

# A Gender Critique of Uganda's Rural ICT Access Policy: Opportunities and Challenges

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## Abstract

Rural access to ICT has been highlighted as key in driving development. It is argued that rural access to ICT boosts production, improves household income, reduces inequalities and widens market options. The Uganda government in 2001 put in place a rural ICT access policy named the Rural Communications Development Policy (RCDP) that provided for a Rural Communications Development Fund (RCDF) through which government subsidises communication investment in areas that are considered unprofitable if left to free market forces to promote universal access. Since 2002 support has been provided to establish telephone points, computer training centres and Internet services.

In 2006 a gender analysis of the Rural Communications Development Policy/Fund (RCDP/F) was conducted in 14 districts of Uganda. The objective was to find out the extent to which the initiatives supported under RCDP/F had provided universal access to rural communications by both women and men and whether the implementation process took into account gender considerations. The findings and subsequent follow-ups in two districts show contradictions and discrepancy between policy conception and implementation, pointing to failure to achieve intended objectives of reaching out especially to women. No women's organisation had ever accessed support. Culture, attitudes and gender blind project selection criteria inhibited females' access to funding. The policy and its implementation did not take into account women's and gender needs. The paper suggests a review and re-conceptualisation of the RCDP/F to remove contradictions so that selected projects benefit women and men equitably.

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General Terms: Theory, human factors

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**1. INTRODUCTION**

Rural access to ICT has been highlighted as key in driving development. It is seen as a way of reaching out to those that would be excluded from the developmental benefits of ICT. A Universal Access Fund (UAF) is one mechanism for motivating and mobilizing private investment into rural areas through subsidies and incentives under a free market telecommunications sector so that services are extended to disadvantaged areas and people. The UAF model encourages private telecommunications operators to compete in extending services to poor rural areas as a means of achieving universal access and country-wide market development from a country's own resources [UCC 2005a].

The UAF which is the Rural Communications Development Fund (RCDF) in Uganda has been acclaimed as a best practice model for funding access for poor rural populations in low income countries [UCC 2005a]\*. The RCDF established under the Rural Communications Development Policy (RCDP) 2001 is meant to act as a means of intervention to ensure that basic communication services of acceptable quality are accessible at affordable prices and at reasonable distances by all people in Uganda. The fund leverages investment and is not a comprehensive solution. Uganda's access fund is contributed to by a one percent levy on revenues of telecommunications, post and courier businesses and has been operational since 2002. The fund extends support to all kinds of ICTs and document delivery services into rural areas. The fund is accessed through a formal application process following set guidelines.

While it was envisaged that by mid 2005, every district would have an RCDF supported internet point of presence (PoP) with high-speed wireless connections available to training institutions, cyber cafes, telecentres and private customers, to date this has not been achieved. Despite the fact that the country's approach has been successful in enabling private operators to exceed targets and to meet some of the objectives in need of special funding, penetration of services is low, inefficient and not in tandem with social and economic transactions for sustainable human development [UCC 2005a & b]. Moreover as this paper argues, there are serious gender omissions in the policy design and implementation that run counter to the realization of Universal access to all women, men, boys and girls which require addressing.

There are compelling arguments for a gender perspective in an ICT access policy to address needs of women and men equally. ICT has a potential for mass transformation, but risks excluding women if their needs are ignored when in developing countries most "are in the deepest part of the digital divide further removed from the information age than the men whose poverty they share" [Olatokun 2008:53]. ICTs are catalysts for women's political and social empowerment and their growth a powerful force in advancing gender equality [Ramilo 2006]. If women are to benefit and contribute more to ICT, efforts at policy and other levels must counter the almost global situation where women are largely excluded. Failure to conduct a gender analysis could unintentionally result in missed opportunities for women and risk ICTs reinforcing women's discrimination and disempowerment [Buskens and Webb 2009]. In Uganda, over 80 percent are rural with women constituting more than half of the total population. If ICT is crucial to development, then women must access the tools so that they are not marginalized. A policy that extends ICT to rural areas is important because it targets the majority most of them poor and less educated than their urban counterparts. ICT has to benefit the majority so as to address access as well as the divide that thrives on gender based exclusion.

