link between intervention and outcome is more indirect and more difficult to observe and measure, especially in media, advocacy and policy work. This has implications for what small agencies like those in BCO can easily achieve and needs to be considered carefully as donors, implementing agencies and development partners assess how best to evaluate impact in this area.

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The BCO impact assessment 2006-2008

Since 2004, as part of the BCO Alliance, BCO partners have supported imaginative projects, in partnership with local stakeholders, designed to unlock the potential of media and ICTs. As well as working in diverse countries and regions, they have gained experience with many different information and communications resources – from journalism to project management – and technologies – from broadcast radio to the internet.

BCO believes that we must learn as much as possible from experience to date if we are to make the most of opportunities which information, communications and ICTs offer to the poor. Impact assessment has been a priority since BCO partners began working together in 2004, and has focused both on their own work and the wider evidence base. To support this effort, they commissioned a substantial impact assessment study, funded by DFID and coordinated by *ict* Development Associates *ltd.*, during 2006-2008. The outcomes of this study are summarised in this briefing.

In their work, BCO partners are especially concerned with three main issues:

- **Voice** - ways of using information, communications and ICTs to empower the poor and increase their influence on decisions that affect their lives.
- **Mainstreaming** - the use of information and communications resources and technologies to improve knowledge, service delivery and quality of life.
- **Poverty reduction** – the ability of ICTs to contribute towards reduced vulnerability and increased prosperity.

BCO's impact assessment work has focused on the following questions:

BCO IMPACT ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

THE CENTRAL QUESTION:

How do communications for development contribute to poverty reduction through strengthening the voices, capacities, communications and networking of the poor and the marginalised, and enable them to influence decisions that affect their lives?

- Where?
- When?
- Why?
- What determines the chance that they will do so or the risk that they will not?

SUBSIDIARY QUESTIONS:

- How does ICD at grassroots level help achieve pro-poor growth and mitigate inequalities, towards the achievement of the MDGs and poverty reduction goals?
- How does "giving voice to the poor" (including through local media) change their lives towards development objectives?
- How is ICD influencing processes of governance?
- How does ICD policy improve people's lives?
- What are the connections between local, national and global impact?

INVESTIGATION 1: VOICE	HYPOTHESIS: Information and communication resources and capabilities among the poor and marginalised deepen people's ability to influence their circumstances and participate in democratic processes and political change.	The Impact of Radio on Political Change: A Practitioner Perspective	Chris Greene
		Radio and Recent Political Changes in Nepal	Pratyoush Onta
INVESTIGATION 2: POVERTY IMPACT	HYPOTHESIS: ICTs help to make markets work for the poor.	ICTs, Markets and Development	Richard Duncombe
		ICT, Pro-Poor Markets and Livelihoods	Manuel Acevedo
INVESTIGATION 3: NETWORKS	HYPOTHESIS: Policy advocacy and networks influence and reshape the agendas of ICT and development policy-makers and practitioners.	Addressing the Value of Networks in Development Policy Influence	Enrique Mendizabal & Pam Muckosy
		Assessment of a Policy Advocacy Network in Ecuador	Manuel Acevedo
		Gender Networking and Advocacy in the Context of the World Summit on the Information Society	Debbie Budlender & Heike Jensen

Three enquiries were commissioned to explore these questions. Each included:

- a. A general review of evidence in the area concerned.
- b. Specific assessment of one or more experiences with which BCO partners have engaged.

Each enquiry examined a particular hypothesis: an idea about the impact of media or ICTs which is widely held amongst those specialising in this field. The enquiries, hypotheses and studies undertaken are outlined in the table above.

These three enquiries are summarised below.

A fourth enquiry, led by David Souter of ict Development Associates, looked at impact assessment itself, and the particular challenges posed by impact assessment of work concerned with information, communications and ICTs. This enquiry has informed the conclusions set out earlier in this briefing.

