

RURAL COMMUNITIES AND COMMUNICATION NEEDS (UGANDA)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Authors:

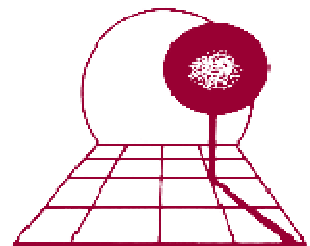
Nigel Scott (Gamos)
Ali Ndiwalana (DICTS)
Andy Sumner (IDS)
Simon Batchelor (Gamos)
Aditya Bahadur (IDS)
Nora Mulira (DICTS)

Grameen Foundation AppLab

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Crown House
231 Kings Road
Reading
RG1 4LS
UK

phone: 44 (0)118 926 7039
email: nigel@gamos.org



Gamos Ltd.

Introduction

The work carried out by the Gamos team is part of the needs assessment activities of the Grameen Foundation AppLab programme; an understanding of the needs of rural communities will inform the design and development of applications. The core activity is a questionnaire based survey of individual users drawn from across the country. The objective of the survey is:

To understand the information priorities and attitudes associated with use of communications media among poor and excluded (rural) communities in order to estimate the demand for mobile phone based applications.

Activities

- Consumer survey - analysis of results and key findings;
- Desk research - background to poverty, figures on poverty in Uganda, and development priorities for the country;
- Stakeholder interviews - key stakeholders (VPOs, MTN, team), focus groups of community members; high level stakeholders.

What is poverty in the context of Uganda?

The rural poor have low levels of capital - such as education and land, and highly diverse sources of livelihoods (e.g. non-farm wage labour, remittances from household members, migration). Poverty itself is about deprivation of assets; vulnerability is about the risk or probability of an individual, household or community moving in or out of poverty in response to shocks and fluctuations. Poverty may be transient - many rural poor people move in and out of poverty over the course of a year based on factors such as seasonality in crops and weather. There are the transient poor - those who move in and out of poverty over a year, and there are the chronic rural poor - those who are always poor.

Poverty in Uganda:

- When compared with other Africa countries, Uganda faces a number of challenges:
 - Health - especially malaria, diarrhoeal diseases, HIV/AIDS prevalence;
 - Population growth;
 - Corruption;
 - Political stability;
 - Telecommunications infrastructure (especially internet);

- Poor economic performance (low GDP).
- The government and donors believe that improving agricultural productivity is key to improving economic development in this predominantly rural economy.
- Rural areas have a particularly young population.
- Rural areas tend to have lower resources e.g. low electrification rates.
- The emergence of multi-spatial households is changing patterns of life. Remittances are a feature of diversified livelihood strategies, and international remittances are significant to the national economy (set to exceed aid).
- Development institutions identify key sectors for action as: economic growth, human development (education, health), governance, and security.

Livelihoods and poverty

A 'Sustainable Livelihoods' approach (SL approach) is concerned with enhancing rural poor people's ability to expand and enhance their 'livelihoods strategy'. The approach, outlined in Figure 1, addresses the causes of poverty:

- Low capital assets (productive, human, social, etc...)
- High vulnerability to shocks (seasonality, poor harvest, etc...)
- Poor governance structures (poor accountability, low participation in decision making, poor state capacities to deliver services, etc...).

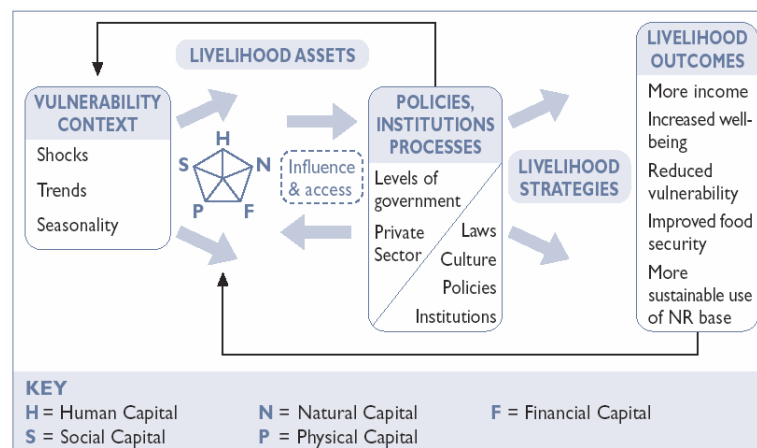


Figure 1 Sustainable Livelihoods model

What's already known about rural information needs?

