

David J. Grimshaw and Shalini Kala (eds.). *Strengthening Rural Livelihoods—The Impact of Information and Communication Technologies in Asia*. International Development and Research Centre (IDRC). Canada: Replika Press Pvt. Ltd. 2011. 152 pages. Paperback. CDN \$16.27.¹

We live in the age of information in which Information and Communication Technology (ICT) usage has diffused throughout the world. In many developing countries, making a call overseas has now become cheaper than buying a piece of bread. In this context, it has been observed that ICTs have a tremendous potential to stimulate growth by reducing transaction costs and travel times, creating jobs, encouraging greater social networking, enhancing labour productivity, and facilitating the diffusion of innovations [UNDP (2001)]. This way ICTs have a crucial role to play in economic development and poverty reduction. But to what extent can this claim be advocated? Critics argue that the emerging global digital divide is also here to stay and that the success of the ICTs will be determined by education and income levels in a society. *Strengthening Rural Livelihoods—The Impact of Information and Communication Technologies in Asia* is a collection of six case studies that investigate the extent to which ICTs can be a driver of local economic development in Asia. In particular they evaluate the relationship between ICTs and rural economic growth by focusing on diffusion of useful information in rural areas through mobile phones and the internet. Each of the case studies in this book was a part of a research programme on 'Knowledge Networking for Rural Development in Asia Pacific'. The programme aimed at investigating the extent to which ICTs enable farmers to sell their produce at competitive prices and measure the gains in connecting geographically distant areas. The six studies provide some of the latest evidence from the field in Asia.

The case study by Sriganesh Lokanathan, Harsha de Silvia and Iran Fernando in Chapter 2, explores the issue of how small farmers in Sri Lanka can benefit from price transparency. The ICT intervention took the form of access to an agricultural platform through which farmers could obtain information on current and forward market crop prices via SMS or by calling a dedicated phone line reserved to answer their queries free of cost. The experiment resulted in increasing incomes of farmers who were part of the intervention and sold their produce only after acquiring market price information. Similarly, Chapter 3 discusses an ICT intervention in one of the poorest districts of Tamil Nadu in India. The authors Daniel Anand Raj, Poo Murugesan, Vijay Pratap, Singh Aditya, S. Olaganathan, and K. Sasikumar, made a crop nutrient support system which provided crop nutrient, weeding, and field preparation information to small farmers via SMS or free calls via mobile phones. The intervention was extremely successful as the farmers who were registered with the system experienced a 100 percent increase in their gross incomes. In the case study in Chapter 4, Haider Rizvi, introduced a phone-based agricultural advisory service called *Lifelines* to a group of small farmers in Haryana district's Mewat village in 2009. Farmers in the intervention group accessed the service with questions regarding their agricultural practices and found that to be a more convenient and cost effective advice seeking method as compared to discussing their problems with local farmers and experts often located at a distance from their village. The positive impact of this intervention

¹Students can access the book on IDRC's website in pdf:
<http://idl-bnc.idrc.ca/dspace/bitstream/10625/45947/1/132419.pdf>

included improved soil health, increased savings and incomes, and decreased local borrowing for 75 percent of the farmers who used the service. It also influenced the non-agricultural characteristics of farmers, such as their local education and, skill levels, and the frequency of inter-village networking. In Chapter 5, the authors Amila Balasuriya and Nilakshi de Silva investigate the impact of ICTs on wage workers in rural Sri Lanka. They introduced a job portal which matches the demand and supply for agricultural as well as non-agricultural work by connecting relevant workers and employers via mobile phones. It concludes that when waged workers turn to ICTs for job information instead of seeking advice from friends and families, they are able to find much better jobs that fit their needs and requirements. The intervention also highlighted the positive change in perception of rural waged workers towards ICT usage.

The last two chapters of this book consist of case studies that differ from the above mentioned studies since they focus on interventions that used the internet instead of a mobile phone. While Chapter 6 evaluates the impact of the launch of an e-AGRIKultura internet project in an agrarian reforms community of the Philippines, Chapter 7 analyses a rural information support project conducted in Ningzia Province in China. In both the cases an internet based agricultural advisory service was introduced to a group of local farmers and their perceptions were surveyed later on. The case studies in this book have demonstrated that when farmers are provided information on market prices, soil preparation, and nutrients the vulnerability induced by shocks and seasonalities in their lives are considerably reduced. Hence the incorporation of ICTs into rural livelihoods can play an important role in fostering local economic development since agriculture still remains the backbone of most Asian economies.

While the evidence from this book is quite encouraging in demonstrating the willingness of rural communities to adopt ICTs in traditional practices, it should be noted that in four out of the six case studies, at least 50 percent of the population that has been treated has had at least 6-10 years of education. A bigger challenge than the incorporation of ICTs into rural lives will be to ensure the sustainability of ICT interventions in poor rural families across the world. Four out of the six case studies consist of less than 250 people in the intervention group, and extending such projects to wider populations could prove to be extremely difficult. Moreover, high social cohesiveness in the communities investigated could also have increased the success rates of the interventions. The case studies could have been more useful if the differing impact of ICTs on rural males and females had been discussed.

However, despite the above mentioned caveats, this book contributes to the much needed literature that investigates the links between ICTs and poverty. Each of the case studies is an interesting application of how Randomised Control Trials can be applied to evaluate technology interventions elsewhere in the world. The book provides some excellent research questions that can also form the basis of postgraduate research work for students in which they may also consider the above mentioned caveats. It will also appeal to academics, public policy makers, and civil society organisations who are interested in investigating the effects of ICTs on rural communities.

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