Changing Lives Through Mobile: 5 Questions on Social Impact on Youth and Employment

Source:

> Suzanne van der Velden

Country:

> United States [US]

Sector:

> Economic Development, Projects

How can you improve skills building, promote youth employment and social inclusion using mobile devices? These were a few of the questions answered by IICD at the UN Conference: Changing Lives Through Mobile, held at the United Nations in New York.

Leading telecom operators, mobile phone providers and m-learning content developers convened in New York on June 21. The aim was to discuss and showcase examples of innovative mobile strategies that have an impact on the social and economic transformation of developing countries.

With examples from IICD's 16 years of experience in this field, IICD's Community Relations Director, Suzanne van der Velden, answered a set of five questions on how mobile strategies are promoting social impact on youth and employment:

How to really improve skills building through mobile devices?

It is the human resources and content behind it what build the skills of youth. First: the capacity development of the end users and the people training them. Second: the learning content behind it. And third: the right mobile services and devices.

For example, if we take a look at one of our business development programmes in Peru. When I asked our Peruvian partner Promuc what, according to them, improves the skills of youth when making use of mobile devices, they were rather explicit about it. It is not the devices and the services of mobile phones as such that build the skills of the youth, it is the educational modules behind it that create behavioural change. This is the case as well in our Ethiopian, Ghanaian and Zambian projects.

With regard to the power of mobiles, we see that modern mobile services and devices make it fast and effective to track the youth. In Zambia, for example, mobiles are useful to extract data from the entrepreneurs with regard to their career development. The local partners use this information to improve their business development courses. Furthermore, mobile services appear to be extremely helpful to distribute business skills knowledge in remote areas through m-learning methodologies. In our projects, m-videos, m-wikis and SMSs are some examples of successful m-learning methodologies. Though in summary, in order to make a mobile strategy work and improve skills building through mobile devices, the keys for success are content and a strong local capacity, without these elements a project with mobile services runs a high risk of failure.

In our projects, m-videos, m-wikis and SMSs are some examples of successful m-learning methodologies. But in order to make a mobile strategy work and improve skills building through mobile devices, the keys for success are content and a strong local capacity, without these elements a project with mobile services runs a high risk of failure.

What has been the most effective mobile strategy to promote youth employment in your experience?

Even though the definition of the m-learning projects in the 11 countries where we work differ greatly, the fundamental mobile strategy is one. In promoting youth employment projects one should not regard mobile as an end in itself, but as a tool for people to shape their own development. The most effective mobile strategy is a participatory, multi-stakeholder approach, whereby innovation and ICT is used to address local problems such as unemployment for youth. As an outcome of this strategy several mobile projects appeared to be effective in their local context.

For example, in our Latin American ANPE programme, we have seen that the use of social media through mobile devices is the best way to promote youth employment. Through the use of social media the project succeeds in making lucrative agro-ecological organic farming cool for youth. Another concrete example of successful promotion of youth employment with the use of mobile is the Ndola program in Zambia. Mobile phones are used effectively by the Ministry of Youth to share information on job markets and job training opportunities with youth-leaders throughout the country. In our Peruvian mobile programme on business skills building

for young women in the guinea pig husbandry, we are now carefully drawing the first results from the pilots. And according to beneficiaries and partners, the targeted information on prices, production and access to microcredit loans shared via mobiles, positively influences the women's revenues.

What is the missing link to match youth with employers?

ICT can be of great help to match the youth with market opportunities. IICD does this on a broad scale in a variety of integrated ICT projects. In Zambia, youth are informed through SMS -and an online dashboard application- about training and employment opportunities. In agricultural communities employers equal the vegetable and livestock market, therefore projects in these communities aim to build business skills of youth in agriculture. Through mobile they access information on the market and how to improve production processes. These mobile services are offered in combination with real-time training modules.

What role should the private sector play towards empowering youth?

Without private sector there is no development. The private sector could really make a difference through ACT: **Access, Technology and Content.** In Mali, we work closely together with Orange. They work on the user-friendliness of the mobile applications and furthermore they contribute to the project by making airtime available to the farmers at all times. In Uganda, we work closely together with Inter Access on tool optimization and distribution of educational content. These are two examples of private sector organisations doing great work on a small scale, but this happens on a global and continental level as well. For example, we are closely following Microsoft 4Afrika, whereby the multinational is committed to content (on their learning platform), technology through innovation and access to low-cost connection (through white spaces) in Africa. With this project, the support is provided from a multi-level perspective: from end users to local ICT enterprises. That can really work.

Is there any way we can develop mobile strategies that provide social inclusion but also create revenue?

On a pilot scale yes, we have seen successes in creating financial revenues. In our youth business development programme in Ghana, more than 90% of the youth saw their income increased due to the project and 95% of the beneficiaries managed to attract more customers. We see these figures in more IICD's business development projects for youth. In addition we believe in the business models of some of our Kenyan and Ethiopian projects whereby entrepreneurs pay for the mobile services through subscription fees or m-payment. However, in order to maximise success of business development (with regard to both social inclusion, sustainability and financial revenue), the mobile strategy always needs to combine participatory solution design, suitable content, ICT skills building (capacity strengthening) and access and distribution of content through appropriate services and devices for the local context. These services and devices can -and did in the examples of Ethiopia, Kenya and Ghana- include mobile.

Suzanne van der Velden is IICD's Community Relations Director. She leads the department that works on international partnerships, business development and the monitoring and evaluation of ICT projects and programmes in global health, economic development and education.