**2. METHODOLOGY**

\* UAF is also referred to as the universal service fund, the universal service obligation fund or such related name elsewhere.

A gender analysis was undertaken in 14 districts of Uganda selected because they were districts where RCDF supported projects had been implemented by 2006\*. Due to difficulties in accessing a list of all beneficiary projects and their spread by district and sub county, projects studied were selected purposively or through snowballing basing on the fact that they ever received RCDF support at least once. Thirteen projects were visited which included multi-purpose community telecentres, school based telecentres, internet cafes, ICT training centres and a University. Most were private businesses while some projects were NGO run or located in public schools.

The assessment objective was to find out the extent to which the initiatives supported under RCDP/F had provided universal access to rural communications by women and men, and whether the implementation process took into account gender considerations. The RCDP/F is used as a case to articulate the risks of ignoring gender in ICT policy and to argue for inclusion of women's specific needs in universal access policy. The focus of the assessment was on utilization and uptake of services offered by RCDP/F supported projects by women and men. Specifically, objectives of the RCDP/F, project selection criteria and benefits were analysed from a gender perspective with a view of suggesting recommendations.

The study design was cross sectional. The approach to collecting and analysing data was qualitative. Data collected was both primary and secondary; the former coming from key informant interviews with proprietors and managers of the RCDF supported projects as well as the end user project beneficiaries. In each project case, at least two end-users one female and the other male were selected. Secondary data was obtained from project proposals, beneficiary records as well as contracts. Literature review was done to locate our example within the broader understanding of Universal access. Policy documents were reviewed including the Uganda Rural Communications Development Policy 2001, The Uganda Communications Act 1997, the National ICT Policy Framework, 2003 and Uganda Telecommunications Sector Policy Review, 2005. Resulting qualitative data was analysed manually. The approach involved deriving themes from interviews and extracting examples and arguments. The data from qualitative interviews was triangulated with secondary sources to draw conclusions. The paper is augmented with findings from a doctoral study in two of the districts namely Iganga and Mayuge [Madanda 2009].

### 3. POLICY DESIGN CONTRADICTIONS

Uganda's ICT policy framework is better understood by examining a range of policies including the National ICT Policy (NICTP), the RCDP and the Telecommunications Act. The policies emphasise a private sector led competitive development model underpinned by a liberalised free market ideology where forces of demand and supply reign. Theoretically, it is within this framework where the invisible hand of the market is paramount that sporadic growth has been attained in Uganda's ICT sector since mid 1990s. But this model of ICT development is not free from contradictions. First, liberalisation policy is anchored within the theory of modernisation which unrealistically assumes a free market and perfect knowledge of the market. Furthermore, although a market mechanism associated with increased competition and lowering of prices has brought ICT to poor rural women and men [Hafkin 2002b], liberalisation is often plagued by the chronic problem of market failure as there is nothing that is perfect [Preston 1996]. Moreover, free market ideology that pursues development at all costs has been implicated in worsening income inequalities, jeopardising gender equality and compromising human development [Rist 2008; Peet and Hartwick 1999].

It is not that the UCC that formulated the RCDP was ignorant of the weaknesses of a market model for universalising ICTs. An authoritative publication co-authored by a then UCC commissioner indicated that the likely pitfalls of a liberalised approach to ICT were not an afterthought [Tusubira, Kaggwa and Ongora 2005]. The report also indicates that when telecommunications sector reform commenced, there was an explicit recognition, right from the start that the kind of liberalised market envisaged by the government policy framework would lead to the marginalisation of the poorer sections of society and that the UCC identified the challenges of accessibility, affordability and utility and put in place the RCDF. In a characteristic technocratic jargon the report adds: "the holistic approach that has been used

