



INTRODUCING INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES (ICT) FOR RURAL AREAS IN AN GIANG PROVINCE, VIETNAM

1. General Information

An Giang covers an area of 3,406 km², of which about 1.03% are whole country areas and about 8.58% are Mekong Delta areas (the fourth position in Mekong Delta). An Giang is divided into eleven administrative units: Long Xuyen city, Chau Doc town and nine districts (An Phu, Tan Chau, Phu Tan, Tinh Bien, Tri Ton, Cho Moi, Chau Phu, Chau Thanh, Thoai Son) with 118 communes, 11 wards and 11 towns (total 140).

An Giang is far a way from HCM city centre about over 200 km and 60 km from Can Tho city centre. The border with Cambodia is 95.05 km in length. It has a fairly good transportation system with the main axial way that connects 91st highway of Vietnam with 2nd highway of Cambodia; Tien River and Hau River belongs to Mekong river system.

In 2001, the population of An Giang province reached 2,113,429 inhabitants, comprised by mainly four main ethnics: Kinh, Chinese, Khmer and Cham. The population density is 620 persons.km⁻², where 448,500 habitants live in urban area, and 1,685,608 live in rural areas.

The economy of An Giang province, which is similar to the whole country, is heavily dependent on agriculture. It provides 6 in 10 of all jobs and a quarter of GDP (but takes up 60% of the total workforce).

In 1999, 100% villages had electricity, as in 2000, over 80% of households had electricity. The average electricity consumption per capita by the end of 1999 was 121.38 kw.year⁻¹. Similarly in 1999, 100% villages had telephone lines at village offices, along with 60% postal services and 70% telecommunication stations with many diversified services available. In average there are about 2.5 telephones subscribed for 100 households.

2. Introducing ICT to Rural Areas (Internet for Rural Areas Project)

2.1. Introduction

The so-called Internet for Rural Areas Project (IRAP) was launched from mid 2001. Since An Giang is classified by the central government as a remote province among other more advance provinces, the provincial government recognized that it's people, especially local scientists/officers are far behind others in terms of information. Meanwhile the local leaders also recognized the potential importance of ICT, particularly the Internet that could contribute significantly and economically to fill the gap of information lack.

However, the implementation of such idea was not easy at that time. After some reconnaissance study, the provincial government agreed to allocate 1 billion VND (equal to more than 65,000 USD) taken from the provincial annual reserve fund to launch a one-year project as a trial.

2.2. Implementation

2.2.1. Stakeholder selection

The reconnaissance study noted that there were 42 out of 118 communes, 11 wards and 11 towns that already had computers (from now called as village). Within these 42 villages, 260 persons (the project initially planned to train 378 persons) – mainly government officers who had education level from college and above AND working mainly in education, medicine and agriculture sectors – were selected for training.

However, after the screening, wards and towns were not accepted by the provincial government, since they are considered to be in the “advanced” class. Finally, only 36 villages and 114 village officers were selected. Within 114 participants, 42 percent have education level of college. The remaining are university graduation in Education, Medicine and Agriculture. What is quite surprise is that, there is only 1 participant among 144 who has agriculture background.

These villages spread over 9/11 districts of the province. The distribution of participants among villages also greatly varied (see table 1).

