

**Will Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) change life in the rural areas of countries in Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific (ACP)? Will they make village life more attractive for young people? Or are they just not appropriate, too expensive, or not available at all?**

**Tell us what you would like to achieve to make life better in the villages of your country, especially for young, and how ICTs could help you to reach your goal.**

Life is a process of constant change so it is easy to state in the affirmative that the introduction of new information and communication technologies will make a change and difference to the lives of people living in rural communities. The extent and result of this change will depend on how they are used and what support networks there are to encourage their use for positive outcomes. There is potential for both amazing good or incredible damage to rural communities through the introduction and use of ICT's in rural villages of developing countries.

In this current time the island of Dominica is experiencing the introduction of a variety of new information and communication technologies such as satellite television, mobile telephone networks and Internet access. To summarise - Television is a mass media product of which the overwhelming majority of content (aside from one or two community led programmes) is one-way communication with little input from the audience. The programmes are mainly American in origin and their content based on entertainment. It focuses on the agendas of those in control namely governments, media industries and advertisers. Mobile phone technology has made it easier to stay in touch with families, friends and business contacts but its use is largely limited to personal one to one communication. The Internet however is very different and is by far the most free, liberal and diverse medium. It has the potential to be the most useful in allowing access to and transmission of a wide range of information *and* facilitating communication. Therefore it is this technology that I will focus on throughout this essay in examining both its positive and negative effects on the lives of people in rural communities.

The Internet has revolutionised the way we access information. From a networked computer it is possible to access a virtual library with a plethora of subjects being covered. If someone in the world is doing it thinking it or believing it – it is on there somewhere!! This makes it highly effective to discover a wide range of knowledge and to introduce fresh ideas and new perspectives. This is especially useful for a small island or any isolated rural community, which has limited book supplies, specialist magazine ranges and lack of direct exposure to cultural differences and lifestyles which can sometimes result in narrowly focused mind states and lack of awareness about global issues. Being able to find and share information with likeminded others decreases the isolation one might feel if just conversing with people in their immediate geographic province. The Internet expands our communities and networks and allows people to operate business, personal and group relationships on a global scale. Virtual communities with trans-national membership helps in breaking down nationalistic barriers and enabling us to interact with, learn from and share others from different cultural backgrounds. It is an excellent education tool, which broadens the scope of study and can make it cheaper to obtain facts and figures for homework, research or personal study.

The Internet is also unique in that it is not just about obtaining information but also provides a way to transmit it to others. It has become a democratised public sphere and allows small groups to have much more of a say than through mass media communications such as television, radio and newspapers. Once trained it is relatively easy for small communities and groups to set up web pages, form web groups and gain a presence internationally. It allows these 'little' voices to be heard, represent themselves, and convey vital knowledge to the rest of the world. This is effective in creating awareness of issues in the developing world. For example the typical western consumer may not be aware of the production and work that goes into creating the food they buy in supermarkets. However if a pack of organic bananas had a website listed on its packaging they may be encouraged to find out more. By viewing a website set up by small scale farmers with their production methods, work involved and lifestyles outlined a consumer could then be further encouraged to buy more produce from sustainable earth-friendly farmers. Through this information they share the experiences of these people and make the vital connections between their lifestyle and the impact it has on those in developing countries.

If the use of technology is seen from this perspective it has the potential to create a world democratic community. To unite us all in the vision that we are all connected, living on one planet and we are all responsible in working collectively, in harmony with one another and the earth. These are vitally needed perspectives in current times of division, hostility and wars. Ideally it would allow us all to participate in world and global networks whilst *remaining distinct in cultural practices and retaining our diversity*.

We can see clearly the positive benefits and great potential that can be obtained through using the Internet. However the availability of information does not guarantee the effective usage of such a resource. Unfortunately there is another less optimistic side to this equation, which sees a cultural takeover of small communities and indigenous peoples through exposure to alien cultures and values.

