

PC4D or People's Communications for Development:

How Intermediary Groups Use Communication Tools for Grassroots Women's Empowerment

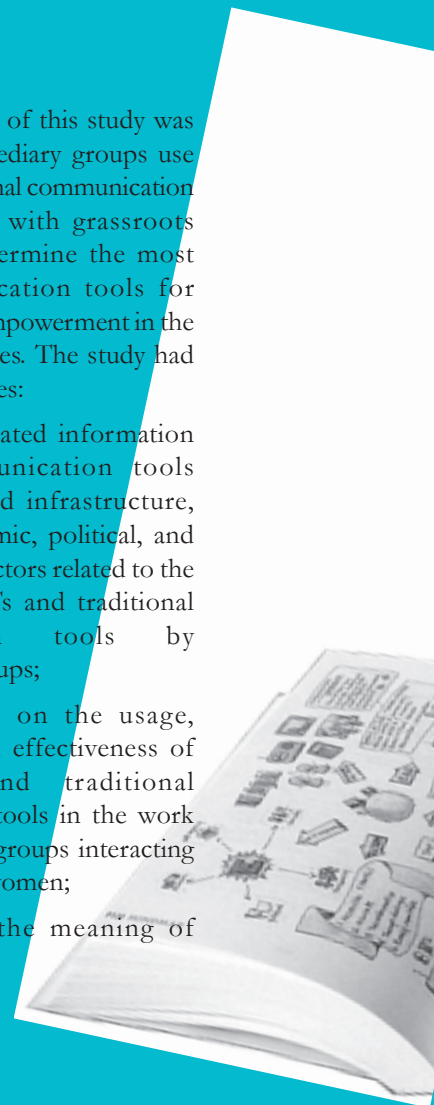
by Mira Alexis P. Ofreneo

People's Communications for Development (PC4D) was envisioned and implemented in the context of interrogating the information and communication technology (ICT)-centric development frameworks. Led by Isis International, the research was conducted from October 2004 to March 2008, covering 5 countries in the Asia-Pacific region, namely, India, Philippines, Thailand, Fiji, and Papua New Guinea, in collaboration with:

- (1) Aalochana Centre for Documentation and Research on Women (AALOCHANA), India,
- (2) The Civil Media Development Institute (CMDI), Thailand,
- (3) FemLINK Pacific: Media Initiatives for Women (FEMLINKPACIFIC), Fiji, and,
- (4) Health, Education, Sustainable Livelihood and Participation for All (HELP), Resources, Inc., Papua New Guinea.

The general objective of this study was to know how intermediary groups use new ICTs and traditional communication tools in interacting with grassroots women; and, to determine the most effective communication tools for grassroots women's empowerment in the 5 Asia-Pacific countries. The study had four specific objectives:

- (1) To generate updated information on the communication tools environment and infrastructure, including economic, political, and social/cultural factors related to the use of new ICTs and traditional communication tools by intermediary groups;
- (2) To derive data on the usage, accessibility, and effectiveness of new ICTs and traditional communication tools in the work of intermediary groups interacting with grassroots women;
- (3) To determine the meaning of



empowerment, empowering information, and empowering communication tools for intermediary groups; and,

- (4) To know the experiences and views of grassroots women on how selected intermediary groups use communication tools for women's empowerment.

The key informant interview was the primary data-gathering method. A total of 81 intermediary groups from the 5 countries were purposively selected and interviewed. A review of related literature (RRL) was also carried out to situate the interview results within the larger country context. An intermediary group was selected among the organisations interviewed in each country to conduct a focus group discussion (FGD) with grassroots women from this intermediary group's constituency or target communities. A total of four FGDs were done to complement the interviews; one in India, one in the Philippines, one in Thailand, and one in Fiji.

In the end, the research yielded a 600+ page book titled **People's Communications for Development**

(PC4D): How Intermediary Groups Use Communication Tools for Grassroots Women's Empowerment.

Summary of Findings

General Findings. The research findings show that traditional communication tools such as **radio**, **popular theatre**, and **film** were evidently the most effective tools in interacting with grassroots women.

One reason why the radio has been seen as effective in reaching grassroots women is its harmony with women's everyday activities. *"With the radio, even if you are doing the laundry, even if you are cooking...while they are working...they can listen to the things that are being shared to them."* **(Philippines KII)** *"Radio is something that is part of the tapestry of their daily lives...they got it going on in the background and they are listening."* **(Fiji KII)** Another reason is the need for information relevant to the community. *"When they go to work in the fields, they would like to listen to a radio program about their own community...The community radio can respond to community needs and provide channels for villagers to communicate."* **(Thailand KII)** Finally, the power of the radio lies in its accessibility and reach. *"Radio could reach out to places that we cannot go to, the remote areas..."* **(PNG KII)** Grassroots women in Fiji believe that the radio is the cheapest and most accessible form of communication.