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\* The districts were Kampala, Wakiso, Kayunga, Kasese, Bushenyi, Kabale, Kumi, Soroti, Sembabule, Rukungiri, Mbale, Mayuge, Kibale, and Iganga.

especially focuses on the majority of the often – marginalised citizens, consisting of rural communities, women, the physically disadvantaged and the youth” [page 168]. What is amazing is that while women are stressed as marginalised alongside youths and the disabled, hence deserving prioritisation, the RCDP document does not mention women or gender at all. This gender blind formulation of ICT policy is in stark contradiction with the overall national law. For instance the 1995 constitution expressly provides for government provision for marginalised groups including women. The National Gender Policy 1997 and 2007 require all government agencies at all levels to design strategies that address gender. Additionally unlike the RCDP/F, the national ICT policy provides for gender mainstreaming in ICTs including using ICT to uplift disadvantaged groups while taking into account gender balance [Republic of Uganda 2003].

In 2002, Uganda Telecom Limited (UTL) and Mobile Telephone Network (MTN), the then two national telecom operators (NTOs) declared 154 sub counties spread over 35 districts as “uncovered.” The NTOs\* had identified these areas as economically unviable – making them eligible for RCDF†. To facilitate the process of universal access, a policy was developed. The RCDP spells out subsidies for communication services in the rural areas‡. The policy covers Internet access provision, information technology (IT) content development, postal services and ICT training. By mid 2005, each district in Uganda was expected to have an Internet point of presence (PoP) with dedicated high speed wireless connections available to schools and other institutions, cyber cafes, telecentres and private customers to make use of within a certain radius of the district centres [UCC 2005a]. As additional incentives the UCC allowed for tariff flexibility where operators can charge up to 50% more than prevailing urban rates in rural areas [UCC 2005a]. This policy stance takes no explicit cognisance of the fact that the rural areas constitute the poor the majority of whom are women. In UA strategies, there is no direct provision for addressing the gender gaps in ICT access. In effect universal access is not universal. Indeed this is explicated by the fact that the areas that have been most difficult to reach are the northern and north - eastern districts which have experienced a two decade plus civil war§ and are inhabited by the poorest sections of the people of Uganda most of them women. In the rural areas, however, a challenge still exists due to the cultural life style that keeps females occupied in domestic work, limiting the availability of time for using any ICT other than voice telephony [Tusubira, Kaggwa and Ongora 2005]. From the foregoing, it is clear that a policy like the RCDP that aims to increase access to the majority especially in the rural areas is a smart thing to do. The question of whether or not the current universal access policy framework promotes universal access is the point of contention given that it is prone to problems of excluding the poor especially women.

Further policy contradictions can be unravelled by examining the policy objectives. According to the UCC [2005a], the projects that could justify UA funding need to meet the following criteria: the service targets meet government Universal Access (UA) objectives as “socially and politically desirable”; the overall service supply profile possesses long- term viability (that is, it is sustainable); but in the short-term, the project may be considered financially marginal (that is offering lower rate of return than that needed by private companies), or risky considering the investment required. The specific objectives of the RCDP are to: ensure that all sub counties with at least 5,000 inhabitants have access to basic communication services by 2005; ensure that RCDF resources are effectively utilised to create immediate impact; support establishment of an Internet PoP in every district of Uganda by 2003, where each PoP was to be associated with at least one Internet cyber café; increase the use of ICTs in Uganda, by supporting introduction of ICT use in at least one “vanguard” institution in every district of Uganda, by 2003; promote provision of communication services in rural areas as a profitable business.

It has to be noted that any effort aimed at increasing access and bringing ICT nearer to the rural people has the potential of reaching the poor and women. However focusing on the sub county headquarters or sticking on a criterion of 5,000 people leaves out many women who are tied up in domestic responsibilities and have no time to travel to the sub county headquarters or the district to access ICTs.

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\* Uganda currently (2009) has 5 telecom operators namely CELTEL (taken over by ZAIN), MTN, UTL, WARID and Orange, having ended the duopoly regime in 2005 and licensed new operators.

