

# **Evaluating a Gender-Based Community ICT Project: Women's Empowerment, Donors Role and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)**

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**Abstract:** This paper assesses the impact of a gender-based community ICT project in a rural remote part of Zambia. It looks at the impact ICTs have had on the women involved with the ICT project. The paper also assesses whether there has been any empowering impact on the women and whether any MDGs have been met. Additionally, light is shed on the role of international donors in the funding of community ICT projects such as the one in question and how the donor's status as benefactors can have some disbenefits due to lack of consultation and understanding of what the community's needs in relation to ICTs might actually be. Too often donors impose their own will, targets and ICTs they see fit at the expense of adequately effecting lasting change beyond their „gifts“. By using the gender-based community ICT project as an example, the paper shows how donor's imposition has the potential to go wrong. The paper begins by tracing some concepts of development and how these have had and continue to have an impact on gender equality, empowerment and development. These are then tied into ICTs for development, whereupon an assessment and impact evaluation of the ICT project ensues.

## **Evaluating a Gender-Based Community ICT Project: Women's Empowerment, Donors Role and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)**

### **INTRODUCTION**

There is a general perception at both local and global level that ICTs are a catalyst for social and economic development for women through the potential benefits they offer. Often when these sentiments are expressed the word “*empowerment*” is used. This is a word that is used to emphasise the potential advantages that may result through use of ICTs, particularly for women (National ICT policy, 2006; WSIS Declaration of Principles, 2003).

Clearly, empowerment symbolises the potential advantages that may result, particularly for women who are often the poorest members of society. As such, empowerment is a term that is used to suggest that ICTs are not only catalysts for social and economic achievement but for women to empower themselves and their communities. The use of the term not only indicates an acceptance that women are indeed the subordinate „other“ but that through using ICTs their position might be elevated.

With this in mind, this paper focuses on a gender based community ICT project in remote rural Zambia in order to assess the social and economic empowerment of women and the development impact the project has had. In order to involve women especially those in rural remote areas, gender-based community ICT-based projects have begun to emerge in Zambia. Such projects are mainly supported by international donors and are often run in under-served parts of urban and rural areas. This paper discusses one such project in Kalomo in the rural Southern Province of Zambia called the Bwacha Women's ICT Club. The women's Club received its support from the Netherlands' International Institute for Communication and Development (IICD) which provided capital to purchase ICT equipment.

Such initiatives have been received with both optimism and pessimism. Optimism because they represent an opportunity for communities who often lag behind in information and communication to be able to use technologies and other materials on offer to meet their needs. Pessimism due to a number of reasons as seen by some commentators. For instance, Meddie (2006) writes about the need to rethink long term strategies and survival of telecentres beyond initial funding. He argues for long term financial and social sustainability. Warschauer (2004) on the other hand highlights the importance of local views in the dichotomy of recipient/benefactor and shows how ignoring local views can have an impact on a telecentres success. But to what extent are telecentric type of initiatives empowering to women and what potential for development do they offer women? How do they fit in the scheme of social and economic development and empowerment, particularly for women? With this, the paper interrogates the ways in which gender, ICTs and development work together to produce (or not) enhanced possibilities for women's social, cultural and economic empowerment. The paper's key contribution is the revelation of a variety of tensions which will need to be resolved if the ambitions that developing countries like Zambia have for ICTs and gender empowerment will ever be realised. Importantly, the paper sheds light on the potential achievements of some of the MDGs.

## WHAT DOES EMPOWERMENT *REALLY* MEAN: RHETORIC AND REALITY

In relation to ICTs and social and economic development for women in developing countries, the word *empowerment* is often used to emphasise the potential advantages that may result through use of ICTs, more so because women are often the poorest in societies like Zambia. As such, „empowerment“ is a term that is used to suggest that ICTs can be used as a catalyst to achieve social and economic development for women who can then subsequently achieve empowerment for themselves as individuals and for their communities as a collective. But what does the term really mean in a patriarchal society such as Zambia where the penetration of a sophisticated technology such as the internet is still in its infancy and where many women live in dire poverty? Can women really achieve social and economic development and empowerment by their use of ICTs like the internet and mobile phones?

