



**RURAL/CAROLINE WAMALA**

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# HOES, TRACTORS AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGIES

More and more people living in rural and remote areas are gaining access to the latest information and communications technologies (ICTs). But in rural Uganda, access to and use of the various gadgets is not as straightforward as it seems, writes Caroline Wamala, NAI study scholarship holder in spring 2010.

**AGRICULTURE IS UGANDA'S** economic bedrock and is a practice all Ugandans identify with. Nowadays, access to information is equated with access to other vital resources such as land and capital. Radios, mobile phones and the internet have allowed Uganda's farmers to get information in real time.

– Information and communication technologies may not make the soils more fertile or rains fall whenever a farmer wants them or increase the prices of farm products. ICTs are tools, just like a hoe or a tractor. They are important to farmers, who need to know when to plant, what to plant, where to sell and at what price, a newspaper columnist noted.

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into the fields. The opportunity to get information on the treatment of sick animals or crops and to apply that knowledge immediately has helped many farmers to avoid losses. Sending text messages requesting weather information has also allowed many farmers to plan their activities better. But as many farmers suggested, staying informed requires two or more devices.

– I recall once when they were talking about growing soya beans on the radio. We called in and feedback was given to us, said one farmer. Thus, email addresses or phone numbers provided in newspapers, on radio, or on the web suggest two-way communication. The additional information may be inaccessible because of delays in communication-infrastructure development, one's gender or age or even economic viability.

By the end of 2010, five service providers served the mobile phone needs of 9,5 million Ugandans, about 25 per cent of Uganda's 31 million inhabitants. Just as the handset purchase prices are becoming cheaper, so are call tariffs: subscribers can make mobile-phone-to-mobile-phone

calls for between 2 and 3 Ugandan shillings (US\$0.01) per second. Use of the internet at internet cafes costs 1000–1500 Ugandan shillings (US\$0.78) for 40 minutes.

In parts of rural Uganda, access to mobile networks or radio signals has to be actively sought, sometimes even requiring extreme measures such as climbing trees. This is in some parts of Uganda an exclusively male activity, since tree-climbing is thought of as culturally irreconcilable with the pious nature of a woman. Consequently,



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women and older men who are unable to climb trees but own or have physical access to mobile phones can only claim to have limited use of their mobile phones.

Research in most developing regions, Uganda included, provides statistics that do not necessarily illustrate how people use the technologies or what access actually means or entails, as in the case of actively seeking mobile network signals. Better informed research that depicts the reality of ICT use and access will provide a clearer perspective on the actual use of different technologies. This is important in relation to various development efforts. It is crucial to understand the reality of the use of ICTs in developing countries with an evolving infrastructure. ■