Role of information and communication:

- Key communication priorities include
 - contacting people in emergencies,
 - social communication (keeping in touch with friends and family),
 - news,
 - financial matters (e.g. business, jobs, remittances); use is predominantly found in urban communities, particularly SME businesses.
- Impacts of access to telecommunications (mobile phones) include:
 - efficiency - e.g. speeding things up, reducing costs, more contacts,
 - convenience - e.g. easier to do tasks, faster,
 - “feelgood” factor - e.g. keeping in touch with family, feeling safe, status.
- Widespread use of mobile phones results in blurring of work and social use of phones - if you have a phone in your pocket you use it for everything.
- Social communication needs are the main driver of mobile phone ownership and use, business is secondary.
- Improved access to information tends to make markets work more efficiently.
- Mobile phones can often work well when integrated with more traditional means of communication (e.g. phone-ins to FM radio stations).
- There is a lack of SMS culture in Africa; SMS use is restricted to youth and well educated users.

Description of survey

A sample of 406 telecommunications users was drawn from four parts of the country - north (Lira), east (Mbale and Tororo), west (Mbarara) and central (Kampala). The sample was designed to gather opinions from a range of phone users, and it did not reach into the most remote parts of the country, so it is of somewhat higher status than the national average.

The analysis has explored differences between key groupings:

- gender - the gender balance of the rural sample was 56:44 male:female);
- age;
- mobile phone ownership;
- poverty - the sample was divided into three categories according to level of education.
- Rural / urban - the sample was split 71:29 rural:urban;

Phone use

46% of rural respondents own a mobile phone - 39% have their own handset, 6% have a SIM card but no handset, and 1% share a mobile handset. 10% of rural respondents have more than one SIM card.

Around half of rural respondents claim to use SMS, although use is higher among the better off (only 10% of the poorest use SMS, compared with 82% of the highest status group).

Among the rural sample, use of public phones is almost exclusively restricted to manned phones (such as Grameen Foundation VPO), used by 66% of respondents, compared to 9% using unmanned booths.

Information needs

The top priorities reflect concerns with both vulnerability (e.g. emergencies and HIV/AIDS) and social wellbeing (keeping in touch with family and friends, the news).

The modest importance attributed to agricultural issues reflects the fact that only 38% claim to be involved in agriculture. However, agricultural issues are attributed higher importance among the poorest group.

The low degree of importance attached to governance issues probably reflects a low perception of influence on political issues.

As a general rule, men are more concerned with marketing and financial issues, and women with family matters such as health issues and keeping in touch with family members.

The frequency with which respondents access information relating to issues mirrors the importance attributed to those issues; priority issues for which information is accessed frequently include:

- Understanding HIV/AIDS
- Keeping in touch with family & friends
- News
- Contacting people in emergencies.

Channels used to get information

Face to face communication through personal contact is the dominant means of accessing information. This is closely followed by radio.

One of the key features of the mobile phone is its interactivity - communication is two way. It is most useful when it substitutes (or complements) face to face communication.

Along with radio, phones appear to be a gender neutral channel for communication, at least in terms of access and frequency of use.

Satisfaction ratings highlight issues for which satisfaction levels are relatively low; these are issues for which people might be inclined to use alternative means of accessing information:

- Introducing modern agricultural ideas;
- Fake drugs;
- Getting agricultural advice;
- Learning about first aid, disease prevention and treatment.

Views on potential mobile applications

Services for which over 50% of respondents register a positive intention to use are:

- Sending greetings;
- Send announcements to local radio station or newspaper;
- Make contact with support / interest groups;
- Get contact details of local doctor;
- Market prices of agricultural produce at local markets.

Top priority services relate to social capital and vulnerability.

Intention to use a mobile based application is not linked to the level of satisfaction with the current means of accessing information.

People feel that phone services, and SMS in particular, will be cost effective. The issue people are most concerned with is speaking to computerised voice systems (IVR).

Factors likely to act as barriers to use of mobile applications in general include:

- Lack of menus in local languages;
- Lack of confidence in SMS services;

- Inability to charge a mobile phone.