Although empowerment is a term used in different and varied contexts (Oxaal and Baden, 1997; Longwe, 1997; Sharma, 2001; Kabeer 1999 & 2001; Malhotra, Schuler & Boender, 2002; Huyer, 2006), it nevertheless tries to at least suggest something specific, to give some form of power to and therefore empower those who are otherwise *disempowered* in different aspects of life. To illustrate the term empowerment, some examples are indicated below of how some scholars have defined it. For example, Sharma (2001, p.8) states that:

The term empowerment refers to a range of activities from individual self-assertion to collective resistance, protest and mobilisation that challenge basic power relations. For individuals and groups where gender determines their access to resources and power, their empowerment begins when they not only recognise the systematic forces that oppress them, but act to change existing power relations. Empowerment therefore is a process aimed at changing the nature and direction of systematic forces which marginalise women and other disadvantaged sections in a given context. The goals of women's empowerment are to challenge patriarchal ideology, to transform the structures and institutions that reinforce and perpetuate gender discrimination and social inequality and to enable poor women to gain access to, and control of, both material and informational resources.

Although agreeing with Sharma's definition of empowerment in as far as women are concerned, it is also possible to argue that although some individuals or groups of individuals might recognise forces that oppress, empowerment will not automatically then begin just because its opposite is recognised. This is because several individuals or groups of individuals can recognise oppressing forces but are either too powerless to change such relations or feel that their position is better served by maintaining the status quo.

Bearing this in mind, empowerment for this paper is defined as the emancipation of women from their subordinate position through the effective use of ICTs and their equal participation in the national ICT policy development. And only through this, can there be true and full social and economic development for individuals in particular and for the country in general.

## **DEVELOPMENT THEORETICAL CONCEPTS**

Development concepts have evolved over time from modernisation, to dependency including globalisation right up to human development concepts. Modernisation was about contrasting traditional societies with modern western societies whereupon western societies industrialisation became the prototype for „traditional“ societies (Allen and Thomas; 2000; Handelman, 2000; Visvanathan et al; 1997). However, development thinkers opposed to the „modernisation“ process took the approach that modernisation was not really about modernising developing countries to the level of western societies but rather more about making them „dependent“ on developed countries (Hulme & Turner, 1990; So, 1990). However, Robinson (2002) states that because of dynamisms resulting from the phenomena of globalisation, development theories such as modernisation and dependency have almost been rendered insignificant. In particular, Robinson points to what he sees as the modernisation and dependency theories“ “inability to account for patterns of socio-economic and political change in recent decades” (2002, p. 1047), in this case globalisation.

With globalisation have come new development paradigms, importantly, the Human Development Paradigm which supposedly differs somewhat in focus from earlier development paradigms because when it comes to gender issues it has a more focussed agenda on the subject (Fukuda-Parr, 2003). Rather than having a general focus on a country's economic growth, this paradigm focuses on many facets of human development. Therefore, for example, rather than looking only at indicators such as a country's gross domestic product (GDP) which is one pointer to indicate a country's economic growth, the paradigm focuses on a number of indicators measured by the Human Development Index to include life expectancy, literacy, education, and standard of living of the people. But how have women failed in the development concepts?

## **WOMEN AND THE DEVELOPMENT IMPACT**

For all the development paradigms alluded to above, there seemed to be no particular interest in adequately addressing the situation of women. The paradigms therefore failed to see women as viable contributors to the development agenda. Furthermore, the development paradigms appear to have failed to recognise that women as a social group were affected differently by development processes. Brydon and Chant (1989) point out that there can be no improvement of women's status without transforming the very structures that subordinate them.

However, the human development concept, within which the premise of the MDGs lie allows an understanding of how a country's population is faring in, for example its citizen's standards of living, human rights, equality including social justice (Human Development Report; 1990). Sen (1999) states that development is measured by the freedoms that people enjoy such as health, education, civil including political rights rather than the general economic development of a country. In this respect, the human development indicators also drill down gender differences in some areas where the other development concepts failed to do so adequately. For example, it is the Human Development concept that puts ordinary people's concerns much more at the centre of development. For instance, it is the MDGs which look at human development in a way that captures the importance that women play in development through the need to promote gender equality and empower as other goals.

With the above in mind, the proceeding sections will endeavour to look at how the Bwacha Women's ICT project has fared in women's empowerment and development and to what extent it can be said to have achieved some of the MDGs which include to:

- I. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
- II. Achieve universal primary education
- III. Promote gender equality and women empowerment**
- IV. Reduce child mortality
- V. Improve maternal health
- VI. Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases
- VII. Ensure environmental sustainability
- VIII. Develop a global partnership for development;

as a result of implementing ICTs?

