

Upland high school students as information providers

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POLICY BRIEF

INTRODUCTION

Information poverty is prevalent in remote rice farming communities such as those in upland areas. Yet there is a massive amount of information available on rice farming drawn from decades of research. This information is available in different forms and channels. The issue, however, is finding proper pathways on how to deliver the information to upland dwellers. The difficulty in reaching out to the farmers in the uplands has been the perennial struggle when it comes to doing agricultural extension. This study is geared towards addressing the information poverty in the uplands by using the school as the nucleus for agricultural extension, and mobilizing the students as information providers (infomediaries) for their farmer-parents. In mobilizing the students to serve as infomediaries, a mix of online and offline means were employed. Online means included introductions to the Open Academy for Philippine Agriculture-developed platforms PhilRice Farmers' Text Center (PFTC) and the Pinoy Rice Knowledge Bank (PRKB). PFTC is a texting platform that answers all queries on rice production while PRKB is a website that contains most information one has to know about rice farming in the Philippines. Offline means included setting up of rice garden to give hands on experience to students on rice farming, making available of reading materials in the school library, and study tour in research institutions.

FINDINGS

1. The infomediaries can be classified into three: champion, initiator, and farming ally. This information is needed to properly design strategies that will more effectively engage the students to perform infomediary roles.
2. Most questions asked in the PhilRice Farmers' Text Center were on rice varieties, weather, and pest management.
3. There were plenty of offline means of serving as infomediaries documented in this research.

THE RESEARCH

The research context

The research was conducted in the hilly and mountainous province of Aurora in the Philippines, more than 200 km North of Metro Manila. For 10 months, the campaign was implemented in Bayanihan National High School in the town of Maria Aurora. Upland rice farming is practiced in

downtown area. An ordinary farmer in the Philippines earns a little more than USD 2 daily (PhilRice, 2008). Poverty is well-pronounced in the area. People have limited sources of livelihood. Most of them are into farming. Some 90% of the locals are part of ethnic minorities, *Igorot* and *Ilongot*.



the area.

In the school and the immediate community surrounding it, communication signal is challenging. People have to put their mobile phones somewhere steady to capture some signal. This poor ICT infrastructure may be due to the fact that the school is indeed in a remote area. It sits several kilometers away from the town center, road going there is unpaved, and one pays a little more than USD 1 to visit the

METHODS

Two focus group discussions (parents and students), individual interviews (19), and key informant interviews (4) were conducted. Field notes provided good inputs for this study. Content analysis of the text messages sent by the students to the PFTC was conducted.

FINDINGS

The infomediaries can be classified into champions, initiator, and ally. Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of the infomediaries in this research. The groupings are based on how they performed their roles as infomediaries. Being a champion is the highest form of being an infomediary. It means that the students went beyond their respective households to share what they know either from online or offline means. The initiators are very important since it shows that the students have moved from being passive members of the household to becoming active participants in the decision-making.

Table 1. Classifications of infomediaries.

Classification	Description
Champion	Does things that are not expected of them; radiates what was learnt to more than two persons; shows leadership in exercising infomediary functions
Initiator	Volunteers to search for information; shares information in the household
Farming ally	Responds to queries

The students used the *Info on Demand* service of the PTC where they just had to key in some keywords and an automated response will be sent to them, aside from the usual sending of SMS. Likewise noticeable in the graph is the weather-related SMS. It is understandable since Aurora is a frequently visited by typhoons.

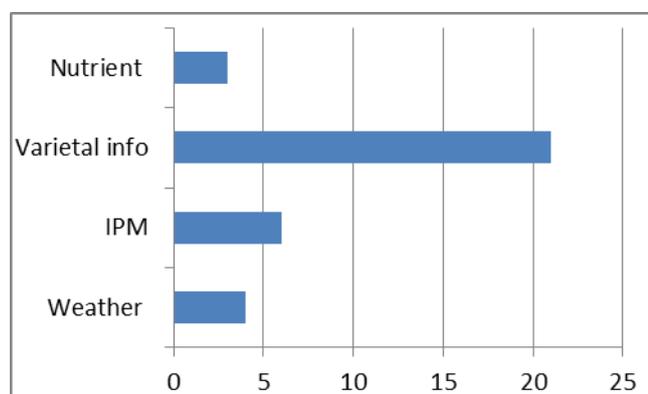


Figure 2. Frequently asked questions sent to PFTC.

There were plenty of offline means of serving as infomediaries documented in this research. Using the materials given as reference materials in classroom, giving of reading materials to others, and sharing to others what they received from the Text Center were the offline means documented. The quotes below capture this argument:

"I just gave the materials you gave me to my parents. They liked it!" (Clyde, 16).

"Farmers in our area have problems on rats. It was fortunate since during that time we were preparing for the quiz bee. I just read something about it ... uhm... I told them they need to observe the usual times rat come out, establish a pattern... and that's the time they can kill the rats..." (Arianne, 15).

The World Bank's (2011) *ICT in agriculture: connecting smallholders to knowledge, networks, and institutions* advised that ICT4D initiatives must focus on the demand, not on the technology (p.10). This means that implementers must keep an eye on the problem to be addressed, in our context making easier access to information on agriculture, not on how ICTs can be used. This makes sense as ICTs can just be among the many tools/strategies that can be employed to address the concerns.

Drawing on from the findings of this research, it can be said that there is wisdom in mobilizing young people to serve as infomediaries for their farmer-parents. The texting behaviour of the students as well as their overall interest in performing infomediary roles will attest to the relevance of this initiative in their lives. Hence, by mobilizing young people to serve as infomediaries, there is high confidence that the information poverty in the uplands can be addressed.

SOURCES

PhilRice. (2008). 'We provide options for resource poor farmers', *Filling up the rice jar: Reducing poverty through rice R&D*. PhilRice: Manila, p11. August 2012).

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