HOW ACCESS TO MICROFINANCE AND EDUCATION THROUGH TECHNOLOGY CAN ALLEVIATE POVERTY IN THIRD WORLD COUNTRIES

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Abstract

The World Bank has argued that the best way to help people climb out of poverty is to give them an education. Professor Yunus of the Grameen Bank (GB) has demonstrated that poverty alleviation can also occur through microfinance – the provision of small loans of money to very poor women who wish to commence a small business. After twenty-three years of working in Bangladesh which is still one of the poorest countries in the world, the GB has already taken the mobile phone to rural villagers who pay to use the cell phone to call relatives overseas; and Grameen Net is planning to bring the Internet to rural towns. The author explores whether a combination of microfinance (GB Replicas) and access to education through communications technology could speed up the empowerment process in third world towns and rural areas at a time when globalization and the lack of access to technology is making many third world countries poorer.

Introduction

According to the World Bank Vice-President for Environmentally Sustainable Development, globalization is having some negative outcomes for all societies (see De Borchgrave, 1996). He believes that the way to reach the poor is through microfinance, microenterprises and self-employment. Not everyone is ecstatic about this route however. Ehlers and Main (1998) speak about the false promise of microenterprise in the USA and "The Economist" (1998) points to the possible dangers of the Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFI) funded programs which have not been tested by recession. However, Rahman and Wahid

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(1992), in a review of the Grameen Bank, in Bangladesh believe that "because of the flow of cash to the poor, the vulnerability of the rural poor has been greatly reduced" (p. 314).

McGuire and Conroy (1998) have observed that with the exception of Pakistan, both donors and governments have given substantial funds to support the development of microfinance in Asia. In 1997, just before economic tragedy struck Indonesia, Robinson reported the Bank Rakyat Indonesia (BRI) in Indonesia had proven that the demand for microfinance could be met sustainably on a larger scale.

Certainly the Asian recession has increased the number of poor between 1996 and 1999, by at least 3 million in Thailand alone. The World Bank's report on "Attacking Poverty" (World Development Report, 2000) indicates that this increase will be sustained in part even when the economy improves, because of the loss of assets including land and savings (Duang Prateep Foundation Monthly News, December, 2000: p. 4). CASHPOR (Credit and Savings for the Hard-Core Poor in Asia-Pacific), in their newsletter "Credit for the Poor" reported on the situation of microfinance institutions (MFI) in Indonesia following the Asian economic downturn and were pleased to write that although there were serious consequences for the poor, whose numbers grew enormously over the first year after the crash, those who were in Grameen Bank Replicas appeared to have weathered the crisis better than those who had not been part of such a microfinance scheme. McGuire and Conroy (1998) report similarly on the Indonesian institutions they followed up, although earlier on, there appeared to have been a reduction in outreach of microfinance programs within the rural banks

Particularly over the past two decades, the concepts of Microcredit and Microfinance schemes, have been introduced to developing countries to assist the very poor. Often there is some confusion about the terms microcredit and microfinance. Microcredit is a system of providing credit to poor people who cannot normally access it, while microfinance includes both a savings and a credit component. While many microfinance projects commence in urban areas (Jackelen & Rhyne, 1991), this article is concerned generally with rural areas. In most countries, access to banking services is restricted in rural areas, although in the more affluent countries, Internet Banking is changing that now. There is no doubt that the formal financial sectors have not been able to meet the demands for financial services in poor rural households. Vietnam is one country in point (see Johnson, 1998).

For many decades, many different creative credit and savings schemes (Conroy, Taylor & Thapa, 1995), cooperatives and self help schemes (Khandker, 1998), and community banks, for example the Grameen Bank (GB) (Yunus, 1994; Gibbons & Kasim, 1990) and the Centre for Agriculture and Rural Development (CARD) Inc. Bank (Aristotle, 1999; Torres, 1999) have been developed and trialed throughout the developing countries (see Khandker, 1995) and more recently in developed nations (see Counts, 1996). The reason for this is that the very poor have been found to be a better credit risk than the less poor and have little access to formal credit because they lack collateral (Foundation for Development Corporation [FDC], 1992; Grameen Dialogue Newsletter, 1999). The majority of the participants in these schemes have been poor women (The World Bank Group, 1999).