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The study of this research used a mixed method approach which allowed for a triangulated research outcome. The mixed method approach included an ethnographic approach where I undertook fieldwork and also employed observation techniques as part of the mixed approach at the Bwacha Women's ICT Club between December 2004 and March 2005 in Zambia. Because this study is part of a research that started in 2003 to 2007, I kept myself updated with events through phone conversations with some of the women at the Club when I left Zambia. Erlandson et al (1993) reveal that "observation allows the researcher to discover the here-and-now interworkings of the environment via the use of the five human senses" (1993, p. 94). In addition to observing activities of the Club, the setting also allowed me to conduct interviews with among others the Chairperson of the Club, the Club's Secretary, the Treasurer and other members of the Club and the community. Also talked to, were clients of the Club who utilised the services that were on offer. This provided an opportunity for the women especially, to express and put their points of view as they relate to ICTs and their empowerment. This in turn allowed me to use textual analysis and interpret the participant's interviews. I also travelled to two surrounding villages with both the Chairperson and the Secretary of the project in order to witness not only how women were affected by poverty but also how they were trying to overcome their circumstances through various activities in their own Clubs. These Clubs happened to be affiliated to the Bwacha Women's ICT Club. This allowed me a better understanding of the gap that exists between the urban and the rural, thereby permitting me to have a sense of the distance between policy-makers' rhetoric on ICTs and gender empowerment, and the realities and experiences of women in such areas. Also included as part of the research approach were interviews with some ICT policy formulators.

The decision to adopt a mixed method approach was taken because it allows for complementarity of techniques where one or the other might be insufficient. And as this research study has various linked themes, which include gender, development studies and new technology it became essential to use a mixed approach particularly in order to acquire an in-depth understanding of community perceptions of these themes.

## **THE CASE STUDY = BWACHA WOMEN'S ICT CLUB**

Bwacha Women's Club (ICT) is situated in Kalomo some 400 kilometres from Lusaka, the capital city of Zambia. Kalomo's inhabitants, especially women are faced with poverty. HIV/AIDS has also ravaged nearby villages with some villages mostly being kept together by women and young children who cannot afford even a proper education among other difficulties. Due to the above considerations, Kalomo provided an interesting site for the assessment of a gender-based community ICT project in a rural area. The project would give an opportunity to gauge whether ICTs were empowering women in the area and how these ICTs were being applied in day to day activities in the community and therefore their wider community impact.

It was in 2000 that a group of 10 women came together to form and own what was then known as Kalomo Bwacha Women's Club. Although the 10 women had formed and were owners of the Club, the reason behind the formation was not only to support themselves but also to support other women in their community who were engaged in small-scale enterprises within and around surrounding villages. Their aim was also to shed more light on how marginalised and poor women were in Kalomo. The Club was meant to ease and share some of the burdens women were going through by supporting each other in small business enterprises like tailoring, crafts such as making reed mats, knitting, cooking, baking and other various small businesses they were inclined to do. Though of different and varied backgrounds and standing, the 10 founders included working and retired nurses, teachers, secretaries, housewives as well as seasoned businesswomen. The purpose was to cater for their community's needs, for example, when they have functions like weddings, traditional ceremonies and other such parties, the Club is called in to provide services for a fee. This, in turn, promotes various women's work and small-scale enterprises. This initiative prompted various women's Clubs to be affiliated to the Bwacha Women's ICT Club. Each Club pays a yearly subscription to access the benefits. In turn, the Bwacha Women's ICT Club also visit the affiliated women's Club to share, exchange and learn, thereby sensitising each other and their communities to different lessons learnt and practices between different areas.

In October 2004, the ICT component was introduced to the Kalomo Bwacha Women's Club with the help of a grant from the IICD. The grant came through a local agency which helped purchase two computers, a mobile phone, a scanner, printer, a digital camera, a landline phone and provided a dialup internet connection. The agency also offered the Club some administrative and technical support. When the ICT component was introduced to the Club, two women were offered basic computer training by the agency in the capital city, Lusaka. There was no specific reason why the two were offered the training, but only that they were to go back to their Club to teach the other members what they had learnt. The training involved familiarisation with Windows and other related applications, internet browsing and how to write and send emails. The two then went back to Kalomo to teach the other members. Before its formation, the women operated from their individual homes where they would meet once or twice a month at a different member's home. However, with the introduction of the ICT component, a local businessman who was subsequently appointed as the Club's Trustee donated a building from which the women could operate. As well as the donation of a building, there was also goodwill from the local electricity supplier, Zambia

Electricity Supply Corporation (ZESCO), who gave the Club reduced electricity rates for a period of about 6 months.

According to the founders of the Club, the introduction of ICTs has opened more doors for Club members. The Club has since changed its name from just Kalomo Bwacha Women's Club to Bwacha Women's ICT Club. With the ICT enterprise added, the women's business enterprise expanded somewhat to be a daily run business, open to the public. Additionally, as a result of the ICT component, more clubs have been created just to be affiliated to the Women's Club.

