

Women and ICT for Open and Distance Learning: Some Formal and Non-Formal Approaches, Experiences and Strategies from the Caribbean

Judith Soares, University of the West Indies, Barbados

Abstract

This paper explores some issues related to the involvement of women in formal and non-formal open and distance learning initiatives in the Anglophone Caribbean. It offers that non-formal distance learning, through the use of information communication technology i.e. learning for non-academic, personal and social development must be considered as integral to the education of the peoples of the Caribbean. We focus here on the case of rural women in the small remote community of Fancy, St. Vincent and the Grenadines.

While we recognise the importance of distance learning as a tool to broaden access to formal academic certification for women in the region, we also argue that distance learning is equally important in non-formal education by providing access to information to rural women in the interest of personal development, broadening their knowledge base, developing their skills and techniques in various areas of agriculture and, hence, the economic base of their community. Essentially, then, open and distance learning, through the use of ICT contribute to personal and social growth and development.

In the context of the Caribbean, it is our view that some of the critical ways to overcome barriers and shortcomings of womens participation in community and national development lie in promoting equal access for rural women to scientific and technological areas, enhancing literacy and providing opportunities for increased technological training. Also, with the predominance of women in the community and household decision making, their grasp of indigenous and local resources and lifestyle along with modern and relevant techniques of production are critical for sustainable livelihoods.

INTRODUCTION

Reliable research indicate that in spite of rapid urbanisation, approximately three billion or 60 per cent of the people in developing countries, and half of the people of the world, still live in rural areas. In addition, three quarters of the world's poor, those earning less than a dollar a day, the majority of this cohort female, live in rural areas. Non-attendance in school, early dropout of students, adult illiteracy and gender inequality in education are disproportionately high in rural areas, as is poverty. Urban-rural disparities in educational investment and in the quality of teaching and learning are widespread.

It is within such a context that one sees the need for educational activities to be linked to the specific needs of rural communities for skills and capacities to seize economic opportunities, improve livelihood and enhance the quality of life. A multi-sectoral educational approach involving all ages and formal, non-formal and informal education is necessary.

Non-formal learning includes adult and community learning, distance learning as well as specific initiatives such as the possibility of a virtual learning campus on sustainable development, and youth-to-youth education initiatives. Non-formal learning offers ways of bringing organized educational opportunities to a diverse range of learners, from rural women to out-of-school adolescents to redundant workers and the retired. In view of the multiple connections of sustainable development with other aspects of learning, education for sustainable development can find its place as part of continuing education from sociology to agriculture.

Regardless of the nature of its organisation, non-formal education programmes are often those most closely linked with direct application and functional outcomes. Frequently centred around adult literacy, learning addresses issues of local relevance, thus providing an orientation into which the concerns of sustainable development easily fit. Indeed, much of what is labelled adult literacy already addresses such concerns - there is need to make sustainable development a more deliberate framework for such efforts and a more consistent thread in adult learning.

Reaching hundreds or even thousands of subsistence farmers will require innovative strategies adapted to local contexts and socio-cultural patterns of work. For example, in the small rural community of Fancy, St. Vincent and the Grenadines where women are the principal farmers of food crops, there is a female cooperative work association which perform economic, financial and social functions. Such groupings are prime places for identifying and discussing issues of sustainable development and deciding how to implement more sustainable patterns of agricultural production and natural resource consumption in a rural Caribbean environment.

It is the intention of this paper to focus on the Fancy community as an experiment in open and distance learning to bring educational or learning opportunities to women, and by extension, a community involved in agricultural activities.

The project, which includes a research component, is a collaborative effort between The UWI Women and Development Unit (WAND) and The UWI Distance Education Centre (UWIDEC) as these units attempt to respond to the institution's strategic plan.

ST. VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES

Fancy is a small remote, rural community in St. Vincent and the Grenadines which is situated in the Caribbean, at 13 15' North and 61 12' West. It lies between the south of St. Lucia and to the north of Grenada, its closest neighbours. The archipelago has a land area of 389 km² and includes 33 islands, the largest of which is St Vincent (344 km²), followed by Bequia, Union Island, Canouan, Mayreau and Mustique (see map below). The capital is Kingstown. The population is 116,394 (July 2002 estimate), and the people are descendants of Africans, Asians, Europeans and Carib. The local currency is the Eastern Caribbean dollar

[See map]

ICT PROJECT FOR ST. VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES

The Women and Development Unit (WAND), one of the five specialised units of The UWI's School of Continuing Studies is mandated to work towards the social advancement of women in the English-Speaking Caribbean through community intervention initiatives, non-formal education, research and documentation.