† Some of the RCDF supported projects were not necessarily located in sub counties declared as uncovered by UTL and MTN. Indeed some are set up in gazetted urbanities thereby bringing to the fore the contested notion of what is rural or urban.

‡ The RCDP does not explicitly define Rural. It appears rural means any area outside the city Kampala [Parkinson 2005].

§ These areas have since 1986 been under civil war with the Lord’s Resistance Army that has negatively impacted any form of development. A peace agreement that created a semblance of peace has not been signed to date

Second, to promote provision of ICT services in the rural areas is a good but limited objective in that as is even admitted by the very proponents of the policy, the hard to reach areas are unlikely to be profitable. There will be need to focus on the social benefits rather than profits to reach the majority of the poor especially women. Thus provision of communication services as a profitable business and from a purely economic perspective is limiting.

#### 4. GETTING TO KNOW: THE EXCLUSIVE INFORMATION FLOW

For potential applicants to know about the UA funding opportunities, they had to be informed. Field data indicated that applicants got information about RCDF in various ways: call for proposals through newspaper adverts; informal contacts with RCDF officials in conferences, seminars and public interactions; through researchers and volunteers [including foreign researchers and students] some of who wrote successful proposals for especially rural districts; insider information from former employees who had prior information about upcoming opportunities; and information from Internet service providers some of who helped to prepare the applications. As expressed by many respondents, there was a feeling that information about the subsidy was insufficiently disseminated and many applicants did not know what exactly constituted the support from UCC. Noteworthy is that while the use of newspapers was commendable for its wider reach, it is clear that such a channel was limited for publicity. It is unlikely that rural based organisations and especially the bulk of community based women's organisations could be informed. Moreover, informal contacts akin to the old boys or old girls' networks came into play in disseminating information. Such mechanisms exclude those who are powerless yet these are supposed to be the target. There is need to specifically target the poor and especially NGOs, CBOs and women's organisations in spreading information. One way is to take advantage of existing women's networks\*.

Furthermore, following a purely market model in operating the RCDF is inappropriate. First, the existence of the fund as precisely for reaching out to those excluded by the pure market system is in itself testimony of failure of the market mechanism to equitably spread ICT. For instance as noted already the reason for setting up the RCDF was a recognition that telecommunications sector reform with a liberalised market as envisaged by government policy would lead to marginalisation of the poorer sections of society including women, youths and the disabled [Tusubira, Kaggwa and Ongora 2005]. The policy implementers needed to live up to this realisation. Therefore, the spread of information needed to follow a model that plugs up the loopholes in the market mechanism. Thus developing partnerships would be more suitable than just asking applicants to "compete" on a criteria that generally favours profit oriented companies. Such a model mostly favours private businesses. It is not surprising these are the biggest beneficiaries with some reporting multiple subsidies while not for profit NGOs and women's organisations report failure in keeping pace or failure in accessing any subsidy.

Beyond project applicants, we also tracked how the end-users got to know about the RCDF supported projects. From their responses it is clear that the RCDF secretariat's role in information dissemination was limited. Information moved through friends, relatives and the church, or through a school staff room or general school assembly. If the mode of transmission of information was not informal as through a relative, it was exclusive like through a staffroom for teachers or a church for believers in a certain faith. This point leads to one critical direction. There was need to strengthen publicity through various media channels so that possible beneficiaries could be reached as much as possible.

#### 5. SKEWED SELECTION CRITERIA AND HOW WOMEN FELL OUT

The UCC is mandated by the Communications Act to establish and administer a rural communications development policy and fund [UCC 2001]. UCC's policy on rural communications development is intended to supplement government efforts by directing development and delivery of communication services in the rural areas aimed at bringing about socio – economic development. Through a competitive tendering process, subsidies are provided to the winning bidders. The kinds of projects financed include:

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\* Uganda's civil society organizations have women's network organizations that could be crucial in this endeavour such as the National Association of Women Organizations in Uganda (NAWOU), the Uganda Women's Network (UWONET) and the ICT savvy Uganda Women's Network (WOUGNET) that could have been utilized as entry points to reach out to women and girls.

public payphones, ICT training, internet cafes, Internet PoPs, IT content development, telecentres, telephone infrastructure network and ICT research.