### **GETTING IN DEEPER – AN ANALYSIS OF THE REALITY ON THE GROUND**

The following interview excerpts are from two leading members of the Club, the first from the Chairperson of the Club and the second from the Club Secretary explaining why the Club decided to include ICTs and also how ICTs have helped the Club:

*Interviewer: So how do you think ICTs are going to help the women?*

Chairperson: ICTs are helping in that we would have whatever they are making advertised and then if there are some interested individuals then they can make some orders. Otherwise they just make but where to sell? We are actually targeting the rural woman because she is really underprivileged despite her efforts to make ends meet but how? She can even do something like this but where to sell, no market, so that's why we thought of including ICT.

*Interviewer: So have you talked to these women about ICTs, do they understand and what do they think they are all about?*

Chairperson: Yes, we did that especially after the launching, they were coming to find out and because a lot of them have heard about ICTs they usually come here and I think they are ready to do whatever is supposed to be done.

As I spoke to the Chairperson of the Club, my reflection of this particular conversation was that I couldn't help feeling that there was a sense of vagueness in her answers. I thought she did not necessarily understand what ICTs like the internet were. For instance she talked about women advertising what they made. Questions like where the women were going to advertise, how they were going to advertise, where they were going to sell the goods they advertised, what mechanisms were going to be put in place to sell as well as get their revenue after the sales were clearly not as clear cut for the Chairperson. This is because when I asked her if she meant they would advertise on a website, she was not sure about what that was but merely said they did not really think of that but that was something to pursue. These exchanges were interesting because I sensed there was so much rhetoric on ICTs such that women like the Chairperson sometimes thought of it as a „magic wand“ that would overcome

women's problems. This was complicated because the Clubs' ICTs were donated and as such the women were only too glad to receive the equipment, without asking „hard and relevant“ questions such as how they would apply the internet to their daily lives and businesses because the internet was the major cornerstone of the ICT component. What was clear was that the Chairperson was expressing what she had been told by the donors about what ICTs like the internet did. This is not to suggest that the Chairperson and her Club lacked agency but rather that because Club members were *passive* recipients, they perhaps felt they were not in a position to ask questions and also perhaps because they did not know what to ask as the internet was something new for them and their community.

The Club's Secretary also gave her perceptions on how ICTs, especially the internet has impacted the women in the following extract:

*Interviewer:* So how has the use of the internet changed your lives from the way you used to be before the internet and all these other facilities came in?

*Secretary:* Well this time we are widely known, we weren't known before. But since we started with our internet most people have known that there is internet in Bwacha. Most people didn't know where we were but they are hunting us every now and then, we receive such kinds of people. It has really changed us because when you communicate with somebody whom you don't know but you can talk to each other through our internet and even our families we communicate with them this time, it's very easy.

In this case the internet has enabled the Club members to engage in wider communication even in far off places. This communication has included communicating with their funders and creating networks through the internet. Evidently, this would have been near possible without the internet.

As a result several other affiliates joined the ICT Club during the launch of the ICT component. The launch was a very big event in the community with people from several other villages coming to witness the „birth“ of an ICT Club. Some perhaps came and affiliated out of curiosity and also to be in on the new „phenomenon“ that had come to the community. However, as I mention in a later paragraph, the internet has not necessarily lived up to expectations, at least not on the occasions I visited during the fieldwork phase, and this has been through no fault of the Club. The first was due to connection difficulties where trying to get an internet connection was near impossible. I also noticed that „clients“ hardly ever asked to use the internet, although they asked for services such as typing and printing. However, as a computer is itself an ICT, it is important to point out that although internet usage did not seem high, the use of the computer to make communication more professional via typed letter for example, should be counted as a positive outcome.

Additionally, with the introduction of the ICT enterprise, the first of its kind in Kalomo, the Club's income is believed to have improved somewhat due to the services it offers such as

internet browsing and emails (when there is connection), telephone services, typing, printing, scanning, desktop publishing services such as the creation of calendars, brochures and cards with the use of digital photography. Communication is easier, the enterprise is easily approachable and it is not a self-consciously „business“ enterprise but rather has a community feel to it. The enterprise is also a meeting place where lively discussions take place as well as somewhere members come to update each other on latest developments that may be of interest to the community or indeed what has been happening in their area. Members of the Club visit other villages to sensitise and educate people on various topics including HIV/AIDS and the importance of good nutrition. They sometimes use information they download from the internet, when they can or use digital photos as learning aides. They also learn from the affiliated Clubs they visit and will in turn go and share what they learn with another Club from another village. There is clear localisation, creation, development, use and promotion of local content as seen from the calendars and brochures they create which centre around their communities.