Table 1. Internet for Rural Area Project Training - Participant Distribution

No.	Village/District	No. of Participants	No.	Village/District	No. of Participants
	An Phu district	5		Phu Tan district	15
1	Da Phuoc	3	19	Long Son	3
2	Vinh Hoi Dong	2	20	Phu Binh	3
	Cho Moi district	17	21	Phu Hiep	5
3	Cho Moi	1	22	Phu Xuan	2
4	Long Dien A	6	23	Phu My	2
5	Long Dien B	7		Tan Chau district	20
6	Long Kien	1	24	Chau Phong	6
7	An Thanh Trung	2	25	Long An	4
	Chau Phu district	24	26	Long Phu	4
8	Cai Dau	3	27	Vinh Hoa	4
9	Binh Chanh	2	28	Tan Chau	2
10	Binh My	7		Thoai Son district	17
11	My Duc	6	29	An Hao	6
12	Thanh My Tay	6	30	Thoai Giang	3
	Chau Thanh district	8	31	Vong The	5
13	An Hoa	1	32	Nui Sap	3
14	An Chau	1		Tinh Bien district	6
15	Binh Hoa	2	33	An Hao	1
16	Can Dang	2	34	Tan Lap	2
17	Vinh Thuan	2	35	Xuan To	1
	Tri Ton district	2	36	Nha Bang	2
18	Ba Chuc	2			

2.2.2. Introducing ICT to Rural Areas

An Giang University (AGU) was later on assigned by the provincial government to provide training to these village officers. A special training curricula was formed, concerning not only how to get acquaintance with the internet, but also introduces

supported tools for them such as onscreen English-Vietnamese dictionary, download manager softwares, antivirus softwares, etc.

Within 114 village officers, nearly one third has totally no background of ICT (using computers). Therefore, the training had to split into two different training approaches. The first category (for more advanced participants) was offered a three days course, while the beginners had to follow a five days training (an additional two days session was for computer basics – 33 participants).

After training, the participants go back with an Internet prepaid card and a CDROM with relevant softwares/tools for further usage, and they were encouraged to form “Internet Clubs” at their respective villages.

2.2.3. Results

During the first three months, there were feedback emails sent to the IRAP coordinator regularly. Email contents tend to focus on technology (tick-tacks on surfing experiences, URLs concerning information needed, etc.). Based on the number of prepaid cards distributed initially, and those who asked for more cards, approximately 80 percent of the participants uphold internet surfing.

At least 10 village officers could not access to internet due to availability of PCs because the PCs that are presented in those respective villages belong to either village office or village accountant office, which is considered to contain “sensitive data”, hence could not be used by outsiders.

Average internet access duration is at 6 hours per person per month. There were only 8 participants that requested for 3 prepaid cards (a prepaid card valued at 100,000 VND (6.5 USD) can provide approximately 13 access hours).

Although all 36 participated villages formed their own club, the activities of the clubs only concentrate on meetings for exchanging each others surfing experiences. Only a few broaden the meeting into how information/internet can serve the village needs (Vong The, An Hao and Long Phu).

Eleven villages/clubs did admit 33 new members to the club. Some of them were already having some internet access experiences. Three clubs had their own official internet access regulation.

The information resource websites regularly visited by all members varies from government policy and guidelines resources such as the Vietnamese Communist Party (www.cpv.org.vn), Vietnam National Assembly (www.na.gov.vn), Nhan Dan newspaper (www.nhandan.org.vn), Communist magazine (www.tapchicongsan.org.vn), etc. to socio-economic such as import/export (www.exim-pro.com.vn), Market Price information (www.marketprice.com.vn), agriculture (www.agroviet.gov.vn), animal husbandry (www.vcn.vnn.vn), education (www.edunet.edu.vn), etc.

More and more participants gain experiences in using search engines both in English and Vietnamese. However, most participants limited themselves to Vietnamese resources due to linguistic limitation.

The overall budget used for this project was only 90 mil. VND (equals to 6,500 USD) in which 17 mil. VND were used for training.

3. Discussion and Lessons Learned

3.1. Pros

As mentioned above, 36 villages are now “more advanced” than others in some cases related to information. A good example to illustrate this is when AGU put its’ university entrance examination to the web, those village were able to get the examination results for people living in those village from the web, instead of go all the way from the village to AGU to get the exam result.

Information gathered from internet significantly help village leaders to keep up to date information from the central government (some village only receives newspapers 1 to 2 days after it is issued). Through this information channel, grassroots leaders are more conscious of how IT can deliver information in an effective way.