BCO partners are strongly committed to continuing impact assessment, and emphasise seven points to guide their future thinking in this area:

- Integration of monitoring, evaluation and impact assessment in the project cycle.
- Understanding of context, and in particular changes that are taking place in context.
- Participation of project participants in all stages of impact assessment.
- Selection of appropriate indicators and establishment of viable benchmarks.
- Systematic monitoring of data.
- An open-minded approach to analysis and interpretation of findings, particularly issues of attribution, aimed at learning from experience.
- Effective dissemination of assessment findings.

INVESTIGATION 1:

The impact of radio on political change

Several BCO partners work with broadcast radio to share information and experience within communities and enable the poor to voice their opinions and concerns. AMARC draws together community radio stations – non-commercial stations rooted in local communities – in a worldwide advocacy network. OneWorld and Panos provide broadcast material and background information for broadcasters. Panos also works to improve the capacity of journalists and broadcasters, and advocates on the use of communications media in development activity.

Radio receivers are the most widely available ICT devices in poor communities, and provide the poor with an important source of information. Although in the past broadcast radio has often been controlled by governments, the last decade has seen widespread liberalisation, with the introduction of commercial and community radio stations offering more choice of information, entertainment and opinion.

Broadcast radio is widely believed to have significant influence on behaviour, which makes it significant for development. Programmes have been widely used, for example, to increase awareness on malaria and HIV/AIDS; to disseminate advice on crops and animal husbandry, market prices and the weather; and to make people aware of their rights as citizens, women or young people.

The content of broadcast radio is widely believed to have significant influence on behaviour, which makes it significant for development. Radio programming has been widely used – by BCO partners and others – to increase awareness and promote preventive measures for diseases like malaria and HIV/AIDS; to disseminate advice on crops and animal husbandry, market prices and the weather; and to make people aware of their rights as citizens, women or young people.

Radio also provides opportunities for people to express their views and take part in debates about policies and politics. Many radio stations feature interactive programming, which allows citizens to contribute by telephone, text and *vox pop* interviews. Liberalisation of content has allowed much greater diversity of opinion onto the airwaves, broadening understanding of political issues and stimulating discussion in local communities. Together, BCO partners believe, these new broadcasting opportunities have helped the poor to make their needs heard by decision-makers, and to expose and correct corruption and mismanagement. The value of community radio in this respect has been described in AMARC's recent survey of experience worldwide.²

The impact of radio is not always positive, however. It has been used to foment violence as well as to promote development – most notably during the Rwanda genocide. It can disseminate rumour and prejudice as well as improving knowledge and understanding. Issues of ownership and regulation are important influences on the social and political outcomes of

² Available at evaluation.amarc.org/evaluation.php

broadcasting, and attention needs to be paid to them by policy-makers and advocates for development and information rights.

At a general level, the evidence in BCO's impact assessment suggests that radio will have most influence where it is widely accessible, trusted by listeners and open to inclusive participation. The conditions for success include:

- A regulatory and legal environment conducive to media development.
- Sufficient quality and reliability of service (including journalistic standards) to develop listener trust.
- Congruence of messages between radio and other influential sources of information (for example, trusted community leaders).
- Sufficient social cohesion to facilitate the development of consensus views.
- Sufficient popularity of output to attract a sizable audience and generate debate.

BCO's study of radio and recent events in Nepal confirms that radio stations played a significant part in creating a climate of opinion and public debate there that favoured movement towards a new political order, displacing the monarchy in favour of alternative political structures. The impact of radio stations, however, varied between locations in the country. Important determinants of impact included the quality of journalism and level of integration with other sources of information and social influence. *The evidence suggests that contextual factors (such as local*

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social, economic, political and cultural norms) play a major part in determining how radio and other media will exert their influence.

As in other areas of information and communications, BCO's impact assessment suggests there is need for more research on the impact of radio broadcasting, including different ownership and content models; its relationship with different social groups and with different political and cultural contexts; and interaction with other sources of information and influence. This is needed not just in political contexts but also concerning the role which radio and other media play in influencing behaviour and supporting development programmes.