### **1.1.1.1 CHALLENGES**

**1.1.1.2** Although the ICT project was received enthusiastically by the members of the Club and the community as a whole, there were clear challenges to follow. After the euphoria of this new part of the Club had settled, the members were hit with several unpalatable realisations. This included problems of maintaining and sustaining their donated equipment. For example, during my last visit I found that they had run out of printer toner for about three weeks, therefore losing valuable business. They could not afford to buy the toner in Lusaka, the capital city of Zambia because they found it too expensive and did not have the cash. They were therefore hoping they would find someone to buy it for them in South Africa because they believed and had heard it was cheaper. My concern was how long they would have to put up with such situations because they had no idea who they would ask to buy them the toner in South Africa or whether it would be the right toner they needed. It would be very easy for someone to offer to buy them the toner but it may have been sub-standard or at an inflated price. I witnessed several potential clients being turned away because the Club could not offer printing services because they had run out of printing toner. This was clearly causing distress and anxiety among the women as it would perhaps result in clients not coming back because they felt the Club was not a real business.

**1.1.1.3** Furthermore, many clients who came often enquired after photocopying and faxing services. The Club could not offer photocopying services, for example, because they did not own a copier. Although IICD had donated 2 PCs among other things, photocopying was the most sought-after service. This mismatch between what's available and what's required can be partly blamed on a lack of consultation between donors and recipients of technology „gifts“. Oxaal and Baden (1997) argue that empowerment of women will prove difficult if international aid agencies and donors continue to be biased against the full participation in the decisions made about donated equipment and other aid. However, they do admit that often these attitudes may be difficult to change, particularly when donors are accountable elsewhere. However, such attitudes can lead to the failure of the entire project in the longer term. The danger is that donors merely impose their ideas on the receiving communities without attempting to find out what exactly it is that the communities

want in order for a project to be self sustaining in the longer term. The Club's Treasurer had this to say about the photocopier:

If we had a photocopier we would have made quite a lot of money because most of the people that come are interested in making copies and there is a lot of money in photocopying. And some come in and ask for faxing but we don't have that.

What the Treasurer shows is the point that no matter what technology one has, if it is not appropriate to local needs, then it is not necessarily that important. The situation is made even more difficult because the donors relied on a local Zambian agency as a go between and did not necessarily get themselves involved with the women directly to understand what is was they needed. This point is strengthened by the fact that during the visits I made to the Club, rarely did I come across clients asking to use the internet. Yet the internet is one of the technologies which Club members felt would bring them development and empowerment, presumably because that is what they were told. However, many clients wanted photocopying and fax services, not the internet. The Club members admitted that this was an opportunity lost because they had neither of these services.

In actual fact they *could* offer faxing services because they had a printer and a scanner and an internet connection, so they could actually set-up and provide a faxing service. However, because they lacked the technological know-how, they were not aware that this was a possibility. This knowledge deficit was due to the fact that the Club members had not received information about the options that a scanner can enable. They only came to know about such a possibility during my visit with their ICT benefactor from IICD who demonstrated the faxing service potential. Therefore, the fact that a lot of clients lack interest in using the internet, could mean that either there was a limited understanding of the potential of the internet or it was simply not relevant to most people, even though this was one of the main cornerstones of the Club. As such, the project was not necessarily doing what it was intended to do, when the challenges highlighted above are put into context. Policy formulator *Mr Evans* had the following to say when I asked him what he thought of ICT projects like that of Bwacha:

*Interviewer: What about all these projects that are being funded by donors, say like the IICD project in Kalomo, what's your opinion on them?*

Interviewee: (dismissively) Those are just there!

*Interviewer: Mr Evans you are almost dismissing such projects - why?*

Interviewee: No...but if you look at what they are doing, they have put 5 computers around and they trained some women and started...(pause)... What I am saying is that you need to make an upheaval, you need to make critical mass, gain critical mass.

*Interviewer: So what do you think of these women's groups? (He laughs knowingly, but I press on). What do you really think of these telecentre projects that want to target women?*

*Interviewee (cynically): They just go and say here is a computer! And the women say "thank you ...chiyikeni uko (just put it in that corner there!)". (Laughter).*

