

The Kalomo Bwacha Women's ICT Club

Transforming the lives of women in rural Zambia

The women of Kalomo district, some 400 kilometres South of Lusaka are influencing and transforming the face of the district, socially and economically with the help of new technologies. With support from the International Institute for Communication and Development (IICD) of the Netherlands and in Zambia by Step Out firm, these women under the Kalomo Bwacha Women's ICT Club, are using the only and first resource centre of women in the district to improve other women's money making activities by using the internet to market their produce.

In turn, this helps to increase their money base and therefore, the circulation of money in the district. Kalomo is a rural district and is mainly dependent on farming as it has very few companies offering jobs to the indigenous people.

Kalomo's opportunities

The presence of the hospitality business in the area bears testimony to the fact that Kalomo has potential to be a good tourist attraction, if attention is given to it, as tourists tend to stop by in transit to the tourist capital, Livingstone, about 120 Kilometres away, to see such sites as the first Governor's house, a few kilometres from town, down the road that leads to The Ngoma National Park, about 25 Kilometres away from town, and also proceeds to The Kafue National Park.

The presence of these national parks and other historical sites and stories are interesting to tourists and some usually feel



The office of the Bwacha Women's ICT Club in Kalomo

it's a good idea to stop by but the road is bad and there is no electricity in the settlements along that road. People who can afford solar panels have installed them as the many remain cut out from civilisation and adequate communication. This has also affected business in the area especially for women who depend on small businesses to supplement family incomes, especially in times when there is not enough food from farming, due to poor rainfall, which affected the harvest.

Bwacha women's ICT club

To address these issues, Bwacha women ICT club based in the centre of Kalomo town, thought of marketing produce of the local area using the internet in order to make ends meet. The club generates between 1.5 and 2 million kwacha.

By that time, this dynamic group was being facilitated by Step Out firm already in the business of helping other women clubs that were affiliated to it, through dissemination of agriculture seeds. They would give the women clubs affiliated to them, 5KG's each of different seeds such as maize, groundnuts, beans, sunflower, etc, to plant after which the seeds would be returned in 50KG bags after a good harvest, hence that would act as a loan system. The seeds would multiply and revolve so that other clubs could also benefit. At the end of the day, women are enabled to have enough food in their households and to sell, thereby enhancing food security.

The produce from these clubs would also be collected by Bwacha women and sold at one centre, hence addressing marketing problems.

Applying ICTs

Step Out further decided to introduce ICTs to the group of about 11 women including an office assistant and sensitised them on how their operations would be enhanced with the use of communication facilities such as telephones, computers and the internet among other facilities and the need for a resource centre where the women could meet, share ideas and market their produce physically in one place and through the internet. This food has been purchased by World Food Programme, The Catholic church in the area, lodges and hotel owners, and the general public. Bwacha women's club members consist of women who are about 48 years for the oldest and 38 years for the youngest. They are also in the process of incorporating youths, especially that the youths were part of those that were trained during the basic ICTs and Marketing course. More training of youths is envisaged.

Last year, Step Out Coordinators, Edwin Zulu and Mildred Mpundu, introduced the Bwacha group to IICD, which at that time was in the process of identifying local organisations that were ready to use ICTs in their operations, which they could partner with locally. IICD and Bwacha women's club finally entered into an agreement, where IICD provided two computers, a printer, a digital camera, a cell phone and a landline, after which they were connected to the Internet through a dial up connection.



Researcher Kutoma Wakuuma visits the IICD supported project Kalomo Bwacha Women's ICT Club. The villagers of the community look back at their own performance in an awareness raising HIV/AIDS theatre play.

A local businessman, Mr Philip Mpundu who is the patron of the group offered a two-roomed building free of charge for the women to use as a resource centre. The group then launched the resource centre in October 2004 and called it the Kalomo Bwacha Women's ICT club. Today the club has about 32 women groups affiliated to it.

According to Bwacha Women's ICT Club's Vice Chairperson Gladness Kayuni, these clubs are now able to market through the resource centre and on the Internet, their produce which now range from food stuffs, clothes and crafts. Through, the Internet, the women at the moment are only able to sell the produce by interacting/corresponding by email with potential clients, some from neighbouring countries. In that manner, they write to them and talk about what their resource centre has to offer, as well as answering to their questions to that effect and if successful, they then arrange on ways in which they could carry out a particular transaction. They use the email directly to market their produce as they do not yet have a website where they could place their adverts.

"We are the mother bodies of all these 32 clubs! Now women in these clubs are able to market their produce on the internet through us. Apart from the mats, baskets and clothes, we also market packaged dry foodstuffs and vegetables such as Chibwabwa (Pumpkin leaves), Okra, Kanunka (black Jack), Beans, Early Maturity Maize, dry Cucumbers, etc." said Kayuni. Apart from email, the digital camera is also used to document information in picture format for sharing and publicity of their services and other activities.