The subsidy amounts have an upper ceiling. For internet cafés and ICT training centres, the maximum subsidy is 40% of investment costs up to a maximum of \$6,000. Public access payphones have a maximum subsidy of 50% of the investment costs up to a maximum of \$400 per access site. Upon approval and meeting requirements, which include obtaining a bank or insurance guarantee, the subsidy is disbursed in the ratio of 4:3:3. Forty percent (40%) of the subsidy is disbursed upon signing the agreement; 30% after 50% of the project has been implemented according to an agreed schedule and 30% upon certification by UCC that the project is completed and operational. This implies that there must be co-financing.

The project selection criteria included: presentation of a certified copy of a certificate of registration; presentation of a business plan indicating the viability and sustainability of the project for five years; adequate professional know-how and operational experience; ability to implement the project within a stipulated timeframe; and availability of counterpart funding. Other considerations were relevant experience of the firm, designated professional and technical personnel, marketing strategy and ability to meet capital requirements

Gender sensitivity was not a requirement. Although two NGOs and one private company had utilised RCDF funds to support gender objectives out of their own volition, all interviewees reported that no requirement for gender was demanded of them during application or implementation. Furthermore, while the criteria for selection were meritorious, the provisions were exclusive. For instance the requirement for experience and counterpart funding excluded the poor and women's organisations that lack experience or counter funds in favour of established male owned ICT firms. Many beneficiaries thought that the financial guarantee conditionality was too high. Some failed to reapply because of the requirement for counterpart funding. This problem was more pronounced for organisations whose objectives contribute to social development rather than business namely NGOs and CBOs. Thus while the mode of operation and guidelines favoured private businesses; they disadvantaged organisations that are not for profit. An inventory of CSOs in Uganda clearly indicates that organisations in this category, many of which have no formal registrations are women's organisations.

During fieldwork we encountered innovative private organisations that used the affordable option of using an insurance company to guarantee their subsidies. But even then, these were private businesses. There seemed to have been no avenue of sharing such information with organisations that had difficulty in finding counterpart funding or financial guarantees. A more proactive action to provide such information to clients and potential applicants would have helped. Some beneficiaries had the perception that although the RCDF had earmarked funds for projects, the fact that it was a subsidy rather than a grant made it very hard to access. There is need to explore the possibility of making the RCDF a grant since it is not expected to be refunded.

Furthermore, the requirement for sound financial plans locked out some applicants. It is common knowledge that although useful, an elaborate financial plan does not always guarantee project success. Neither is beginning with a simplified application procedure a recipe for failure. Some funding agencies have long realised these and find other ways of guaranteeing success such as effective implementation and monitoring systems. Women's organisations in rural areas are particularly constrained by this fact owing to high levels of illiteracy and lack of access to such information that would help them design elaborate implementation plans. To include them therefore requires some more innovative, flexible and inclusive approaches.

## 6. THROUGH THE FILTER: THE NATURE OF PROJECTS SUPPORTED

Projects and businesses supported by RCDF often conducted more activities than were directly supported by the fund. Major activities included: Internet and email services; computer typesetting and printing; scanning and type writing (sometimes with manual typewriters); computer training (introduction, Microsoft applications like word, excel, access and PowerPoint), as well as accounting packages (such as sage, tally and quick books). Others included television viewing (especially for European soccer); Video shows especially educational films and entertainment; and photocopying. Internet and email services were offered by most projects but in some, especially in rural areas, the Internet links were reportedly unstable. Training in typewriting was offered because potential employers of the graduates, mainly schools still used typewriters.

