

Making a case for infomediaries in the upland farming communities in the Philippines

POLICY BRIEF

Whilst there is a wealth of information available on the Internet on improving rice yield and reducing cost of farming operations, access remains a challenge for farmers owing to several issues such as computer anxiety, language, and computer illiteracy. The access issue is all the more confounded in the upland areas where the poorest of the poor farmers reside. Improving access for these farmers can mean several things. Among them are access to cost-reducing and yield-enhancing technologies, information on alternative livelihood within the agriculture domain, and ultimately, better lives for most of them. The importance of infomediaries in bridging this gap has long been proposed to address said issues. Policies, however, relating to this initiative seem slow to take off in the Philippines.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The infomediary concept may help bridge the information gap being experienced by farmers. Infomediaries are people who facilitate access to information, in this case farmers' children.
- Below are some considerations in implementing an infomediary campaign:
 - *A strong collaboration with the Department of Education is necessary to realize this initiative.* The school is a point of convergence for the farmers' children. Hence, the difficulty in reaching out to the farmers in the uplands will be addressed by the fact that their children converge in schools. The school, then, should serve as the nucleus for agricultural extension activities. Another thing is the fact that computers, although the internet may be absent, are present in school. This means that the students can have access to information on rice farming through the offline version of the *Pinoy Rice Knowledge Bank*—a repository of rice farming information in the Philippines made available in CD format.
 - *More than anything, there is a need to take seriously provision of the needed ICT infrastructure.* Upland areas, as in most rural areas, are disadvantaged when it comes to ICT infrastructure. In the sites of this study, however, broadband access might offer some hope for the upland dwellers. At any rate, there is a need to find ways to bolster initiatives to improve ICT infrastructure in the uplands.
 - *Development of materials on agricultural extension that target the young individuals is necessary if they are to effectively perform as infomediary.* Edutainment (educational and entertainment) materials must well be present if we are to engage the youth. This means that we should creatively package our information to suit our intended audience. Games, online puzzles are not a bad idea.
 - *Government must work towards coming up with context-specific solutions in far-flung areas.* While this proposal tries to offer solutions to issues in an upland community, it should also be noted that this cannot be applied to all upland areas. This means that the government must seriously pursue devising mechanisms that will address local concerns by unlocking local resources.

METHODS

This research used several participatory methods. They were:

- Time transect. This is a good method to investigate on the time allocations of the research participants. I asked the usual activities that consumed their time in a week.
- Mobility mapping. This is a method to investigate on the activity patterns of the research participants. In this research, I asked them to draw the places they usually visited weekly.

- Photovoice. This is a method that allows research participants to tell stories using photos. In this study, I asked them to take photos of something that represents their dreams.
- Group discussions. After the participant finished their participatory outputs (time transect, mobility map, photos), I asked them to present their work in a group. Other research participants and I took turns in asking questions. This method was important to validate the information they were trying to convey.
- Individual interviews. All research participants were interviewed individually. It was an important method as some were not comfortable telling their stories in groups. This was to ensure that all research participants were able to tell their stories that would inform the findings and recommendations in this research.

Analysis

Salient points were noted, transcribed and coded. Successive grouping and regrouping were conducted to ensure accessibility of data to readers.

Informed consent

Participants were asked to sign informed consent letters which outlined the extent of their participation in this research. They were likewise allowed to withdraw their participation at any point during the conduct of this study.

HIGHLIGHTS OF FINDINGS

- Research participants spent 20-30% of their time studying. This is something that has always been observed in several studies concerning the Filipino youth. It should likewise be noted that the literacy of young Filipinos are among the highest in the developing world.
- Going to computer shops was a popular activity for the research participants. This is an interesting finding as to access the computer shops, research participants had to spend roughly about USD 1.50, something that may be difficult to reconcile with the fact that many Filipinos live on less than USD 1.35 daily according to a 2008 data by the Asian Development Bank.
- Texting was an obvious activity in their time transects. Some of the research participants sent more than 200 text messages daily.
- Cases of computer anxiety or the feeling of discomfort when in front of the computers were noted. This is something that is oftentimes ignored when talking of the capabilities of the youth on information and communication technologies as they are oftentimes seen as tech-savvy.

AUTHOR

Jaime A Manalo IV

Science Research Specialist
Development Communication Division
Philippine Rice Research Institute (PhilRice)
Maligaya Science City of Muñoz, Nueva Ecija 3119
Email: jamanalo4@email.philrice.gov.ph