Assessment of the Rural Communications Development Fund (RCDF) from a Gender Perspective

Introduction

The Rural Communications Development Fund (RCDF) is rapidly becoming the best practice model for special funding to support access to communications by the poor and the rural populations in low income countries\(^1\). The RCDF is Uganda’s approach to implementing a Universal Access Fund – which is a mechanism to motivate and mobilize the private sector to invest in information and communication technologies (ICTs) within rural areas. The RCDF was established under the Rural Communications Development Policy, 2001, and was officially inaugurated by the Uganda Communications Commission (UCC) in 2003.

In line with the Universal Access Fund (UAF) model, the RCDF is expected to harness the energies and interest of private telecommunications operators already active in the country to compete with one another, as well as to encourage new interested entrants to participate in the extension of service to poor rural areas\(^1\). UAFs are a means for the communications sector to meet the challenge of achieving universal access and country-wide market development from a country’s own resources and to do so equitably. The UAF motivation to the private sector is typically provided through “smart subsidies” and investment incentives.

In Uganda, the RCDF is a means of intervention to ensure that basic communications services of acceptable quality are accessible at affordable prices and at reasonable distances by all people in Uganda\(^2\). It is meant to assist in areas where provision of commercial services is not feasible; to provide basic universal access; and to promote competition among operators. The fund is contributed to by service providers in the telecommunications sector, and seeks to leverage investment rather than provide all the solutions. UCC has established a formal application process and a set of guidelines for access to the RCDF. Projects supported by the RCDF include district portals, multi-purpose community telecentres, Internet cafés, ICT training centres, and public telephone booths. Information about the RCDF and its projects is available online at [http://www.ucc.co.ug/rcdf/default.php](http://www.ucc.co.ug/rcdf/default.php).

In 2006, the Uganda Women Caucus on ICTs (UWCI) conducted an assessment of the RCDF from a gender perspective. With WOUGNET as its secretariat, the UWCI was initiated to promote engendering of the ICT policy processes in Uganda – including design, implementation and monitoring and evaluation. The focus in assessing the RCDF was to review its objectives and
its implementation from a gender perspective. Specifically, the assessment sought to assess the project selection criteria, to examine the benefits of the supported projects to both men and women, to assess the contribution of the supported projects in reducing gender gaps, and finally to make recommendations as well as suggest ways for gender inclusion based on the findings.

**Gender Issues highlighted the RCDF Assessment**

**Assessment of the RCDF**

While officially inaugurated in 2003, the RCDF has been administered since 2002. At the time, it was envisaged that, by mid 2005, every district would have an RCDF contract in place to provide a local Internet point of presence (POP). It was also expected that most of these POPs would have dedicated high-speed wireless connections available to schools and other leading institutions, cyber cafés, telecentres and private customers.

For the RCDF assessment from a gender perspective, fourteen districts in which RCDF supported projects have actually been implemented were purposively selected. The projects visited included multi-purpose community telecentres, Internet cafés, school based telecentres, and ICT training centres. The fourteen districts visited were Bushenyi, Iganga, Kabale, Kampala, Kasese, Kayunga, Kibale, Kumi, Mayuge, Mbale, Rukungiri, Sembabule, Soroti and Wakiso. It should be noted that this study was not to assess the disbursement of RCDF funds; rather the focus of the study was the utilisation and uptake of services offered by RCDF projects – and whether the implementation process had taken into consideration any gender concerns for the equitable benefit of both men and women.

The approach and design used to collect and analyse data was qualitative and participatory. The study included collection of primary and secondary data. Primary data was obtained from key informant interviews with proprietors and managers of the RCDF supported projects as well as the end user project beneficiaries. In each case, the aim was to select at least two end-users one being female and the other male. Secondary data was obtained through literature review including the Rural Communications Development Policy (2001), The Uganda Communications Act (1997), the National ICT Policy Framework (2002) as well as some project proposals and beneficiary reports/records. In December 2006, the study findings were presented and discussed at a workshop that was opened by Hon. Alintuma Nsambu, Minister of State for ICT, and attended by officials and beneficiaries of the RCDF.

**Study findings**

The study findings point to the following conclusions with a number of concerns from a gender perspective. To begin with, the Rural Communications Development Policy (2001) does not make specific consideration for gender issues nor does the selection criteria. As such, the supported projects do not necessarily aim at addressing gender imbalances.