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The key objectives of the projects visited varied depending on the nature of their focus. Projects based in rural communities, aimed at social and economic development of the area through use of ICTs. While those in towns aimed at availing ICT services for profit. School based projects aimed at providing students, teachers and in some cases surrounding communities with access to ICT services and application of ICTs in teaching for enhanced learning. Apart from the Mayuge district based NGO, Busoga Rural Open Source and Development Initiative (BROSDI) that had explicit gender objectives in its activities and services, other organisations often had gender blind objectives although SchoolNet Uganda and the Kumi district based Arrow Centre (for profit company) provided specific services aimed at women and girls. It is likely that benefits to females would have been higher if there were specific gender requirements in the funding criteria.

## 7. SURPRISE: WOMEN & GIRLS AS MAJORITY BENEFICIARIES

It has been argued that exclusion of gender in ICT policies is often the norm rather than an exception and that even when policies are developed the real test is the process of implementation and commitment [Jorge 2006]. Even when Uganda's RCDP does not recognise gender and supported projects are not obliged to address gender objectives, in many field examples, women constituted the majority of the final beneficiaries.

In tracking benefits, we inquired about the final project beneficiaries. There were interesting scenarios where females were majority beneficiaries despite the gender blind way in which most projects were designed. Records at many training centres showed that women were the majority trainees. The projects in general targeted a broad range of people that included: civil servants, teachers, community members, cultural leaders, NGOs, health workers, religious leaders and school drop-outs. Others included primary school pupils, women farmers, secondary school and university students, businesspeople, local government employees and tourists.

In Mayuge district, we visited BROSDI an NGO whose aim is to stimulate socio-economic development using open source particularly Free and Open Source Software (FOSS), knowledge sharing and information management. The organisation used computers and the Internet to address poverty through information generation and exchange. ICT was its core project with three other subsidiary projects in education, agriculture and health. BROSDI's education project targeted teachers and school children. The agricultural project, which involved collecting and exchanging local agricultural content targeted women farmers. The health project that had an HIV/AIDS component targeted the youth. The Manager indicated that the project had helped to increase computer awareness. While RCDF funded some ICT inputs, financial support for the sub projects was obtained from other agencies. BROSDI had got RCDF support thrice: first, to support acquisition of computers; second, to set up an ICT centre and third to acquire an electricity power solution to address the electricity shortage. In this example it was clear that by designing programmes to include women as the target beneficiaries, BROSDI extended its ICT services to women and girls even when it could not be described as a women's organisation.

Another example was SchoolNet which is an education oriented NGO. Some of SchoolNet's RCDF funded projects were implemented in girls' schools. One example was Bweranyangi Girls Secondary School in Western Uganda. As a beneficiary girls' school, female students were primary targets alongside their male and female teachers. The fact that it was a girls' only school constituted one of the criteria of its selection by SchoolNet Uganda. Similarly, SchoolNet chose a boys' only school in the same region namely Kitunga High school. However this was SchoolNet's internal gender sensitive programme implementation policy rather than an RCDF strategy. Based on SchoolNet's initiative, the fund was used to facilitate ICT centres targeting both women and men.

Apart from NGO led initiatives, women also benefited from private businesses. From the Manager Ruhinda ICT centre Bushenyi district, women and girls were part of the beneficiaries just as men. In some cases, women trainees outnumbered men especially senior six leavers and teachers from nearby schools. At the time of the assessment, two females trained at Ruhinda had obtained jobs as secretaries in secondary schools after training in basic computer skills and typewriting. But this was not out of an RCDF special strategy to address women's needs.

In Mayuge district in Eastern Uganda, another private company, Batud ICT training centre, had 42 people trained in introductory computer skills and Microsoft Office applications namely word, excel and PowerPoint of whom 18 were female. Though there was no special treatment to women and girls in particular, females formed a large percentage of the end user beneficiaries. Batud also reported a

discounted computer training programme for schools, where both girls and boys were targeted.