Established in 1978, WAND, in keeping with its mandate has been involved in community initiatives in the interest of women, particularly rural women who tend to be more socially disadvantaged. These initiatives have involved, over the years, skills training, non-formal education and income generating projects in the Eastern Caribbean. For example, a preschool in La Pointe, St. Lucia is one of the main projects in existence since 1996/97. Set up in collaboration with the La Pointe Development Committee, a community-based women's organization, the preschool continues to serve some 26 children between the ages of 0-5 years whose parents find it convenient to send their children to a preschool closer to their homes. Notably, this is the only preschool in St. Lucia that is run by a community-based organisation. In addition, workshops and training sessions have been held with women (and some men) in the areas of parenting, disaster management, gender relations, conflict management, writing a proposal, the importance of self in the community, HIV/AIDS, retrofitting and advocacy as part of the community development exercise. Skills training has also been an important component of this community effort and areas of training include paper making.

Fancy, St. Vincent and the Grenadines

In Fancy, WAND collaborates with the Fancy Community Help Group (FCHG), a community-based women's organisation comprising some 22 women, the only community organization involved in economic, social and financial activities towards engendering community 'development'. An income-generating project implemented in 1997, began with the women rearing pigs for sale. The idea for this kind of project came from the women themselves who took the responsibility for distributing piglets to members until all members were in possession of a piglet. With funds from IFAD, the women were able to build pig pens. This project has mushroomed to include (i) a sewing project whereby members produce children's uniforms, bed linen, drapes on a commercial basis; and (ii) a revolving loan scheme to address financial issues.

Any community project must provide necessary skills and knowledge critical to understanding social issues in the

community and for the advancement of the community members. Hence, WAND is involved in a continuing programme of nonformal education for both adults and young people, in such areas as HIV/AIDS, teenage pregnancy, conflict management, gender relations, understanding and working with the elderly, disaster management. What must be noted here is that it is the community, through the FCHG, which is part of the decision making process, takes the lead in all projects and activities.

Why Fancy?

With a population of about 650, this socially cohesive community is located at the northern most tip of St. Vincent. (On a clear day, one can see the island of St. Lucia). The community members, although vulnerable to being thrown into poverty, cannot be said to be poor in conventional terms. Most of them own their own houses as well as plots of land on which they farm. While, some people own farm lands or have access to the land, there is still a number of people, women, men and young people, who are unemployed and there are really no possibilities for employment in that community.

Fancy was chosen as a community for involvement because it is a disadvantaged rural community where the main economic activities are farming and fishing. The village is the most remote community on the island. In terms of communication, there is only one entrance and exit to the community which lies in a hilly terrain in an area which is prone to land and rock slides. The poor state of the access road removes Fancy even further from communities in the northeastern district where the community is located. Telephone access is not universal and most households have a radio and a television set. At the best of times, however, community members have great difficulty in receiving radio transmissions from broadcast centres in St. Vincent and this situation becomes more acute in times of natural disasters. There is a post office, but there are no government offices, libraries or banking facilities. The remoteness also puts the community at a disadvantage in terms of the ability of its members to gather information on issues which affect their daily lives such as farming methods and techniques, information to assist their children with their academic work, health issues etc. This means that for adults, there is really no way of expanding their knowledge base except by leveraging information and communication technology to facilitate the process of learning to improve their quality of life. Community members also have little access to government training programmes. Unless these training programmes are held in the village, it is extremely difficult for adults to participate in any learning activity since training sessions are usually held after regular working hours.

This is critical because Fancy community members appreciate the value of education, learning and social progress. It must be noted that school attendance is high in a community where there is one primary school. Children over 11 years of age attend secondary schools in the country's capital, Kingstown. Health concerns are taken care of by a resident nurse who runs the clinic which is open throughout the week. Serious illnesses are referred to the General Hospital in the capital.

The Project

An ICT project will open community members to the world of information and so take the community to the world. In this sense, it can provide for community members, critical information and skills which can help them to improve their lives and the life of the community. For them, ICT is not just a teaching tool, a research instrument and a source of information, it is also a means of communication which is critical in a situation where the community can be cut off from the rest of the island during a natural disaster. Relevant areas of information would include, for example: developments in agriculture, health, education, finance.

Distance education has been shown to effectively reduce the gap between the domestic role of women and educational career aspirations by allowing women to combine study and domestic role in a flexible way. But this barrier may be too great to deal with in rural areas. For women in these areas, relevant community-based programmes are more likely to be effective. Our strategy here, then, is to develop a programme of learning suited to the socio-economic needs and cultural context of Fancy.