Women Borrowers as Credit Recipients

The trend in the "feminization of poverty" has been highlighted by Buvinic (1997) and observers across the globe attribute this to a complexity of factors including market reforms, divorce, migration, trade liberalization, privatization, currency devaluation, cutbacks in social services and tax reforms, structural adjustment and global restructuring, and the higher unemployment of women after economic reforms (see Angeles, 2000).

Pearson (2000) argues that "women have become the ideal 'flexible' worker of the new global economy" (p. 6) and indicates that it is because they are prepared to be flexible to comply with family duties, that they are over-represented in the lower-paid occupations, with little security, or bargaining power. Indeed Beresford (1994) maintains that a less educated population overall has "fewer opportunities for improving their economic circumstances and is more likely to be influenced by traditional practices, including practices which discriminate against women, in their daily lives" (p. 30). Beresford believes that moving Vietnamese women beyond their traditional domestic roles depends on educational attainment. Note that it is not that they be "educated" in terms of being persuaded or indoctrinated (as in some development and government programs), but rather that they attain an educated status.

There is some indication that perhaps access to credit has drawn women out of their homes, making them more self confident and empowered, and this in turn means that they use family planning more successfully (see Schuler & Hashemi, 1995). Indeed the first request for training (in addition to the formal training in microfinance) from the Ward Women's Union in the Ba Ria Microfinance scheme (Australian Veterans Vietnam Reconstruction Group [AVVRG] Newsletter, 2000) was for family planning for the communes. The majority of women in these MFI schemes have a positive attitude towards family planning (see for example, Todd, 1996).

Overall, the findings of the impact of credit provisions on women's empowerment in Asia are generally positive (see Sebstad & Chen, 1996). The desired outcomes include economic security, ability to make their own purchases, political and legal awareness, public participation, more control over decision-making, more bargaining power, and increased self confidence. Bernasek and Stanfield (1997) advocate that the peer-mentoring process in GB methodologies facilitate personal change and that the networking opportunities "have implications that extend beyond loan repayment and even the economic development promoted directly by the enterprises financed" (p. 364). Interestingly while the GB will grant education loans for the children belonging to the woman, there is no concept of the woman accessing a loan for her own education. This becomes relevant when we return later to the concept of Internet training in microfinance.

However the latter comment aside, this article focuses more on the GB which has been lauded for its efforts in bringing credit and savings access to poor women and their families. This does not indicate however that the GB is the only, or the best, provider in this respect. Indeed there have been many criticisms of the GB with respect to the low number of women it actually employs, but there is no question that it has been most successful in improving the lives of poor villagers through working with women. There can also be no doubt that the majority of those Bangladeshi women would not want to be denied access to such credit (author's interviews with many women in Bangladesh, April, 2000).

Background on the Grameen Bank

In 1983, Professor Muhammed Yunus established the GB of Bangladesh for the purpose of poverty alleviation for the assetless poor. Begun in 1976 as an action research project, Yunus' underlying assumption of the Grameen Model (Grameen is interpreted as rural) is that the rural poor just need access to credit to be able to climb out of poverty. Groups of five people meet and then join others (about 30-40) at a Centre meeting each week where they make loan repayments, undergo some training and recite and discuss the 16 Decisions. "The 16 Decisions" are sometimes altered slightly in other countries because of different social and cultural influences.

Gibbons and Kasim (1990) remind us that Grameen Replicas do not always follow the rules of the Grameen Bank to the letter and most Grameen Replicas do not impose the Grameen 16 decisions on their borrowers; for example, Project IKHTIAR in Malaysia do not carry interest (however they do charge administrative fees); their special savings fund is different from Grameen's, they have no emergency fund and they don't have saluting and physical exercises in Centre meetings. The means test is more rigorous and they are totally computerized.