In a sense, *Mr Evans* reiterates the challenges faced by the Women's Club as far as lack of consultation on an appropriate technology suitable for a particular culture and context is concerned. The point where he imitates recipients of a computer and then the donors are told "thank you, just put it in that corner there" shows that, as much as a tool like a computer is useful, it may not necessarily be so to some recipients who may not know or understand and appreciate its usefulness. It also says something about his attitudes towards the recipients, that they lack knowledge of what they have been given, therefore reinforcing the lack of power of a receiver to make the decision on the type of ICTs they might feel are more useful to their situation. Therefore, the issue is not just about donating what might be the latest computer hardware or indeed software but rather to consult and assess which ICTs might be useful and necessary for a particular situation and to provide information and training on its potential, together with the provision of additional resources to pay for maintenance and support, including consumables. In this case, *Mr Evans* suggests that the recipients merely accept the "gift" out of politeness but put it away where it gathers dust because it is of no use to them. The implication is that the recipients lack agency in deciding what is suitable to them and their communities. This is however not to suggest that the ICTs received by the Club were useless but rather to show that, had there been prior discussion, what was bought might have been more appropriate. Where a particular ICT might be valuable in one part of the world or community, the same might not necessarily follow elsewhere. Nevertheless, the Women's Club were still hopeful of acquiring a photocopier when they have saved enough money.

In addition to the challenges highlighted so far, the room that housed the Club was far too small, with inadequate ventilation which was problematic in very hot weather. The only ventilation system was a simple fan which was clearly insufficient. Additionally, the Club did not have an uninterrupted power supply. The reason given by Club members when asked why an uninterrupted power supply had not been purchased was that it was "too expensive". The women were unaware of the importance of such a system and its intended use. In essence, they were not adequately informed about how to take care of the donated equipment.

The lack of more up to date and advanced training in ICT skills was also a real concern to the Club members as they needed to be well versed and conversant with the dynamics and workings of technology in order to compete favourably at a local level. This was a problem cited many times by the women when I asked about some of the problems they were facing:

*Interviewer: Obviously, you must have a bit of problems here and there. What sort of problems do you face as an ICT club?*

Secretary: If at all we finish our training in ICTs we are going to achieve what we want.

*Interviewer: What do you want to achieve?*

Secretary: We want to have a thorough knowledge on how to operate all the machines in this office because at the moment we don't know much (with emphasis). It's a job on training. We want training. We need training.

*Interviewer: In what area and what sort of training?*

Secretary: On the computer system and these other facilities you are bringing for us. We need good training actually.

It is obvious that the basic training they received at the initial launch of the project is not enough. ICTs are dynamic and constantly evolve. This fact was not lost on the women, and in fact the desire for training was evident but they had no idea who was going to give them training, when they would be trained or how they would get training, because such a decision was out of their power. Clearly, this has implications for the eventual empowerment of women. For how can women be expected to be empowered if they lack training to keep abreast with the ever changing technologies? Training is vital to women's empowerment, from the planning stage through to the evaluation of any project.

Perhaps the lack of training and proper guidance also added to what seemed like a lack of marketing for such a project. For instance, the Club is advantageously and strategically situated, just behind a busy road, which goes to one of Zambia's favourite tourist attractions, the Victoria Falls. As tourists usually want to use internet facilities to keep in touch with family and friends, the Club could potentially attract free advertisement of the services on offer and consequently earn themselves a legion of not only local but international clients as well. However, they were yet to come up with a billboard poster advertising their enterprise which could be placed on the highway.

Projects of this nature and their supporters perhaps need to get back to the drawing board and understand what is really needed in specific communities in order to attain long term social and economic development for women. Importantly, to bear in mind what women themselves really need for themselves and their particular environments. Merely donating equipment without assessing all the details will not provide the empowerment that all the stakeholders say they want to attain. One sceptical interviewee expressed her concerns about donations in the following interview excerpt:

There is also this danger when people talk about women's ICT projects, it seems attractive because it's going to attract funding and whatever, but it's again the benefits

- are these benefits going to accrue to these women. That is the one million dollar question. (*Ms Grant, NGO Sector*)

What *Ms Grant* was alluding to is the point that donors themselves want to attract funding for themselves in the guise of providing ICT „gifts“ to „underprivileged“ women in countries like Zambia. The pledge of helping set up a telecentre in a developing country for women, is an easy way to attract funding because ICTs and women’s issues are at the moment issues of concern, especially at international fora, as seen for example from the WSIS initiative. Additionally, the interest may be less about attracting funding for one’s organisation than perhaps making a name for the organisation whose interest is in line with what may be a topical issue. Therefore, it becomes fashionable, or perhaps cynical, to simply buy some equipment without necessarily looking at the long term gains of recipient communities or exactly what it is that such communities might really need in not only the short but the long term as well in order to sustain themselves. For example, there is usually no follow-up with projects after the initial period of funding has ended. Recipients often do not know how they will maintain the equipment, who they can turn to for capacity building as technologies change all the time or whether they can afford continuous upgrades of computer software. In addition, what might seem a small provision needed for daily business usage such as paper or toner may simply be unaffordable in the long run if the project does not break even when funding has stopped.