Meanwhile, street plays are considered by Indian grassroots women's organisations as a cultural tradition that is most effective in empowering women. One reason is



its emotional impact. As one woman recalls one particular street play, *“These women were weeping. Seeing them crying, I realised that the street play was able to touch the heart of the viewers.”* (India FGD) Theatre also initiates discussion and dialogue. *“After every performance, the conversation, the people chat, ask questions...answer—very effective!”* (India KII) In India, popular theatre is seen as most culturally appropriate. *“Within the traditional lore, messages on health, gender bias, superstition and many others can be woven in.”* (India KII) The process itself of doing theatre is empowering for grassroots women. *“What it does is it creates a space...these women would never actually go to become actors...But what is important for me is the fact that they get this space where they can jump, scream, shout, something they have never been allowed to do in their lives.”* (India KII)

Similarly, a film’s audio-visual quality makes messages easy to understand. *“If it’s in video or documentary, it can be absorbed easily by the participants because they see something, they hear something”* (Philippines KII)

Films also reach diverse grassroots communities. *“Many people, they are illiterate...They are seeing the pictures and also the sound and all that goes with it, the movement. So, they get a lot from that.”* (PNG KII)

The ability of

videos to facilitate communication for grassroots women was cited by the grassroots women from the Philippines. Videos can convey powerful messages to women who cannot read nor write. It is also a useful tool in presenting in international conferences on women’s issues. *“There was no explanation needed. At a Southeast Asian conference, we showed the video...we didn’t need to speak. It was subtitled in English.”* (Philippines FGD) Films initiate reflection and facilitate discussion. Films can be powerful enough to touch viewers and create change. *“In our culture, you don’t see women doing...traditional male jobs, such as construction work or police work...we want to show them films of Muslims...in other parts of the world...who are into construction work.”* (Philippines KII) *“People can identify with the message if they actually see the person...”* (Fiji KII)

Oral communication or direct, two-way, **face-to-face interaction** was clearly the most empowering way of sharing information between intermediary groups and grassroots women.

Indian grassroots women shared their struggles to reach the communities they serve. One reason for their success is the intimate, personal, and experiential quality of face-to-face interactions. The grassroots women activists interact with villagers in a very intimate setting such as the villagers’ own homes. Moving door to door, the women enter each home and sit with the people in their own households. *“By interaction, we understand them. We decide a strategy based on what we gather from the people.”* (India FGD)



Illustration by Jim Marpa

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In Thailand, interactive fora make information understandable by giving an opportunity for two-way exchange and explanation. Referring to a legal forum discussing specific laws, one participant narrated, *“As poorly educated local villagers, we cannot understand academic analysis and ambiguous texts in codes. When we attend fora, the academics explain to us how those texts can be interpreted and how they affect our lives. They always ask for our opinions.”* (Thailand FGD)

The grassroots women from the Philippines find the value in new ICTs while at the same time asserting the need for interpersonal face-to-face communication. Despite the difficulties, the network’s members travel to different parts of the country in order to meet. Meetings and trainings were also believed to be the most effective by some intermediary groups. *“Communication tools which provide venue for interaction, participation, reflection and dialogue are more empowering.”* (Philippines KII)

In Fiji, some intermediary groups believe that face-to-face communication is still the best mode of exchange and fear that the use of new ICTs will endanger personal communication. Speaking on

empowering women, a participant shares, *“That’s the best way we can empower them. It is to go and sit down with them, explain to them and off course allow for that dialogue and exchange of opinions or views and opportunities for clarification.”* (Fiji KII)

In Papua New Guinea, many of the intermediary groups also believe that oral communication is the most empowering. *“Passing information through word of mouth”* is one of the surest ways to transmit information (PNG KII). A member of a women’s group shares that there are two main ways of communicating with grassroots women in the country, *“firstly, by sending messages through people, and secondly by sending messages by letters.”* (PNG KII) Though the physical distance is a barrier to face-to-face communication, women report traveling for days or spending the night along the way, to pass information to those who live in far-flung areas.

The utility, accessibility, and effectiveness of traditional communication tools in development work for grassroots women’s empowerment were repeatedly observed and substantiated by the intermediary groups. On the other hand, **new ICTs** were reported to be generally inaccessible and ineffective for grassroots women across the five countries.

Internet technology, computers, and cellular phones, were reported as the least accessible tools for grassroots women. Inaccessibility referred to structural factors including the lack of infrastructure such as electricity or telecommunication in some areas as well as the high costs in terms of



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acquiring the technology, the skills to use the technology, and the resources to sustain the use of the technology.