With regard to the more general GB processes, Gow (2000a) reports on eight key features that practitioners have determined are essential for the Grameen Model to have any chance of success. These are: the importance of the basic group; compulsory savings; regular repayments; realistic interest rates; weekly meetings; intensive staff training; openness and transparency of transactions; and constant performance monitoring.

Outreach to the Poor

Such schemes may be introduced by non-government organizations (NGOs), governments or local community groups or finance businesses. The FDC (1992) sees an important role for the NGOs as intermediaries between the banks and the self-help groups of poor people. An FDC report (Goodwin-Groen, 1998) posits that the development of microfinance has been discouraged by former inappropriate regulation. With the introduction on second tier microfinance situations in many countries, McGuire (1998) conjectures that these are likely to expand more with assistance from the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank, especially since the Microcredit Summit Campaign commenced (see Van Hoorebeke [1998]).

When introduced by governments, such as the Vietnam Bank for Agriculture (VBA) and the Vietnam Bank for the Poor (BVP), or by finance organizations such as the Credit Unions in Thailand, they are generally focused solely on the provision of, and the repayment of, loan monies. NGOs tend to combine these schemes with the implementation of health care services and training, and water and sanitation supply (see for example the NGO Directory in Vietnam [Brown, 1999] where over one-third of NGOs are involved in some type of credit or savings provision). Local community groups may commence with savings first (such as the Vietnam Women's Union commune schemes) or design some method of pooling resources before loaning money.

In many countries, there is an ongoing concern that this credit often does not reach the very poor. An objective analysis by GRET (Group de Recherche et d'Echanges Technologiques) (Bousso et al., 1997), of rural microcredit scheme members in Cambodia, found that 74% of the borrowers were from very poor, poor and average families, and concluded that the poor were under-represented. There is even the argument that such credit does more good for the community as a whole, in the hands of people who are not the very poorest (Hulme & Mosley, 1997).

Sustainability – Economist's Dream or Practical Reality

According to Christen, Rhyne, Vogel and McKean (1995), viability allows a microfinance program to maintain its operations indefinitely, independent of concessional funding" (p. 9). Measuring repayment rates has been a key determinant of whether an MFI is successful or not. One of the major problems for MFIs has been bad debts and pilferage. Bad debts certainly influence the ongoing viability of a credit scheme.

A key aspect of sustainability is held to be the facility to reach large numbers of people. McGuire (1998) urges us to understand that if "microfinance is to make an important contribution to poverty reduction in the region, the microfinance sector will need to develop to the stage where it can reach large numbers of poor people on a sustainable basis" (p. 1). Renteria-Guerrero (personal communication, CARD Bank, Philippines, 3.12.99) posits that there is no possibility of a MFI becoming successful in sparsely populated areas, especially, where there are not a large proportion of "very poor" people because the MFI needs to be able to outreach to more than 10,000 to be considered viable.

However Kelly (Interview, Ho Chi Minh City, 13.2.00) collects monies from 4,800 people (60% women) who are spread across a diverse population in the provinces of Long An and Dong Thap (to the west of Ho Chi Minh City) and even to adjacent provinces. Kelly advises that while a Grameen Replica may not work in a sparsely populated region, because of the extra wages for weekly meetings, etcetera, modified collection arrangements would reduce the cost of transport and wages. Hettiarachhi (personal communication, Bangkok, 10.12.99) argues that, to be sustainable, a new project needs 50 groups of 20-30 in the first year, 100 groups in the second year and then at 500 groups, it can be sustained. This matches Renteria-Guerrero's figures of viability (Hassan & Renteria-Guerrero, 1979).

But are large numbers enough? Seibel (in Dunford, 2001) writes that rural and agricultural banks (AgDBs) reach tens of millions of rural people in India and China, but that most of these are unsustainable.