It is also worth noting that the services at Bwacha attracted more men than women. On the one hand, it *was* empowering for the women running the Club and offering services. On the other, it was unclear why women in the local community were not utilising the services as much as men and what the possible implications were for their overall empowerment. One explanation could be that men were more educated and therefore more proactive in seeking services such as typing of CVs in order to send out to a possible employer, as I discovered. There was a similar reason for clients wanting photocopying and faxing services. Clients were keen to photocopy documents like national registration cards as well as school certificates to send to potential employers. What this means is that although it is conceivable that the women who were offering such services as typing and printing were empowering themselves economically through the income coming in from the services on offer, it was the men seeking such services who were taking best advantage of such services. In this way, men’s dominant position in that society was being reinforced. However, it is also fair to say that services such as typing and printing were not the only ones on offer. Women also created posters as educational tools through using ICTs like the digital camera which they then took around the surrounding communities to educate other women.

### **DRAWING IT ALL TOGETHER: EMPOWERMENT AND REALISING MDG’s – TO WHAT EXTENT?**

In the context of ICTs, it would appear that in order for new technologies to be able to empower women both socially and economically, they would at least need to embody Malhotra, Schuler and Boender’s (2002) four concepts of empowerment which include options, choice, control and power. In this respect Huyer (2006, p.27) states that

...for women to be active agents in their empowerment in the knowledge society, as a result of independent and informed choices, it is required that women become creators

and developers of the technology and the content it carries. [There is need therefore] to promote the ability to access, use, create, and distribute knowledge.

This promotion can be seen to be taking place in the Bwacha's Women's ICT Club, particularly targeting women. However, it should be noted that such „promotion“ is rarely enough on its own because there is considerable lack of awareness about the nature, function and potential of complex ICTs such as the internet. Choice, though, does seem to be operating inasmuch as women choose to use particular technologies such as the mobile phone.

In addition, wider participation in ICT policy could be encouraged more in the Kalomo Bwacha Women's ICT Club. With the infrastructure (albeit unstable) in place, government could provide forums via the internet to encourage those in rural areas such as the Club members, to participate in policy consultations. Or government could perhaps install a dedicated mobile phone line, free of charge, for the public to communicate with local councillors or other government officers. Or mobile phones could be used for opinion polling. Such measures would encourage a sense of involvement in policy-making and community consultation, particularly for women. Policy makers make decisions (top-down approach) that will have an impact on women (and men) without necessarily having effective input from those whom such decisions will affect. It was not unusual to talk to research participants who indicated “awareness and understanding” or lack of it, as a major issue when it came to how ICTs such as the internet could help them socially and economically. It can however, be said that there is an element of social and economic empowerment for the women of Kalomo. Social empowerment has come through easier communication via the mobile phone while economic empowerment has developed through the ICT-related services they offer to their community at a fee. However, women's potential to fully utilize ICTs is compromised by their lack of understanding and knowledge, a lack they fully recognize and about which they expressed frustration.

## **MEASURING WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT**

There is always a need to try and measure, evaluate or otherwise show whether a change has taken place and if so, its impact. However, empowerment is a difficult concept to measure not just because it is difficult to quantify but also because dynamic processes and changes are difficult to predict. Oxaal and Baden (1997) state that although there are ways of developing empowerment indicators, the multi-faceted nature of empowerment means that such indicators will not always be completely accurate or comprehensive. However, from the evidence so far discussed in this paper, it is clear that for the most part women were mere passive beneficiaries of, for example, donor aid, government intervention and other initiatives without being consulted about what those donated items should be. Here the decision, control and power of the benefits being received lie with the benefactors who are the donors and not the „beneficiaries“ who are the Club owners. Due to this, it can be argued that there is very little empowerment for women, particularly as women have little choice in the matter of the benefits/equipment they received. For instance, although the Kalomo Bwacha Women's ICT Club received a number of donated ICT items, they found that having access to the internet, for example, was not a very effective tool for their empowerment because it did not meet their needs as technology in demand by the local community. What *was* more useful (or would have been) was photocopying facilities and provision of a mobile phone. Although the donors had provided a mobile phone among other ICTs, they had not donated a photocopier

which was important in income-generation as it was the one service which most of their customers wanted. Unfortunately, a photocopier had not been donated because it was not considered relevant by the donors. Had the donors consulted with the women on which technologies were most important, they would have perhaps provided something more relevant.