The members of the general public also have access to the services by paying a small fee to have access to ICT tools. The fees that are charged act as a revolving fund to use for other needs and to pay a full time Office Assistant that has been employed.

"We use the money we get from the customers as a revolving fund to pay the secretary who we have employed to oversee the operations of the resource centre on full time basis. From the same money, we buy materials and sew Pit coats, which we exchange for grains such as maize, from villagers and then we sell the maize to

organisations such as the World Food Programme. At the end of the day we use the money for other needs and also buy foodstuffs such as Kapenta and others, which we give out to the needy to curb hunger which has been perpetuated by poor rainfall," Kayuni further stated.

The grass-selling Lusime women in Mwiindilila village have since expressed admiration at the Bwacha project and expressed need for a similar set up in their area so that they do not have to travel to town all the time to access the ICT facilities. With the absence of electricity in the area, the women suggested that they would use a solar panel to connect to the internet and use one of the classroom blocks at a near-by primary school.

Bwacha Women's ICT Club continues to be the link between these women clubs, other groups of the society and potential customers through ICTs.

Bwacha club also has its challenges. The computers at times develop faults and without proper technological know-how, the club always seeks the assistance of a computer expert from Lusaka who has to travel ten hours go-come and operate free of charge and is only given one way transport money to go back. "We always have to use one person because we do not want to change hands, as that is what leads into destroying equipment," said Kayuni.

Developing livelihoods

The establishment of this centre has even increased the level of entrepreneurship for inhabitants of Kalomo as not only the affiliate members are able to benefit from the services but also the general public who are marketing their services on the net and in the building, such as reed and grass mats and baskets as well as clothes, food stuffs, etc.

Bwacha Women's ICT Club is comprised of professionals, such as nurses, teachers and secretaries; therefore they operate in the club when they are not working. For example, on weekends when the office assistant is off, they take turns operating in the resource centre. Those that go to church on Saturdays sit in on Sundays while those

Training & Technology

It came as a joy when the IICD through one of its training partners, Coldreed Training, sent three trainers to train the women and other members of the public on Basic ICTs and Marketing of ICT services, where software skills and Computer maintenance were taught.

"The course took three days and was able to enlighten them on how to handle little hiccups," said Violet Hankwebe secretary at Bwacha club. *"We learnt on how to go about with computers and were able to even teach our friends. The course was quite helpful because now we know how to handle certain programmes of computers, some certain things, we can do on our own and not wait for someone to come and help us,"* she said.

She was however quick to point out that the course period was not enough as most of the women felt more time should have been allocated for the same. *"We need more training, because there is a lot that we need to learn and three days was not enough. Those three days was just foundation, so we need another course."*

The women stated that the dial up system which they were using was very slow and usually customers got tired of waiting and would leave if they were in a hurry. They therefore called on other partners to come up and provide a satellite dish and a photocopier to help provide efficient services.

that congregate on Sundays sit in on Saturdays.

The husbands of these women are very supportive all the way because they believe the development will benefit them and the communities they live in. One is able to see some of these women's husbands escorting them or helping where necessary with their wives affairs so that they are able to attend to the duties at the centre. As a visitor of the centre, you are treated with such good hospitality by these husbands and their

families even when you follow at their homes.

Looking at how this resource centre has improved people's livelihoods, other people are also emulating the initiative and already another similar business centre is being constructed with the help of a Canadian NGO, bringing to three the number of ICT service centres in the area.

The Kalomo District Council is excited at the development and called on other investors to establish ICT businesses in the area. "We need more investors to establish such businesses. ICT businesses could be good in this area, because Kalomo town is situated on the way to these tourist attractions so as tourists travel, they could stop by and access the ICTs," said Council Secretary Alfred Mungalu.

People travel from as far as Mapatizya (an amethyst mine area), about 120 KM from Kalomo town and other distance places to access these facilities and this is evident that the people in the district embrace ICTs.

Bwacha, Step Out and International organisations such as IICD should be well commended. For indeed, like the name Bwacha suggests, it is daybreak, we need to wake up and move ahead in ICTs with the rest of society in this information age, for it is the way to development.



Women in rural Kalomo lack infrastructure and information to effectively market their produce, e.g. vegetables or grass.

Prospects

With such developments as the Kalomo Bwacha women's, it is clear; these women have lit a candle in the district towards a bright future. Where there once was lack of access and non availability of communication channels, people are now able to connect with other communities and market their produce and goods.

It provides hope that other people would take a leaf from this. It therefore also places a need for the Zambian government to speed up the process to develop the national ICT policy, so that it could give direction on how the country proceeds in implementing ICT related business. There is a lot lacking in this area, such as proper systems and infrastructure to support the enhancement of ICTs in the country, especially in rural and peri-urban areas.

Meanwhile, efforts that are being made to connect people by way of resource centres in this manner by local organisations such as