Criticisms of NGO Introduced Schemes and Sustainability

NGOs have come under some criticism for their part in these schemes (see Fernando, 1997). The Association of Asian Confederation of Credit Unions (1999a) in Thailand and GRET in Vietnam (Consultative Group to Assist the Poorest [CGAP], 1996, May) are of the view that NGOs can act without due regard for the effect of their loan programs on the local community. Many NGOs tend to commence a program and then leave within two or three years without linking the scheme to a formal course of credit such as a Credit Union. Kelly maintains that all NGO sponsored programs should build in this link from the commencement of the scheme to ensure sustainability. Rutherford (1998) advocates that all savings and credit groups should become part of a credit union and lists the benefits. GRET has worked with the VBA. CGAP (1996) suggests that it may be difficult for the VBA and VBP to give the highly quality service to the poor that NGOs are trained in.

Natural Disasters

Another major problem has been the intervention of natural disasters such as floods that wreak havoc with the programs. However the GB tends to rally to the assistance of its borrowers and even through the momentous flood in 1998, their repayment rates only regressed a few percent. The GB does not give charity to the flood victims, it gives them special loans to tide them over and in some cases, adjust the repayments for some months to allow the borrower to recover – it never forgives a loan (Bornstein, 1996): "We are a business" reaffirms Mohammed Yunus (personal communication, 2000) and those of us who thought the GB was a social organization, come to learn very quickly that this is most definitely a rigorous business (Grameen Dialogue, 2000).

Brown and Nagartajan (2000) outline how microfinance organizations operate during floods. They conclude "there is no one product or set of products that all MFIs can use to fully cope with disasters. However, the Bangladesh experiences highlight that client preferences, the degree of disaster exposure, and the size of an MFI will all likely influence which products or product adaptions are most appropriate in a given situation".

Best Practice and Sustainability Measures

While the western world tries to transfer its concept of Best Practice to the provision of microfinance services in emerging countries, Cornford (2000) reminds us that we may be evaluating schemes in terms of sound practice which allows scope for flexibility and variability in the ways things are done in different countries. She refers to Seibel's (1998, cited in Dunford, 2000) assertion that "there cannot possibly be a unitary set of best practices, only diverse sets of sound practices" (p. 7).

Not everyone involved with these types of MFIs are happy about the emphasis on sustainability. Fairley (1998) goes so far as to say that vocational training, business development and other types of non-financial and financial services can be as equally successful as microcredit in microenterprise development. Fairley further professes that the fact that MFIs focus on repayments and institutional sustainability takes the attention away from poverty alleviation.

Before turning now to the potential of training, it is important to acknowledge that there are a complexity of factors influencing sustainability (including lack of infrastructure and capacity building and the author has summarized some of these factors elsewhere (Gow, 2000b).

It could be reasoned that one of the key ingredients in a sustainable MFI is the training of the managers, staff and field workers and the loan recipients who are commencing or increasing the output of their small businesses or farming produce. Equally important from an educator's viewpoint, making sure that the borrowers have access to training would be essential criteria for them to expand their knowledge about, and scope of, business opportunities.

Training

Many institutions train professionals and non-professional people in how to conduct microfinance, and some of these relate to the GB: Grameen Trust in Bangladesh, CARD Bank in the Philippines, CMF in Nepal, (accredited through the Coady Institute in Canada), and Action Aid in Vietnam.

The CARD Bank is a Centre of Excellence when it comes to demonstrating the positive effect of training on people at all levels of the Bank. Office and field observations (December, 1999) by the author, a trainer of long standing, led her to conclude that their culture of training empowered all persons who had contact with CARD.

However, overall training does not feature high on the agenda of reports about microfinance schemes across the world. Moreover, where there is training at the top of the structure, often the grassroots training is absent (Dao, Nguyen, Tran & Pham, 1999). Thuy (2000) also observes that one of the problems at the grassroot levels is that the project cadres lack the skills to meet requirements of projects' complicated monitoring and management systems.

Not that there is a lack of training materials available – there are now several sources of training manuals and videos, but many are only in English. The AIM (Amanah Ikhtiar Malaysia) in Malaysia has produced a simple training manual with a promotional video, which is very helpful in explaining what AIM does. CASHPOR provides consultants and trainers who travel across the world and train managers and assist the program managers in problem solving the many issues that arise in financial and management areas. They have produced several training manuals to assist others to replicate the GB approach (see for example, Gibbons, 1994). UNICEF (see CGAP, 1996) concludes that if sufficient development of core training modules on identification of the poor, basic bookkeeping and managing groups could be developed, then that could effect some scale economies.