“When we say that the future of Fiji’s women’s movement faces a rocky road ahead, it is more than just a figure of speech. Land travel is very difficult in Fiji, and communication by post and new ICTs along with it. Some women’s groups even reported that to make use of their cellular phones, they had to ride on horseback to a place where the signal was clear.” [Fiji KII]

Inaccessibility also means ineffectiveness for new ICTs. Some intermediary groups believe that new ICTs are potentially empowering for communities. Filipino grassroots women attested to this potential, particularly when ICTs are designed and used appropriately and strategically. *“First is learning how to speak. Then to develop one’s personality, and from there to learn to use different technologies...How do you organize them with the use of technology?” (Philippines FGD)* Other intermediary groups think that new ICTs are not useful or beneficial to grassroots women. Referring to new technologies, a participant asserts, *“Why do they have to learn about these equipment... It is more proper to learn something relevant to their life...It is no need for them to have their own computer.” (Thailand KII)* Still others feel that new ICTs are not the solution to grassroots women’s empowerment. *“But if they are still cooking over open fire, in a leaking kitchen, is it morally*

justifiable that we provide them computers?... We haven’t addressed basic things.” (Fiji KII)

Though the general research findings across the five countries overwhelmingly support the power of traditional communication tools over new ICTs for grassroots women’s empowerment, which specific communication tool was most frequently used, most (and least) accessible, and most (and least) effective varied from country to country.

Usage of Communication Tools.

Film or **video** emerged as the top communication tool used with the 5 countries combined, followed closely by **radio** and **popular theatre**. Among the new ICTs, the **computer** emerged as the fourth most commonly used, primarily for making visual presentations when meeting with grassroots women. But comparing country data on the top 2 most frequently used tools, the radio emerged as the most frequently used tool in 4 countries (Philippines, Thailand, Fiji, and PNG), film in 3 countries (India, Philippines, and Thailand), and theatre in 2 countries (India and PNG). The **landline** was in the top 2 for Thailand and **print media** in terms of books and pamphlets for PNG. The **computer** was mentioned in the top 2 for Fiji.

The use of the landline for reaching grassroots women is unique for Thailand. *“We can reach people in remote areas right away via phone...If we phone them, they will come.” (Thailand KII)* A specific example is the helpline. *“Telephones are main tools for women to escape and to be released from forced prostitution.” (Thailand KII)*

Print media is very important for Papua New Guinea, primarily because they are accessible and readily available. Posters, with

“sharp and powerful images”, are always in high demand. *“There is never enough for distribution.”* (PNG KII) The use of leaflets and pamphlets, handy publications, was also reported. *“They can pick it up anytime and read when they have time available after their busy day schedule.”* (PNG KII)

The computer was the top new ICT used by intermediary groups, primarily for making visual presentations for the community. *“It is very visual and you get good feedback.”* (Fiji KII) *“It makes them interested and awake.”* (Fiji KII) *“It enhances learning, makes it user-friendly and learner-friendly.”* (Fiji KII)

Accessibility of Communication Tools. The most accessible communication tool for grassroots women using the combined data for all 5 countries was the **radio**; which was also reported as among the top 2 most accessible tools in all countries except India. This was supported by the RRL where radio emerged as the most accessible tool in the 5 countries as well. **Film** emerged as the second most accessible tool using the combined data but was only in the top 2 of PNG. The **cellular phone** was the third most accessible and was reported in the top 2 of India and the Philippines. Interestingly, the cellular phone was also mentioned as the third least accessible tool using the combined country data. **Theatre** was

among the most accessible tools for India, the **landline** for Thailand and Fiji, and **print media** for Fiji and PNG. The **poster**, as a type of print media, was specifically mentioned as the most accessible tool in PNG. The least accessible tools were primarily the new ICTs, with the internet and the computer cited the most. Again, the RRL supported this finding as the literature showed that new ICTs were indeed the least accessible in all five countries.

The radio is the most accessible communication tool because of its wide-reaching coverage in all 5 countries. It is relatively cheap to own and easy to use with no special skills needed to operate it. The radio is a medium found in many grassroots households and can be used even in far-flung areas where there is no electricity. *“In remote villages, the easiest and cheapest mode is radio.”* (India KII) Accessibility also specifically means being accessible to grassroots women. *“It would reach grassroots women because they listen to the radio.”* (Fiji KII)

The accessibility of the cellular phone was uniquely reported in India and the Philippines. *“It seems that almost all people, (even) mothers who are poor have cellphones.”* (Philippines KII) Due to minimal costs and easy accessibility in its use, grassroots women are able to maximize the mobile phone’s potential. Through its short messaging service (SMS) or text, intermediary groups and grassroots women are able to interact, sending and receiving messages instantaneously. *“A mobile phone is the most effective communication tool we have now because it is on your body all the time! So you are on call all*



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Among the top reasons why a communication tool is perceived as effective included a tool's wide reach or coverage, visually stimulating qualities, interactive features, cultural appropriateness, and clear target focus.