The project beneficiary agencies were largely private businesses together with some educational and development oriented NGOs. The fact that the research team had difficulties in accessing a
A complete beneficiary list makes it difficult to reach a firm conclusion. However, the evidence from field interviews and from information volunteered by the RCDF secretariat indicates that none of the organizations that accessed funding could be classified as women’s organizations. Organizations that specifically extended benefits to women and girls did so owing to their own gender sensitive policies. Such organizations included SchoolNet-Uganda, Busoga Rural Open Source and Development Initiative (BROSDI) in Mayuge and Arrow Centre in Kumi. A point that clearly emerges is that women and girls were more likely to benefit from the RCDF support if it was directed through an agency where women were in the majority like a girls school or through a not-for-profit organization such as an NGO or CBO.

The study did find that, in general, more women than men were customers of the privately owned computer training centres. However, this fact had nothing to do with gender targeting. Many of the women went to training centres for secretarial training and/or to learn elementary computer skills like Microsoft office applications – which skills would enhance their gender stereotyped roles of secretary. Those women that were employed as trainers or ICT lab attendants were in the minority. Furthermore, women were generally absent from ownership, management and control of the private ICT business centres.

Hence, although RCDF support has facilitated further spread of ICT facilities and services to less privileged areas and its communities, some members of these communities especially women have benefited less as compared to their male counterparts. RCDF’s lack of a gender sensitive implementation strategy has left out many who would be potential women beneficiaries – especially as managers and owners of RCDF funded enterprises for computer training and Internet facilities.

In addition, the fund is yet to reach out and benefit most of the rural population in part due to the funding strategy of giving bigger subsidies to the more commercially viable projects. It is possible then that many rural but ‘low economic return’ projects may fail to access the RCDF. However, it is important to note that the primary reasons 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.

Lastly, the point of failure of market oriented system, its benefits not withstanding, is very well known. Simply put, it is not possible to reach everyone based on market based conditions alone. Surprisingly, the criteria for supporting projects is based on the market based platform tilted in favour of private, experienced, typically male dominated business enterprises against not-for-profit organizations generally but women organizations particularly. This is because most women organizations are focused on social returns or 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 based system that in first place cannot deliver to the marginalized without a certain mechanism that directs benefits in that direction.
Recommendations and Strategies for Gender Inclusion in the RCDF

General Recommendations

In view of the findings, there are a number of recommendations directed at the RCDF secretariat and civil society if the fund is to effectively address the needs of those it is intended to reach. Within civil society, women organisations active in the area of ICTs are particularly targeted as an avenue of reaching out to women and girls who constitute the majority of the disadvantaged rural populations.

The dissemination of information regarding RCDF funding was very poor. Apart from the newspaper adverts, informal channels are a key information outlet. Since past calls for proposals have been placed in newspapers, it is not surprising then that many people are not aware of the Rural Communications Development Fund. The RCDF secretariat ought to broaden and deepen the methods of information dissemination. In particular, women and marginalised populations in rural areas that are targeted by the RCDF cannot all be reached by newspapers alone. UCC could consider advertising and creating awareness using multiple channels such as radio, the Internet, mailing lists, posters, brochures, educational agencies and so on. Apart from disseminating information about the fund, UCC needs to provide information about the projects so far supported as well as the benefits and challenges faced so that lessons can be drawn and shared widely.

Field findings indicated that the beneficiary agencies had no mechanism of interfacing and sharing experiences. Some of them had very good innovative methods of addressing challenges that others perceived as a nightmare. For instance, while some agencies were saying they would not be able to get further support from UCC for lack of financial guarantees, others knew how to utilise insurance companies to provide guarantees at reasonable costs. Some participants suggested that there should be a mechanism of linking up beneficiaries. For a start, UCC could publish information about beneficiaries or even organise a periodic forum where beneficiaries meet and share experiences about their challenges and successes. It was suggested that even those who applied and did not succeed in winning the subsidy should be invited so that they could learn from those that succeeded. In particular agencies of marginalised groups of people, women, youth and persons with disabilities should be invited to take part and learn from others.

Specific projects had different challenges, for example, centres especially private businesses and schools that had problems with electricity shortage called for support from RCDF to install standby generators to overcome the frequent power cuts. On the other hand, educational institutions that had overflowing numbers of clients and students and could not to adequately meet the stimulated demand asked for help to expand their ICT centre premises and to add more equipment. These examples highlight the issue UCC should not apply a ‘one size fits all’ approach in rolling out ICT to rural areas. Different groups of beneficiaries will require different support and help. For instance, the RCDF secretariat could consider giving bigger subsidies to less-commercial viable community ICT projects. Such projects are more likely to be based deep in rural communities as opposed to the more commercially viable projects that are typically based in busy commercial centers or district towns.
Strategies for Gender Inclusion

In this section, we present strategies for addressing gender needs within the RCDF. These strategies are in addition to ensuring that the general recommendations given above integrate gender concerns. While most of the strategies are directed at UCC/RCDF, there is a role for all stakeholders in ensuring that the RCDF is indeed an intervention to ensure that basic communications services of acceptable quality are accessible at affordable prices and at reasonable distances by all men and women, boys and girls in Uganda.

