Chapter 11

The Infomediary Campaign in the Philippines as a Strategy to Alleviate Information Poverty

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ABSTRACT

This chapter is about the Infomediary Campaign in the Philippines, a strategy to mobilize young people in agriculture and to alleviate information poverty in remote rice-farming communities. It reflects on how information and communications technology (ICTs) and some offline means can converge to address information poverty, and thereby contribute to positive social change. Social change in this chapter is operationalized as moving from a period of information scarcity to one with additional communication pathways to alleviate information poverty. Surveys, interviews, and content analyses were used in data collection. This chapter combines Stakeholder Theory and the Livelihoods Approach to better unpack the results of this research. Key ingredients for upscaling the Campaign are identified. The strengths and weaknesses of using the combined approach are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

It has long been argued that availability of information on cost-reducing and yield-enhancing technologies for rice is not an issue in the Philippines—rather access to this information is the issue (Manalo, 2013). With the presence of the International Rice Research Institute and the Philippine Rice Research Institute (PhilRice), the country’s lead agency for rice research and development, many information needs have been adequately covered. The mechanisms, however, to ensure that these high-caliber products of research reach Filipino farmers are inadequate.

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Agricultural extension in the Philippines is challenging due to several reasons. First, the country is the world’s second largest archipelago, with more than 7,000 islands. Many of its rice fields are in remote upland areas, with poor communication infrastructure. Aside from difficult terrain, the country’s agricultural extension workers (AEWs) are aging at 50 years old on average. They are agriculture professionals tasked to provide information on rice farming and on agriculture in general. Moreover, the Philippines has only 13,500 AEWs to cater to the needs of more than 2 million rice farmers (Saliot, 2014). Sebastian et al. (2006) noted that agricultural extension contributes 15% to increased rice yield, while research and development provides 25%. Reflecting on the research and extension continuum, where extension communicates cutting-edge technologies on rice farming, failure in extension means that farmers will not have access to research outputs. It is therefore necessary for the Philippines to devise new ways of bringing agricultural information to farmers. The Infomediary Campaign is one way, as it aims to create new communication pathways in extension by mobilizing high school students to serve as information providers in their respective rice-farming communities.

In this chapter, social change is understood in the context of addressing information poverty in our target sites: from a period of information scarcity to one with additional communication pathways. Social change is a multifaceted and loaded concept. Hence, it is useful to set limitations on how this is understood in the context of the Campaign in order to manage expectations about what it can and cannot do. This chapter argues that for as long as people have access to information, chances for achieving better livelihood outcomes are high. The chapter aims to (1) document the extent of information sharing that transpired during Campaign implementation, (2) show how the combined Stakeholder Theory and Livelihoods Approach can be used to analyze the Infomediary Campaign, (3) study the enablers and disablers in implementing the Infomediary Campaign, (4) reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of the combined theories, and (5) show the effects of the Infomediary Campaign on the information-seeking behavior of farmers in the project sites.

BACKGROUND

The Agricultural Extension System in the Philippines and Infomediaries

Many problems beset agricultural extension in the Philippines. Among them are aging AEWs, mismatch in their educational background, difficult terrain in many agricultural areas, and mobility issues. AEWs’ ability to serve farmers is weakening inexorably, and there are not enough of them. The difficult terrain in many remote rice-farming communities makes it very hard for the aging AEWs to do their job (Hondrade, 2007). It is in this light that the call for alternative communication pathways in agricultural extension is relevant. The Infomediary Campaign is one such initiative.

Infomediaries are people who facilitate access to information (Manalo, 2013). They could be gatekeepers (Metoyer-Duran, 1993), key informants (Schilderman, 2002), lay information mediaries (Abrahamson & Fisher, 2007), boundary spanners (Mason, 2003), or service providers (Sein & Furuholt, 2012). Many publications refer to infomediaries in public access computing centers (Gould & Gomez, 2010). In fact, agricultural infomediaries refer to people who help others access computers or search information from the Internet. The case of Uganda’s Grameen Community Knowledge Worker Initiative, which used “literate, village-based intermediaries to provide support and information to poor residents,” is a good example of performing infomediary work (Qiang et al., 2011, p. v.). In Belize, in northeastern Central