the time. There is a problem in the community, within seconds, everybody knows.”(India KII)

Effectiveness of Communication Tools. The most effective communication tool from the combined country data was the **radio** followed by **theatre** and **film**. Looking at per country data, radio was among the top 2 most effective tools in all 5 countries; theatre in 3 countries (India, Thailand and PNG); film in 2 countries (India and Thailand); and **print media** in 2 countries (Thailand and Fiji). **Storytelling** or the oral tradition and the **internet** were mentioned in India whereas the **cellular phone** was among the most effective tools in the Philippines. Among the new ICTs, only the cellular phone was effective and only for the Philippines. Among the top reasons why a communication tool is perceived as effective included a tool's wide reach or coverage, visually stimulating qualities,

interactive features, cultural appropriateness, and clear target focus. The internet and the computer were the least effective tools because of high costs, lack of infrastructure in some countries, and the skills/literacy requirements. The cellular phone was the third least effective tool using the combined country data.

Print media was among the most effective tools in Fiji and Thailand. One reason for effectiveness is sheer accessibility, especially given the lack of an enabling environment for digital or electronic media in Fiji. *“The print form is still the cheapest form in the Pacific.” (Fiji KII)* In Thailand, visually stimulating print media such as posters seem most effective. *“Now we are making more posters because they are the more effective media in local community.” (Thailand KII)* An interesting anecdote was shared by the Thai grassroots women on the use of letters. *“I consider the letter as very important. It provides me evidence for my husband. If I only receive the information via telephone, he will question me a lot, but the letter confirms that it is really about work.” (Thailand FGD)* Letters apparently are used by Thai women to legitimise their community work, particularly to their husbands, given the negative stigma suffered by feminists in Thailand.

Empowering Potential of Communication Tools. Intermediary groups from all the 5 countries repeatedly confirmed that **oral communication** or **face-to-face interaction** was the most empowering means of interacting with grassroots women. The FGDs with grassroots

women corroborate this as the women found direct interaction with the intermediary group the best mode of communication. Intermediary groups also report the radio and popular theatre or performing arts as empowering in all the countries. These were again supported by the FGDs with grassroots women who found these traditional communication tools most appropriate for them. Film was cited as empowering in 3 countries (Fiji, PNG, and the Philippines); television in 2 countries (India, the Philippines, and Thailand); and print media in 2 countries (Fiji and PNG). Telecommunications or the landline was not cited.

Empowerment and New ICTs. Intermediary groups further validated that new ICTs, namely the internet, computer, and the cellular phone, are

generally not empowering for grassroots women. Though intermediary groups found the internet empowering for themselves, these tools were not empowering for the grassroots women they served. However, the utility of the computer for making visual presentations was cited as empowering in the Philippines and Thailand. The use of the cellular phone for mobilisation and other activities was empowering for the Philippines. Interestingly, only intermediary groups in Fiji and PNG see the potential of new ICTs in empowering grassroots women. Groups from India and the Philippines generally believe that new ICTs will not necessarily lead to development. Whereas, the intermediary groups in Thailand found new ICTs as inappropriate for grassroots women. Grassroots women from the FGDs supported these views as they

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described new ICTs as least effective except for communicating outside of their immediate communities. As a unique case, the Philippine FGD highlighted the value of the cellular phone for facilitating communication among grassroots women.

Meanings of Empowerment. The meanings of empowerment for the intermediary groups were diverse. The general themes that cut across all 5 countries were empowerment as economic independence, political participation, community-organising or solidarity-building, and individual agency. Empowerment as individual agency was most elaborated by the intermediary groups in the 5 countries. Societal transformation was mentioned in India, the Philippines, Fiji, and PNG whereas family transformation was uniquely mentioned in the Philippines.

Meanings of Empowering Information. The top 5 ways by which information becomes empowering are when information is accessible, accurate, transformative, based on interactive dialogue, and useful. The accessibility, accuracy, and transformative quality of information were shared themes in all five countries. Accessibility meant in the local language and using tools suitable or appropriate for the grassroots women or community. Accuracy referred to using only information based on

research from the ground or the community. And transformative quality implied that information is for initiating change.

PC4D: People's Communications for Development

From the research results, Isis and its partners evolved **PC4D** or **People's Communications for Development**, a model that frames the research findings into a picture of development communication work visualised as 3 spheres: (1) *practices*, (2) *programmes*, and (3) *policies*. Similar to the solar system, practices lies at the centre of the model while programmes and policies revolve around practices in successive concentric circles. Framed within the research parameters, grassroots women are at the core of practices, intermediary groups in programmes, and states and other development institutions in policies.

The model argues that genuine development takes place when programmes and policies are solidly focused on community practices. Hence, development must begin from the ground, must be rooted in practices, and must be determined by grassroots women, communities, and people themselves. PC4D is a reminder that people are at the core of development. ■

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