To begin with, the RCDF policy 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 public sector, private sector, academia, women organisations and civil society. Furthermore, there is need to take advantage of the telecommunications sector review process. Policy makers should go beyond general declarations for mainstreaming gender and be more specific in what the policy intends to do.

Even as review of the policy is awaited, RCDF Secretariat staff can still intervene by taking on board gender needs at implementation level. The mandate to do this can be derived from Uganda’s constitution which advocates for gender equality. Such interventions could address:

- Amendment of the selection criteria to include provision for gender equality: In particular, the selected agencies should be fairly distributed in three categories: educational institutions including female only ones; private sector for profit businesses including women owned enterprises and NGOs / CBOs including women’s organisations and agencies with gender objectives.

- The need to for contracts for RCDF support to specifically spell out gender outcomes: All support from the RCDF should have gender-based outcomes and this should be a reporting requirement for beneficiaries and project management staff. For example, the RCDF supported training centres could advertise and encourage women to apply or they could provide some subsidy for female students such as what is offered by Makerere University based CISCO programme. Reporting requirements should be that data collection and compilation is gender disaggregated and there should be an indication of the contribution of the fund to social transformation and gender equality specifically.

- Development of a gender sensitive monitoring and evaluation mechanism: There is need to put in place implementation procedures that take gender concerns into account, including the development of a gender sensitive monitoring and evaluation mechanism.

- Revision of the selection criteria to attract more women: The selection criteria should encourage women to apply by giving incentives to women proprietors, through positive discrimination, or indicating that women organizations should apply. UCC should improve publicity and look out for women organisations for possible support. Adverts should bear the message such as “women’s organisations and enterprises are encouraged to apply”.


• Development of an RCDF knowledge sharing platform: The RCDF secretariat should develop an open platform to share knowledge on how the services of the various projects can be improved in favour of rural communities and of catering to the needs of both men and women. In raising awareness, gender/women organisations that are active in the area of ICTs should be involved to provide sensitization on gender issues and to promote ICT centre services for women.

Lastly, all stakeholders including the public sector, private sector and civil society have a role to play in supporting the mission of the RCDF and integrating a gender-sensitive perspective. For example, there is a dire need for locally relevant content in formats that are readily usable by the rural communities. Centre managers also need access to specific educational materials that may be of interest to women. In addition, there is need to sensitize the youth about gainful use of the Internet other than pornography, games, chatting, etc. For civil society and advocacy agencies, especially those active in the area of ICT such as Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa (CIPESA), Department of Women and Gender Studies at Makerere University, Information Society Foundation (ISF), I-Network, UgaBytes Initiative, UWCI and WOUGNET, there is need to design programmes for continuous monitoring of not only the RCDF programme but also of other ICT policy processes in the country. The objective of such monitoring programmes should include the strengthening of the gender outcomes from Uganda’s ICT policy processes.

Conclusion

The overarching ICT policy framework of Uganda places emphasis on private sector led development in a liberalised economic environment. Indeed, it is within this policy framework which commenced in the mid 1990s that phenomenal growth and achievement has been attained in the ICT sector. The likely pitfalls of a liberalised approach to ICT were not an afterthought in Uganda’s case, and hence the Rural Communications Development Policy. However, as highlighted in this paper, the RCDF framework is prone to leave out the very people it is intended to reach out, and in particular, the women of Uganda. In conclusion, this briefing paper is to generate gender sensitive information for the ICT policy processes in Uganda and to urge for the mainstreaming of gender in these processes.

About the UWCI

Assessment of the RCDF from a gender perspective is one of the activities undertaken to promote the formulation and implementation of gender sensitive ICT policy processes and programs in Uganda. Under the auspices of the UWCI, a number of activities have been undertaken to create awareness of the need to integrate gender concerns in ICT policy processes in Uganda. For example, in March 2006, a public forum was organized to disseminate a policy brief on a gender analysis of the National ICT Policy Framework. At regional level, as an outcome of a presentation on “Gendering the e-Government Policies in East Africa” made by UWCI members at the April 2006 Regional Stakeholders’ Consultative Workshops on Cyber Laws & e-Justice and on Information Security, one of the workshop recommendations was that deliberate efforts
should be made to engender cyber laws developed to provide an enabling legal and regulatory environment. Such an environment has been identified as a critical enabling factor for effective implementation of e-Government strategies at national and regional levels within the East African Community partner states. Indeed, there is a role for all stakeholders in promoting appropriate and affordable ICTs and access to ICTs by all men and women of Uganda.

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