In 2004, WAND discussed with the Fancy Help Group the project as well as the possibility of establishing a small training centre and a community radio. The Group had identified a building as a possible location for both activities. The women were unsuccessful in securing the use of the building as a community training centre. They later identified a second building and proposed that they would get the assistance of the Member of Parliament in getting the use of a room to conduct the proposed activities. In June of 2005, a meeting with the women concluded that they would continue in their efforts to locate suitable space. Earlier this year, at another meeting with the women it was decided that the project would be initially housed in the preschool where it would provide services for the health clinic which is also on the school complex.

In this community driven, multi-stakeholder project, the goal is to establish community access centres to achieve "anywhere, anytime, anyplace" education. The original idea involved the placement of 10 computer terminals in a small building with the possibility of extending it to provide space for a community radio station, so as to create a

multi-media centre. The project will include training to use the internet, word processing, spreadsheets, accounting packages, etc. and eventually getting the community to establish a community portal with e-mail accounts etc. An important consideration is the use of wifi for the whole community using a shared network. Another consideration is the use of renewable energy e.g. solar panels and a Bio Diesel plant as cost reduction measures and as a means of sensitising the community to the use of alternative sources of energy.

Why a Radio Station?

A community radio station is one that is operated in the community, for the community, about the community and by the community. The community can be territorial or geographical – a township, village, district or island. It can also be a group of people with common interests, who are not necessarily living in one defined territory. Consequently, community radio can be managed or controlled by one group, by combined groups, or of people such as women, children, farmers, fisherfolk, ethnic groups, or senior citizens. What distinguishes community radio from other media is the high level of people's participation, both in management and program production aspects. Furthermore, individual community members and local institutions are the principal sources of support for its operation.

Community radio gives community members access to information because it gives them access to the means of communication. The most relevant information – educational and developmental – is disseminated and exchanged. Important local issues are aired. A free market place of ideas and opinions is opened up and people are given the opportunity to express themselves socially, politically and culturally. Community radio helps to put the community members in charge of their own affairs.

Observation(s)

Access to ICT can provide the tools of empowerment for women and build their self-confidence and self-esteem and give them a sense of independence, but such a community project can create conflicts between women and men. As feminists have pointed out for decades, when women pursue an interest or an activity which does not relate directly to their domestic role, and effectively expose and challenge unequal power relations within the family, they often meet with strong resistance from male partners because of suspicion/jealous as well as ridicule [Evans: 1995]. In Fancy this is not the case as both women and men have worked together to implement and sustain projects women have been involved in over the years.

Project Challenges

The major challenge faced by the Project is that of funding.

Challenges to the Community

At present, no major challenges for the community (women and men) were identified by the members of the FCHG.

Benefits to the Community and The UWI

- Enhancement of knowledge of agricultural techniques, skills, technology and technological developments, farming practices, availability of resources, environmental and developmental issues etc.
- Research, news, information, community programmes
- Health information e.g healthy eating habits, for healthier living and assisting the creation of a database recording system for the community health centre
- Opportunities for increased technological training
- Knowledge of accounting procedures
- Knowledge of issues relating to women and other women's groups
- Cheaper and faster communication with friends and families through email

- Reduction in expenditure for community events e.g. printing of wedding invitations and programmes
- Greater cohesiveness centred around the project which would be owned by FCHG and the community
- Potential for replication throughout the Caribbean
- Provide the platform for future delivery of The UWI's programmes for personal development through the School of Continuing Studies
- To bring higher education to potential students in the remote, rural areas of the Caribbean

CONCLUSION

As The UWI pursues its vision for the 21st Century, the Women and Development Unit and The UWIDEC continue to fulfill the institution's mandate to support the strategic thrust of the transformation of Caribbean societies through education by implementing a project of this kind which will provide access to an expanded clientele.

By leveraging ICTs, WAND and The UWIDEC will bring both formal and non-formal education to those socially disadvantaged groups in communities which were not traditionally served by The UWI. At the same time, the implementation of the project will contribute to the removal of barriers associated with women's participation in community and national development by addressing issues of equity and access by providing that access to improved literacy and scientific, technological and social training and awareness. It is in this same vein that the project will not only ensure sustainable livelihoods for individual households and the community as a whole, but it will point community members in the direction of sustainable development.

REFERENCES

Evans, K. (1995) "Distance education: Helping Overcome Barriers to Women's Technological Education in the COL's News Publication. *Vol.6 #2*.

2

Figures

map st. vincent and the Grenadines

[Back to Abstract](#)