INVESTIGATION 2:

ICTs, markets and the poor

All BCO partners seek to use media and ICTs to help the poor gain greater value from the resources that they have available – to increase prosperity and take advantage of opportunities for financial security. Hivos and IICD, in particular, have explored the potential of ICTs to improve the knowledge of primary producers and make available information about market opportunities and prices.

Market mechanisms are often weak and asymmetric in developing countries. Primary producers are often poorly informed about the market value of their produce and find it difficult to negotiate effectively with intermediaries – regardless of whether produce is sold nationally or internationally. Mobile telephones are believed to have rebalanced many negotiating relationships because they have made it easier for farmers to confirm the prices being realised for produce in retail markets.

Much discussion in development circles about ICTs, markets and the poor has focused on the poor as primary producers. The relationship between markets and the poor, however, is more complex than this suggests. Primary producers are engaged in markets not just as producers but also as consumers of agricultural and other inputs. Many people are not engaged in primary production but in other markets for exchange of goods and services, including craft production and labour markets. An understanding of the relationship between markets and the poor must consider the poor as consumers as well as producers, the consumption and production of many different goods and services, and the needs and preferences of different social, economic and cultural groups.

Information plays a crucial role in markets. The more people know about the price, quality, value and effectiveness of goods and services, the more likely they are to secure them at prices and on terms that suit them. Equally, the more sellers know about supply and demand for their produce or labour, the more likely they are to maximise returns on their effort. Markets in which buyers and sellers are well informed will usually be more economically efficient in distributing goods, and avoid surpluses and shortages that adversely affect the poor.

Several BCO partners have supported initiatives to improve the flow of information within markets, particularly in support of small producers. Information flows can be improved by many different ICTs. Local radio stations, for example, can broadcast market prices. Cooperative marketing arrangements – adding to producers' negotiating strength with intermediaries and facilitating direct consumer access to goods and services – have been developed on the internet with varying degrees of success.

The most significant impact of information technology on markets today seems to come from mobile telephony. There is strong evidence suggesting that mobile phones are used by farmers, fishers and craftspeople to place their products in markets that command higher prices. Mobile phones also allow consumers to shop around, and retailers to order a wider range of goods, more conveniently and at better prices. Although more research is needed, mobile phones therefore seem to have substantial impact on the dynamics of local markets. This may increase if, as seems likely, they become a vehicle for mobile banking and money transfer.

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The BCO impact assessment – including a study of Hivos and IICD experience in Ecuador – supports the contention that *ICTs can help make markets work for the poor*. It also recognises that *the circumstances surrounding different markets are highly influential in determining how far they make a difference*. For example, the potential impact of better information resources on micro-businesses is often constrained by other factors such as shortage of capital, lack of skills and unequal relationships with other market actors, including intermediaries.

Information and ICT initiatives, the evidence suggests, may have most impact on more entrepreneurial SMEs (small- and medium-sized enterprises), which have better access to other resources. On a larger scale, ICTs may contribute significantly to improving the supply chain in specific business sectors, in fostering trade associations, and in supporting the availability of credit.

These findings have implications for strategies designed to assist small producers, especially the poor. While improved information can be significant in itself, they suggest it will have greater value if it forms part of a strategy designed to address multiple constraints facing small producers, including the availability of investment funds and technical capacity. Information intermediaries, or “infomediaries”, often play an important part in such circumstances.

More research is needed to refine understanding of the interaction between ICTs, markets and the poor in ways that will help development agencies design new resources with maximum impact. The distribution of gains between the poor in general and specific groups within the poor, including in particular the poorest, should be an important focus for such work.

INVESTIGATION 3:

Information and communications networking

Networking plays an important part in the work of most BCO partners. Some, such as AMARC and APC, are themselves networks, whose memberships comprise organisations in different parts of the world. Others, like Panos and OneWorld, are associated in international partnerships that share common objectives and a common ethos. All BCO partners draw strength from networking with like-minded development and rights organisations. The BCO Alliance is itself one such network – one which, unusually, draws together both donor and implementing agencies.