There were other examples from Eastern Uganda too. Women and girls were the majority of training clientele at the Tororo branch of the Kampala International Management Institute. Many accessed the centre for skills that could help them get secretarial employment. Men accessed the centre mainly for internet surfing. At Telecom Equator located in Soroti town, women and girls benefited by accessing the Internet and e-mailing. Students used the cafe for research, and the ratio of men to women was estimated at 4 to 6 implying that females were the majority. Students and nurses acquired skills to better their job opportunities. There was an example of a woman who accessed computer services and was trained in Kiswahili language. She was able to read and send her son email in her local language. At the Mbale branch of Nile Computers Limited, which was one of the major beneficiaries of RCDF, it was reported that men used Internet services most though records showed that more women than men had been trained in computer skills though the majority were unmarried and students.

In Wakiso District of central Uganda, women and girls were reportedly beneficiaries of the Bugema University project though the centre had no gender disaggregated records to show usage by gender. The RCDF supported project at the university targeted all students, teachers and community members. Women had benefited as part of the student, teachers and surrounding community in accessing the ICT services though there were no gender specific implementation guidelines. At Mubende Light Secondary School ICT Centre, in Mubende district, 150 community members had trained of which 80 were women. Trained students were 530, of which 260 were girls. The centre also had a public pay phone, an online electronic library as well as CDs with subject content. Staff had been trained in MS word and access. Mark sheets were computerised and all teachers had e-mail addresses. Ten female and 20 male teachers were trained in basic computer skills and had access to computers. Other contributors were Uganda Industrial Research Institute and the International Institute for Communication and Development (IICD), which gave the school computers, software, initial training and further training in how to manage the centre. Two of the six ICT centre committee members were women. The ICT help desk officer in the school was a woman and girls were encouraged to use ICTs.

To conclude this section two points have to be made. One is that even when the policy is gender blind, it is possible to have a gender inclusive implementation at organisational level largely mediated by gender sensitive actors. This however should not overshadow the overwhelming evidence that gender blind policies often produce gender blind results. Secondly, the predominance of women in basic computer training is the norm in early computer adoption processes. A study in Mayuge and Iganga found that women were the earliest computer technology adopters because of the feminisation of the secretarial profession where they constitute the majority but soon gave way to men as the technology assumed more complex uses [Madanda 2009]. The real challenge therefore is for RCDP or similar policies to ensure sustained universal ICT access to all gender categories.

## 8. IMPACT OF RCDF SUPPORTED PROJECTS

The impact of the RCDF is difficult to isolate as the changes resulted from multiple initiatives. However, it is possible to pinpoint associated changes including the following:

Access to cheaper ICT services was possible within shorter distances by many including students, teachers and the general public even in remote areas for business, social and educational purposes. Affordable services within shorter distances were especially beneficial to females because many women and girls due to social cultural constraints make restricted travels. Women were reported to be benefiting from internet services by communicating with friends and family members

There was also direct employment creation in RCDF supported initiatives for ICT trainers and attendants the majority of whom were men. There were also spin-offs reported. For example, businesses had been started by qualifying trainees some for secretarial services, designing posters, document scanning and photocopying. Trained women had got jobs as secretaries, trainers and ICT centre attendants. Men had improved their careers some as teachers, head teachers or administrators.

One area where RCDF ICT initiatives had made a contribution that was potentially very useful was in education. Through supporting the establishment of ICT centres, there had been the exposure of students and teachers to various ICTs in both girls' and boys' schools, which had enhanced learning through Internet and multimedia. Beyond secondary schools, in both Tororo and Soroti districts, students of commercial courses were getting trained from RCDF supported centres. Female secretarial studies

students supplemented their skills from the ICT centres as there was no computer training in some of their colleges.

One observation to make was that women had taken lead in responding to computer services. Through the computer skills acquired, many had benefited by getting employment. It has to be noted however, that most of the centres were engaged in secretarial and elementary skills where women are often the majority. Unless there is specific effort, it is likely as is with the management and ownership of these centres that women may be edged out as skills acquisition and ICT use complexity advances.