The majority of content on the Internet is still sponsored or run by multinational corporations who have the money to invest in promoting their products and services. They promote fast-paced urban lifestyles with glamorous images, multiple promises of financial success and all the luxury associated with material wealth. Images of this ideology are presented in attractive ways and can be very seductive and luring for young people looking for ways of improving their lives. Rural life is downgraded as primitive and backwards. As young people in rural communities aspire to the ideals of foreign cultures they are encouraged to seek their fortunes elsewhere, to reject traditional ways and view them as inferior. This domination of western culture means that globalisation at present rather than celebrating cultural diversity is attempting to merge us into one monoculture. It dominates not because it is the best system or one that is lived by the majority but because it has the means to project and enforce itself on the rest of the world. This can be very dangerous for small rural communities as traditional values and lifestyles are undermined. Careers in farming and agriculture are downgraded in status and seen as unworthy goals. As Dominica's late Prime Minister Pierre Charles stated this influx of foreign culture leads to the development of a 'Cadillac mentality in a bicycle economy'. Attitudes, which are inappropriate for the cultural conditions can lead to a constant dissatisfaction and unrest amongst the population who are striving to reach unobtainable ideals.

Of course it is not possible to dictate to people what they should and should not look at. Yet quite often people from small communities lack the awareness to fully assess the appropriateness of the information they receive. They can see the products available but are unable to see the whole way of life that leads to being able to obtain these things, which can create a 'streets paved with gold' attitude, an idealisation of the western model of development without seeing its more negative side such as pollution, crime, breakdown of families and a lack of access to fresh foods. Media awareness training and education is required for people to develop skills of critical analysis and become able to fairly assess the usefulness and appropriateness of new information in context. Then we will be able to come up with measurements of success which are based on more than money or economic growth but also incorporate factors such as how fertile the soil is, how much time we spend with our children, how many hours per day we laugh, how physically, mentally and emotionally healthy we are as individuals and as a community.

Personally I have found having access to the Internet invaluable in my work which involves research and development within holistic healing and the creation of sustainable environments and communities. I use the technology as a way of gaining access to ideas, keeping up to date and study but it is never a substitute for the hands on practical work and the joy of experiencing the benefits of my natural surroundings. I have been inspired by holistic nature retreats, organic farms using alternative technology and the possibilities for my country as a key player in these fields. I feel it is important to show people how to make the best from nature in a positive way. Information on Permaculture, organic farming, intentional communities, ecovillages, herbal medicine, natural health and the Earth Charter all give credence and support to the value and necessity of rural life and explore techniques that can be used to enhance current lifestyles without damaging the environment or culture.

First world countries have had access to these information technologies for a great amount of time yet as Thom Hartmann states in his book 'The Last Hours of Ancient Sunlight' although we are living in an age of incredible information we are suffering from a "knowledge deficit" We know many abstract and academic facts and figures but the real life basic and vital survival skills such as how to source foods, living according to the seasons and natural health treatments have been lost especially by people living in urban, industrial environments. Losing our appreciation for and connection to nature causes a multiplicity of illnesses ranging from depression to cancer, attention deficit disorders to obesity and heart disease. These are the results from eating the wrong foods and spending too much time in artificial environments. I would not like to see rural

communities changing to imitate models of development, which are at present showing themselves to be unsustainable, unhealthy, unnatural and on the verge of collapse. We cannot assume the world will continue on an ever-increasing trend to technologically based lifestyles. It is important that agricultural techniques, traditional medicines, ceremonial practices and indigenous life experiences are not lost due to the exposure to the cultural practices of others.

I would like to see Information Technology used for the empowerment of our young people and to reinforce the importance and efficacy of traditional rural life whilst informing us how to make appropriate technological advances. This can be done through online courses and lessons, which allow young people to learn new skills and gain qualifications whilst remaining in their country and contributing to the local economy. It is crucial to give all people a chance to be heard and respected for their own perspectives and experiences. Through this we could gain a deeper appreciation and value of local eco-systems, local produce, biodiversity, stable communities and economies. I would also like us to retain a respect for diversity, learning new ways whilst preserving the old and for young people in my community to be grounded in the legacy of their past, firmly embedded in the present and inspired and purposeful to create a positive future.

Overall access to ICT's provides enormous potential and is representative of the decision we face in every area of our life – it's in our choice of how to use them that is the main factor in deciding if they will enhance or detract from the lives of young people in rural communities. The Internet and other ICT's can be useful tools, yet simply providing the means for accessing information is not enough to make a positive difference and to ensure the integrity of rural life. They need to be introduced as part of an integrated venture, which has nature-led and focused education as the core and where they are simply one part of the project, another useful tool in the same way as are cutlasses, wheelbarrows, books, ancient wisdom and local cultural exchange. The technology alone will not help us – only a combination of our choices, support in how to use it, what to access and application of that knowledge have that potential.

Terri Henry  
July 2004