BCO partners have been keen to explore what makes networks effective, especially in advocating policy change for ICTs and supporting empowerment of the poor. Their assessment of network impact looked at two specific experiences: the development of a policy advocacy network, Infodesarrollo, in Ecuador (supported by APC and IICD), and the experience of gender and ICT networking during the World Summit on the Information Society. Work by the Overseas Development Institute also contributed to the investigation.

Networks are made up in different ways. They may be built around a common ethos or established for a specific purpose; designed to maximise service delivery or to leverage policy influence; centralised or centrifugal; permanent or temporary. What they share in common, typically, is a belief that more can be achieved through collective analysis and action than could be achieved by member organisations acting alone.

The costs and benefits of networking vary from one experience to another. For small and specialist organisations – including many within ICT4D – networks provide a mechanism for extending awareness and influence beyond their natural constituencies. However, networking also carries costs, and is not always effective in achieving goals. Maintaining communications between partners can be time-consuming, particularly where networks address general rather than single issues.

BCO partners are especially concerned with networking for advocacy and policy change. Many have worked together successfully to achieve changes in the policy and regulatory environment for communications – for example, the liberalisation of broadcasting ownership required for community radio, telecommunications policy reforms such as open access, and internet rights. They have drawn strength in this not only from civil society but from a wider stakeholder community, building coalitions amongst those that share their broad objectives to foster participation and empowerment.

Networks generally share a belief that more can be achieved through collective analysis and action than could be achieved by member organisations acting alone.

Assessing the impact of advocacy on policy change is notoriously difficult. It is not sufficient for advocates to convince policy-makers of their case; for this to result in change in people's lives, it has to lead in turn to policy or legislative action, to implementation, and to adoption by both community leaders and the poor. The impact chain is long and it can take years before advocacy achieves its targets.

BCO's evidence suggests that networks are particularly effective in building communities of activists, where they enable pooling of resources and expertise and leverage wider influence on decision-makers. Factors of importance in achieving this include:

- Clear governance structures (formal or informal)
- Appropriate membership composition
- Balance between individual and collective roles and responsibilities of network members
- Flexibility
- Appropriate use of ICTs to coordinate activities, particularly in global networks where direct communications are difficult to maintain.

The BCO impact assessment suggests that positive developmental gains can be achieved through deployment and effective use of ICTs. It suggests, too, that networking has contributed to policy changes required in order to achieve greater access to communications resources. The importance of networking may be greater in ICT

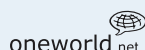
The BCO impact assessment suggests that networking has contributed to policy changes required in order to achieve greater access to communications resources. However, many factors contribute to the performance of networks, and not all networks are successful.

advocacy because of the relatively small size of civil society organisations involved. As with other investigations in this impact assessment, more research is needed to improve understanding of what is most effective, and to refine strategies for advocacy and implementation.

This briefing, for development professionals and others, summarises the outcomes of new work on the impact of information, communications and their related technologies (ICTs) on development, which was undertaken by the Building Communication Opportunities (BCO) Alliance, a partnership of donors and non-profit organisations, in 2007-2008.

Almost everyone agrees that ICTs can make a substantial difference to the poor. However, although there is a growing body of experience in using media and ICTs for development (referred to here collectively as “information and communications for development” or ICD), the evidence base around this is still weak, principally because most experience is recent and many ICT initiatives have been experimental pilots. As a result, many donors and mainstream development actors remain cautious about the value and application of ICD initiatives.

The BCO study summarised in this briefing looks at the reasons why the evidence base is weak compared to other development sectors, and the need for more evidence-based learning regarding how ICD can be used most effectively in widely varying contexts. The briefing is available in English, French and Spanish. The full study report, in English, can be found at: www.bcoalliance.org



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The BCO programme was supported financially by DFID and SDC. The BCO impact assessment was financed by DFID.