## 9. GENDER SPECIFIC CHALLENGES

Women were constrained by time. According to a key actor of an NGO that targets women “you have to consider household chores. For market days, women have to be in the market. You have to target your activities on non-market days and in the early afternoon like from 2.00pm to 4.00 pm. After four o’clock, women have to go back home, collect firewood and prepare evening meals except if a woman is a widow.”

In many instances culture discourages women from taking part in public affairs. For example in Mayuge district we learnt that “even if you invited women only, men come in and want to take over...” Culture underpins control of women by their spouses to the extent that some men are described as “very possessive of their wives” making it hard for them to take part in development programmes generally including ICT initiatives. Conditions in the family reportedly affected women more. For instance in Soroti, an example was given where a woman stopped computer training lessons when her husband was transferred from the district. Generally, women suffer cultural confines which “you have to break to get them into a project” said a project leader. Women wanted to first seek permission from their husbands. There are also financial control problems when resources begin to come in as men want to take charge.

Social roles that girls play in homes demand that they are at home early as they may be required to contribute towards household chores like collecting firewood, fetching water and cooking. Orphaned girls were particularly disadvantaged as they were the ones mostly called upon to do such chores. Girls said they feared staying out late as this exposed them to rape, sexual assault and the resulting dangers of contracting HIV/AIDS. As such courses scheduled for late evening hours were not recommended for girls because they could not return home late and for married women their husbands could not allow them. Men however were not similarly constrained.

## 10. CONCLUSION

Overall, it is important to note that the primary reason for establishing the RCDF was because of the failure of the market based system to reach everyone particularly the marginalized and the very poor sections of society. The point of failure of market oriented systems, their benefits notwithstanding, is well known. Simply put, it is not possible to reach everyone based on the market mechanism alone. In stark contradiction of this well known fact, the criteria for supporting projects was based on the market based assumptions tilted in favour of private experienced male dominated business enterprises against not for profit organizations generally but women’s organizations particularly as most of them are focused on social returns or based in the informal sector where elaborate business plans and corporate culture procurement procedures are not the norm. If the fund is to reach the poor, it cannot simply utilize the lenses provided by the market system alone. This alone cannot deliver to the marginalized without a certain mechanism that directs benefits in that direction – that system involves utilizing “gender lenses.”

Neither the RCDP 2001 nor the project selection criteria had any specific gender considerations. Resultantly supported projects did not necessarily address gender concerns. Beneficiary agencies were mainly profit motivated private businesses with a few educational and development oriented NGOs. No agencies that directly accessed funding could be classified as women’s organizations. RCDF’s lack of a gender sensitive implementation strategy had left out many would be potential women beneficiaries especially as managers and proprietors of funded enterprises particularly for computer training and Internet facilities.

Also the RCDF funding strategy of giving more “commercially viable” projects bigger subsidies as compared to less commercially viable projects in rural areas was a prudent strategy. But simultaneously this left out many rural projects. Henceforth the fund was yet to reach and benefit most of the rural population. If not revised, more will be excluded. As noted by Gurumurthy [2006:615] “the fundamental

issue in reaching poor women is not one of profitability of models, but the creation of a set of technology-mediated services and products that allow women to be part of the emerging opportunities.”

It is also important that dissemination of information regarding the RCDP/F be improved. Apart from newspaper adverts and male oriented informal channels, there is need to broaden methods of information dissemination. In particular women and the marginalised populations based in the rural areas that the fund targets cannot all be reached by newspapers. There is need to consider advertising and creating awareness using multiple channels such as radio, the internet, mailing lists, posters, brochures and educational agencies. There is also need to share experiences of already supported projects regarding the benefits, challenges and lessons learned.

Ultimately the RCDP needs to be reviewed so that specific gender sensitive objectives, strategies and targets are included. The review process should be consultative taking into account effective participation of key stakeholders including the public, private sector, academia, women organisations and civil society. Selection criteria need to be amended to include provisions for gender equality.

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