

Chapter 8

Socio–Economic Empowerment Through Technologies: The Case of Tapestry at Lentswe La Oodi Weavers in Botswana

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ABSTRACT

The chapter presents a case of a community development project known as Lentswe La Oodi Weavers in a rural village, Oodi, in the Kgatleng district of Botswana with a goal of socio-economic empowerment for women operating it and for the community. The project reinforces sentiments that technology work best for local communities if it is compatible with their ways of life. The women who started the project almost 30 years ago did not have any formal education and achieved their dignity in their own communities as women who are independent and have empowered themselves for better livelihoods and sustainable income, meager as it may be. They use their natural talent of weaving and boost their productivity through compatible ICTs such as spinning wheel, Bobbin wheel, and flat looms. Short training is done to strengthen these natural skills. Their products are bought internationally. Challenges include lack of skills for proper management. They live in the world of bookkeeping and book auditing and their project is susceptible to problems if it does not go through such procedures. Thus, these women skill-needs are mostly in areas of management, marketing, and selling their produce; all of these could be said to need formal training.

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INTRODUCTION

Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) offer myriad opportunities for economic and social development. ICT is a term “which is currently used to denote a wide range of services, applications, and technologies, using various types of equipment and software, (Commission of the European Communities 2001, p.3). The role and impact of these technologies in development cannot be ignored. Their impact has undermined the literacy divide and they have contributed significantly to empowering the less educated of our masses. Within the context of community development, ICTs are seen as potential vehicle through which development can be wheeled to all, including the rural communities. The development discourse is inundated with pronouncement and strategies geared towards enhancing the use of ICTs in addressing rural poverty in rural communities. In the debates on equitable economic opportunities, ICTs occupied a central stage both in national and international forums. In these debates, it has been acknowledged that modern technologies have a role to play in promoting cultural as well as economic development in developing nations.

Arora and others (2002) argues that “technology is now available to combat corporate amnesia and facilitate knowledge creation, capture, organization and transmission from the right people to the right people at the right time for the right job” (p. 240). The pervasive use of modern technologies may lead to the integration of rural communities in national development.

The chapter analyzes a case of a community development project known as the Lentswe La Oodi in a rural village of Oodi, in the Kgatleng district of Botswana. It outlines a success story of a project that has been able to adapt technology to produce distinctive work of art aligned to their cultural heritage. The chapter, therefore, provides a brief description of the evolution of the art of tapestry and the technology used in the process. The project reinforces sentiments that

technology work best for local communities if it is compatible with their ways of life (culture). The work of art presented in this chapter depicts the value of traditional Tswana culture. It tells stories about lived experiences and oral literature that has had great significance and relevance in various aspects of community life. It specifically introduces people to the social, cultural, political and economic characteristics of the country. The stories are topical, poetic and cover the historical and social contexts. This approach to rural development highlights the significance of relevance and ownership in the process.

The second section discusses the planning processes that the project went through from inception prior to and after implementation of the project. The role played by all stakeholders, that is, community members, leadership and the Swedish founding members is critically discussed. It starts with the arrival of the Swedish couple, formulation of the project idea, mobilizing community members for participation and the project implementation.

Thirdly, the chapter discusses experiences of current project members with regards to the technology used, challenges and opportunities as well as project management processes and concerns regarding the organization of the project. All project members are women and all come from the three villages identified by the project stakeholders. The project is managed by project members who are all shareholders in the project. Being shareholders has sustained their commitment level through good and bad times. The final section discusses current challenges and problems faced by the project. These include issues of staffing, recruitment, sales, marketing and the economic climate of the project. The paper ends with recommendations that are in congruence with the national Rural Development policy so that the project could have a shared vision for rural development with policy makers. These include the ability of the project to alleviate poverty, expanding opportunities for generating

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