### **REALISING SOME OF THE MDGs**

Although there are clear challenges with the Bwacha Women's ICT Club, there are also positives that have resulted due to the project especially for women. In looking at the MDGs and whether some have been met, there are three MDGs that have had a head start as a result. These MDGs include:

#### ***THE PROMOTION OF GENDER EQUALITY AND EMPOWERMENT FOR WOMEN***

The fact that women were running the ICT project and reporting some financial improvement of some sort, is a bonus for this MDG. Additionally, it can be said to be empowering, particularly in a community where men are used to taking leadership in almost all aspects of life, be it financial and any innovative projects.

#### ***COMBATING HIV/AIDS, MALARIA AND OTHER DISEASES***

The members of the Club were using the computer to publish articles, posters, fliers including brochures to make their community and surrounding others aware about the dangers of HIV/AIDS and other health related concerns. Some of the information was also being printed from the internet when connection was available. This again is a step towards meeting the above MDG through use of ICTs.

#### ***DEVELOPMENT OF GLOBAL PARTNERSHIPS TO ACHIEVE DEVELOPMENT***

Members of the club expressed gratitude and happiness for the potential that ICTs offered in establishing networks with others in much more developed areas. They particularly pointed out to networks they developed with fellow women in their international donors' country of origin. They claimed this will enable them to learn from each other and to help build business links that may support their development. They acknowledged that ICTs played a huge part in establishing such inroads as they knew relatively nothing of outside networks without ICTs.

### **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

The aim of discussing the Bwacha Women's ICT initiative was to understand how the project was empowering women and whether through that some of the MDGs had been realised. It was also to understand the role that donors play and how these can have an impact on long term sustainability and development. Overall, it was to assess and evaluate the role of ICTs in the general empowerment and development of women, particularly in a rural remote poor community of a developing country like Zambia. Although the Bwacha Women's ICT Club had been received with enthusiasm by the women and their community, members of the Club complained that they had only received very basic computer training and as such wanted more capacity building ICT programmes to keep up to date with ever changing technologies.

This was clearly not happening and threatened women's long term enthusiasm for technology and subsequent use of it in their day to day business. This is something donor agencies ought to take into serious consideration as they donate ICT equipment and accompanying software. This is not to suggest that donors have to do everything but merely to point out that there needs to be some level of responsibility in terms of future sustenance especially for training without which ICTs cannot leave a positive impact on communities and the empowerment of women.

A major lesson learnt from this assessment is that appropriateness of a technology matters. The fact that the Club was much interested in a photocopier, may have seemed a very simplistic technology but it shows that it is the locals who know the needs of their communities much more than an outsider. However, much a technology like the internet matters to most people, especially in the developed world, the case may not be equally the same in parts of the developing world. It is perhaps due to this reason that not many people used the internet aside from the fact that the connection was also extremely very erratic.

This paper has showed that, albeit not in much detail, that development paradigms continuously evolve. From the more macro-centred level of a country's development to micro-centred approach in which emphasis is more on human well being. In this case, the human development paradigm, which is about enhancing people's life choices avails the potential for meeting some of the MDGs which include overcoming some gender concerns especially as they relate to women's empowerment. The paper has shown that some of these are potentially possible with the application of ICTs as the case has shown in the Bwacha Women's ICT Club project. The outlined potential benefits as evidenced within the Club relate to women empowering themselves by offering services to their community including tackling issues of HIV/AIDS and developing partnership. The development of partnerships and the other MDGs touched upon are an integral to the development agenda of Zambia including women's empowerment.

As far as empowerment through ICTs is concerned, this is a particularly difficult element to measure because although indicators are necessary to show if empowerment has taken place, the multi-faceted nature of the very term makes quantification somewhat imprecise. However, empowerment *can* be identified by looking for signs of life improvement. For example, despite some problems that the Bwacha Women's ICT Club potentially face, there are elements of social and economic empowerment that *have* been achieved. Socially, through improved communication and economically through the financial benefits the Club has seen from the ICT-based services which they are now able to offer to their community. Additionally, other research participants also identified communication improvements due to their use of the internet and mobile phone which can be seen as social empowerment. Given what we know about the different kinds and levels of empowerment and from the findings of this study, it is clear that ICTs *can* make a difference to women's lives, including financial improvements. However, what is equally clear is that the potential of ICTs for women's empowerment lies as much with women's knowledge of and training in, the use of ICTs, as with their access to these technologies. Crucially, any ICT strategy which is formulated in the developing world must include women's voices; any aid/donation package which includes ICTs, must involve the likely recipients in discussions about which ICTs will be most appropriate and relevant to specific communities and ensure that maintenance costs are built

into project plans; any gender-based ICT projects which are funded by the West must take account of the different social and cultural norms which exist in many developing countries and work with local women to ensure viable projects are developed. Without this kind of grassroots consultation, the potential of ICTs to genuinely empower women will continue to be restricted.

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