Apostol and Chan (1998) detail the delinquency management guidelines in their ASKI credit policy manual and outline a western style induction program for new employees which consists of orientation, testing, training program and then apprenticed through probation and then further evaluation is undertaken before the individual becomes a regular staff member. The GB orientation and training program is very vigorous, and both styles highlight the need for shared training access.

Other "train the trainer" programs focus on participatory rural appraisal methods (Save the Children Fund, 1994a) as well as on savings and credit generally (Save the Children Fund UK & Oxfam UK/Ireland, 1994b) and administrative, financial, monitoring and evaluation tools (Dang, 1997). Indeed there appears to be a good selection of resource materials available (see UNDP [1997] and ACCION International [1997]), if these could be donated to a web site for this purpose.

Motivation and Training

Motivational training is generally a key factor in the Grameen Replicas as with the Tau Yew Mai (TYM) project in Vietnam, established in 1992. The program includes two days of training for all intending participants before they gain access to loan monies and then at the end of each Centre meeting (each Centre consists of eight groups of five members each), a short training talk is given on issues relating to training in health, sanitation, clean environments, family planning, education, budgeting and product development. Training is needed, not just at the beginning of a program, but throughout the life of the program. Managers of even the most financially successful programs (e.g., CEP [Capital Aid Fund for Employment of the Poor], personal communication, 1999) still ask for assistance in motivating the women in the programs to make their repayments and to improve their income generating skills.

Entrepreneurship

While the members of the MFIs may be able to operate very small home-based businesses, if they do not have an enterprising spirit and skills in agriculture, or mariculture, or small business products of services, or have an ability to act as agents, then it is likely that they will not be successful in establishing a larger business, even if they have access to appropriate avenues of credit. The ACCU (Association of Asian Confederation of Credit Unions) (1999) emphasize that it is important to accept that "not all poor have entrepreneurial competencies" (p. 1). On the other hand, Yunus (1998) would make a case that the commonly held belief that entrepreneurs are a special or a select group in our society is a fallacy and that he has already proven, that given the opportunity, many thousands of poor people will grow successful small businesses. The author has proposed that people can learn certain types of enterprise skills (Gow, 1999a), and Yunus says the GB has demonstrated that poor women have innate abilities and just need the chance to prove themselves capable of running a business.

People in third world countries want to learn and setting up courses and even a University for the Poor via the Internet (see Gow, 1999b on INTERUNI) makes logical sense, if the world's educational facilities are willing to donate such courses initially and honour the outcomes with certificates.

Wydick (1999), utilizing extensive statistical formulas, confirms that microenterprise increases child schooling. We already know that education helps people move out of poverty. According to the World Bank (1994), "educating girls yields a higher rate of return than any other investment available in the developing world" (p. 7). Moreover educating women also reduces both infant mortality and fertility rates. This reduction in the number of children helps families to reduce costs due to the economic responsibility of additional children and releases the woman to work in order to earn more income for the family. This is why family planning education is combined with microfinance programs.

Many institutions are now offering on-line courses and all most people need is access to the Internet, facility in the language that the course is being offered in (or the availability of a translator) and cash to pay whatever the charge is for the course. However, not many organizations have conceived of the idea of training in microfinance through the Internet, although several are planning to do so (FDC, 2000).

This form of training inevitably necessitates that the intending student (or at least a family member or friend) is technologically literate. This brings us to the need to provide access to IT training in villagers utilizing the local entrepreneurs who wish to provide telecommunication services, whether that be through cyber cafés, local schools being opened after hours, or greater use of cell phones. Ross Siu, in Vietnam, (2001; E-mail: kpl@net2000.com.au) promotes 10-week courses (through English language medium) ranging in price from $US115 to $US165; an on-line instructor is provided for courses such as E-commerce, E-marketing, HTML, Java and Visual Basic. Obviously such courses are available through universities and private companies throughout the world, but they are not so easily accessible in emerging countries which do not have the technology and necessary infrastructure to facilitate IT. Such infrastructure may take the form of community Telecentres or Televillages.