ICT/Internet significantly help local scientists/officers in update and improve their professional knowledge, hence serves better for the community. Information demand from different disciplines are enormous and abundant. In such remote areas, information from the internet is the only source of information that can deliver this typical nature of information needs.

Through the internet, there is an emerging of continuous education through e-learning and/or distance education. Some participants demanded for additional training for self learning skills. This potentially will provide excellent opportunity for local officers/scientists living in rural areas to upgrade their knowledge while serving the community.

The implementation and success of the project has a tremendous impact from the provincial leaders. This readiness for introducing ICT to rural areas has created a very trustful atmosphere from both educators and learners. Many official decisions and decrees have been issued to strengthen the implementation of the project.

3.2. Cons

The major information contents on the internet are in English. This is also obviously a very important constraint in accessing to information by villagers. There have been a number of projects concerning content building, some simply doing the translation. However, the translation reward is very low, hence no incentive to translators. Another trade-off is translators are not (and will never) always precise when coming to multi-disciplinary fields.

Up to now, the evaluation on the true value of information is not clear. Therefore, the sustainable “self-survival” of the project or internet clubs) were very low. Nearly right after the project stop providing prepaid cards to clubs, the activities also terminated somehow. This shows that the information itself cannot keep itself alive in such environment. It might be due to the human being ho use the information who was not good enough to master the information from the internet (due to linguistic limitation) and or the community does not need (hence not willing to pay?) information. Several studies in Vietnam and also from An Giang province clearly stated that all farmers nowadays urge greatly for information. Agricultural extension workers at present days face big problems since farmers ask not only on cultivating techniques, but also market price of their products.

From the project, 3 or 5 days training is not enough. However, to get participants attending longer training periods is not possible since most participants are involved in their own duty that could not be absent for long periods. Another alternative is to train smaller groups of 2 or 3 adjacent villages, or split long training period into smaller pieces so participants can attend easily.

Education level of agricultural staff in village level is low. More attention should be paid to alleviate agricultural extension workers knowledge to keep up with present situation. Similar situation also applies to the whole Vietnam, where more educated people tends to “stick” in larger cities.

There are still some vague awareness from local leaders versus ICT/Internet, although some of them did changed their mind after surprising what ICT contributed to their management

occupation. Keep in mind that this project was implemented with a very strong support from the provincial government.

Last but not least, there was no evaluation by the end of project. Although AGU did asked to organize a final workshop, where AGU mainly would like to invite all participants and hear their feedback, the counterpart (Department of Science, Technology and Environment – who took over the leadership at that time) was not interested in organizing such workshop.

4. Recommendation

As mentioned, information readily in native language is a crucial factor for the success in introducing ICT to rural areas. However, the trade-off for this fact is very often (if not always) the content – to be built preferentially by professionals – are normally impossible. While in western countries, investments for information construction pay heavy attention on content compared to hardwares, in eastern countries (or at least in Vietnam – which is still very common), more attention is paid to hardware.

Moreover, incentives for translation is not recognized by regulations. However, there are quite some complete databases (eg. from ministries of Education and Training, Trade and Tourist, Planning and Investment, etc.) that exist elsewhere. Getting accessed to such information is a long run matter.

Balancing between timing to be updated with present information while remain low educational level, is it necessary to have a dedicate staff for information exploitation? In this trend, An Giang would need 140 staff in addition, and Vietnam will require 10,000 staff. Concerning incentives for such qualified staff to work in rural areas is another challenge.

Community awareness on value of information should be done. Although farmers recognize the importance of marketing of the products, or cultivation technologies, they usually consider this contribution as a duty from village officers. From the national perspectives, a law or by-law where value of information is quantified might be necessary.

Upon national policy level, although there have been many decree/decisions concerning ICT in general, the development progress remains slow. There has been an important effort to boost e-government. However, agreements on what hardware to use and which software to utilize until now remains vague. More simple approach can be done, but somehow not getting the attention from the central government such as establishing a national citizen database and so on.