Factors likely to act as drivers supporting use of mobile applications include;

- Relatively low cost of SMS;
- The ability to get an immediate response.

Considering specific applications confirms those issues most likely to influence intention to use mobile applications:

- The cost will offer good value for money (driver);
- Services (especially business related) will be available in local language (driver);
- Ability to keep a copy of the information to refer to later (driver).
- Inability to type (an SMS) (especially business related)(barriers).

Background on the information environment in Uganda

The government of Uganda has a positive attitude towards ICTs, and the role of ICT in the Poverty Eradication Action Plan. There is a positive regulatory environment that is progressing towards a fully liberalised telecommunications sector by 2010. Challenges still to be addressed in creating a thriving electronic environment include security issues (e.g. digital signatures), and legal issues (e.g. intellectual property rights). This provides the Grameen Foundation with opportunities to engage in a developing market, by engaging with stakeholders, and drawing on its experiences of working in other parts of the developing world.

While Government recognises the role played by the private sector in expanding telecommunication services, there is also a growing recognition of the need to complement these approaches with public-private partnerships (PPPs) to help minimise marginalization of the poor. There is, therefore, a positive environment in which third parties like the Grameen Foundation may collaborate with Government in offering various services to the public. For example, The RCDF has provided internet points of presence at administrative offices in 52 districts, but staff have little experience of collecting data or sharing it with the public. The Grameen Foundation could collaborate with local administrations by providing tools to that enable them to better collect and disseminate this information to end-users in novel ways.

Barriers to improved use of ICT include low levels of technology awareness and inadequate training. While steps are being taken to address this, there are opportunities for the Grameen Foundation to collaborate with tertiary institutions as a means of creating better awareness, sharing knowledge, and nurturing of ideas that will enhance the impact of mobile applications in the long term.

Despite regulatory efforts to increase coverage and reduce costs, the Grameen Foundation will face a number of challenges:

- Collecting the right information;
- Identifying the right partners;
- Creating awareness among users;
- Devising novel pricing mechanisms.

Conclusions

TV audiences are also increasing and, as coverage increases, this is likely to emerge as a viable alternative to radio, which is currently the only medium with universal coverage.

The ranking of livelihoods issues shows the importance of shocks, or vulnerability, and the value of assets that enable people to respond to those shocks. Reducing vulnerability would, therefore, appear to be a priority development need.

Even though the risk of shocks may be perceived as high, they occur relatively infrequently. This creates a bit of a paradox in that some services that might be of considerable benefit to the rural poor are least likely to be financially sustainable.

On the other hand, there are issues with no clear development impact that people access regularly e.g. sport, entertainment. Having said that, one of the criticisms of the livelihoods approach is that it has a strong econometric focus and does not adequately take account of psychological factors that may be described as “wellbeing”.

Higher status groups are more information oriented - they place greater importance on issues, they access information more frequently, spend more on mobile phones, and are more likely to use mobile applications.

However, providing services to higher status groups would most likely serve to increase local divides. The Grameen Foundation might like, therefore, to consider applications likely to appeal universally across status groups such as family matters (e.g. keeping in touch, finding doctors and drugs), and agricultural services (e.g. market prices, agricultural advice, weather).

One of the key features of the phone is its interactivity - communication (using either voice or data) is two way. In this respect it is an obvious substitute for face to face communication.

A positive view that mobile phones offer good value for money appears to support the uptake of mobile phone applications.

A further important dimension is the ability of mobile phone applications to cut the cost of corruption to the poor; this is linked to accuracy of information.

Where there is a tangible cost benefit, it is likely that the poor will pay for a service, as the mobile market has demonstrated. The poor in particular, will be reluctant to pay for services offering potential or future benefit (e.g. introducing new crop varieties) as they tend to be risk averse.

Where more fundamental problems lie behind demand for information, a mobile application may have limited impact. Further investigation into areas of interest is required to identify how mobile phones may play a role in integrated approaches.

There appear to be a number of key characteristics associated with potential mobile applications that enable them to deliver a positive impact on poverty:

- Accurate information - can reduce vulnerability and reduce costs.
- Timeliness - timing of service and content should be appropriate.
- Perceived substitution - services need to offer benefits over current means of accessing information.
- Specificity - information is relevant when targeted to the user.