Telecentres, Televillages and Telelearning

The concept of telecottages, telecentres and televillages has now been around for almost two decades and open learning centers have modeled themselves on such ideas, with respect to making education available to rural and remote students. Telecottages are community centers that have modern electronic communication facilities which enable the population to share resources in education, training, employment, and social and economic development.

To work effectively, the telecottages need a community facility with telecommunications and information processing equipment so that the public can access them. The telecottage concept was meant to benefit the local communities by providing services to local businesses and distance working opportunities, and in some places has already provided local training facilities, open learning access points for distance education, and expanded social networks.

The development of "telecottage villages" in the third world, could link rural communities globally through communication and information technology. The villagers and townspeople would need to have access to a village Internet post; they would have to pay for this, just as they have to pay for using the village water pump. They are used to regulating scarce resources. And there are already Internet cafes in Asia and villagers utilize common phone points, so it is feasible that this sort of technology can be harnessed for teaching. Grameen CyberNet is already established in Bangladesh, although it will take some time to penetrate the villages.

However the goal of Grameen Phone in 1997 was to have a cell phone in every village (Carbonara, 1997) and this is proceeding well.

So using a “top down” approach, we could start with selecting and training the coaches and the tutors. Obviously we would need to train Internet specialists and tutors to oversee the program in each home country. However there is also another alternative, that of the in-country graduate student tutor.

Peer Tutoring and Group Tutoring

The concept of such a virtual training does not rely solely on the internet, computers, telephone cables and reply-paid mail. It needs real bodies to spread the information, to monitor its delivery, to administer it, and to assess and coach students. Who better than the graduates of the programs, assisted in the beginning no doubt by volunteer Masters students from in-country universities, to teach others. A certain percentage of those first degree holders would go on to become agents after they had completed a Business/Accounting or Administration/MBA degree.

Thus using the “bottom up” approach, each student/trainer who connects to the Internet system and who is the paying student, could teach 40 others who may submit assessment via the in-country agent for marking. All 41 people could gain their certificates. (Whether or not they should be charged just one fee or 41 would need to be determined.) The student/trainer could then charge them for training others, so he/she can earn some pocket money (at fixed rates) which allows them to pay for the next course/degree at basic cost.

Hence a new form of enterprise is immediately created in the third world – private tertiary education. Undoubtedly the problems would increase with quality control and assessment once the translations begin, and auditors may find it difficult to monitor the quality, if they do not speak these particular languages.

Going one step further, there is nothing to prevent a small group of villagers, within or across villages, from enrolling in small business accounting, auditing or quality control. Each person then is responsible for ensuring that each other person in the group completes the assignments, understands the concepts and processes and can do the tasks satisfactorily. It may be possible that they can’t receive their own certificates, until every other member of the group is up to standard. If it works for the GB, then group pressure can work for completion of educational tasks. Those of you who know the Grameen Model will recognize the networking concepts outlined in this paper.

Curriculum Choices

Some of the courses that could be offered would revolve around small business, administration, farm management, tourism, production and quality control. The selection of initial courses would have to be made after a careful needs analysis of the participating areas and income generating opportunities. See Gow's paper (1999b) for ways to do this.

Summary

In the bigger picture, there is no reason why, in five years' time, we could not have our first cohort of rural poor in the third world countries obtaining a tertiary "certificate" from INTERUNI, the University for the Poor, having conducted a vast portion of their studies via the Internet and with in-country tutors and peer trainers. Microfinance courses could be taught via the Internet and even GB members at the grassroots level in rural villages could access much needed information and training via Grameen Cybernet and other Internet providers. Vietnam is one country that is proving that even the very poor can access both credit and the Internet in rural areas. The economics of providing such training facilities remains to be assessed and the mechanics of implementing such innovative courses needs to be worked out. However there are indications that this is about to happen in some third world locations.

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