

## **CROMABU: enhancing market opportunities for small farmers in Mwanza, Tanzania**

**By Aloyce Menda**

In 2001 the Crop Marketing Bureau (CROMABU) project was designed to gather and disseminate relevant information regarding crop prices in local and international markets. Basically the project is aimed at empowering small-scale farmers economically by enhancing their access to price information in trade flows. While stakeholders in the agricultural sector are demanding the government to ensure a fair-competition policy, for agricultural marketing and distribution, CROMABU ([www.cromabul.com](http://www.cromabul.com)) is leveling the ground by use of modern Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) to empower farmers. Based in Magu area of Mwanza near to the southern shores of Lake Victoria, the four-year old CROMABU project is supported by the Dutch International Institute for Communication and Development (IICD).

According to CROMABU manager Ms. Naomi Masele, a professional agriculturalist with experience in management of rural agricultural and industrial projects, CROMABU comprises three components. These are the Internet Café that serves the targeted community; the price information services; and community development through information and training. CROMABU's development phase will end in September 2006 and is regarded by IICD as a pilot project to be replicated in other rural areas with crop marketing problems.

Ms. Masele explains that the project targets 16 villages directly, but the information from it circulates further. Information on crop prices gathered from local and foreign markets downloaded from the Internet are compiled by CROMABU and stored in a database. Eventually a simple price index is prepared in Ki-Swahili language and disseminated to farming villages. The youth, particularly ex-students from primary and secondary schools, are the key channel of communication between the CROMABU and the targeted small-scale farmers in Magu. They are employed as agents and use bicycles to collect and distribute all relevant documents to the villages.

According to experts, four characteristics describe the powers of modern ICT in poverty reduction:

- **Interactivity:** For the first time ICTs are effective two-way communication technologies.
- **Permanent availability:** The new ICTs are available 24 hours a day.
- **Global reach:** Geographic distances hardly matter any more.
- **Cost-effective:** For most areas the relative cost of communication has been shrunk to a fraction of previous values.

The CROMABU project is aimed at doing exactly that. With NGO set-up, the project generates income from its community-training centre for peasant farmers and youth groups. It also charges fees from institutional clients in Magu, such as NGOs, for training and the Internet Café. Small-scale farmers have benefited a lot from the project. The Internet services have helped them get best markets for their produce namely cotton, groundnuts, maize, beans, finger-millet and sunflower. When prices are low in Tanzania, the Internet enables them to secure direct buyers from abroad - some of whom are sometimes ready to pay above the world market price.

Before 2002, middlemen (madalali) in Magu, were conspiring to lower crop prices and reap super profit. The price of good cotton for instance is currently ranging from Tanzanian shillings 200 (US\$ 0.2) to shillings 250 (US\$ 0.25) for a kilogram, while before the project it could be lowered to as much as shillings 150 (US\$ 0.12) to shillings 180 (US\$ 0.18) per kilogram. Recent press reports said that small cotton farmers in the neighbouring Bunda district, situated about 450 kilometres from Magu in the eastern shores of Lake Victoria, refused to vend their products for shillings 180 (US\$ 0.18) per kilogram to any buyer. They heard that prices are much better in Magu and hence would rather retain their cotton, which after all is imperishable product. They anticipated buyers with good prices would eventually come!

Despite the remarkable success of CROMABU, the challenge remains on content issues. Most web contents are in English, which is a language of elite in Tanzania. Ki-Swahili is the official national language of 34.6 million people of Tanzania, and over 95 percent of the population can only speak, read and write in either Ki-Swahili or tribal languages and hence cannot comprehend most of the Internet's contents, even if they get access to it.



Farmers sowing seeds in Tanzania

Before thinking of a project on ICT for development one should comprehend the multi-dimensional concept of poverty. Beyond a lack of income, poverty also refers to disadvantages in access to land, credit and services (such as health and education), vulnerability (towards violence, external economic shocks, natural disasters, etc.), powerlessness and social exclusion. According to the year 2002-03 government

commissioned study titled 'Tanzania Participatory Poverty Assessment (TzPPA)', impoverishing forces arise from social, economic and political processes. The study concludes that the macro-economic reforms that pushed the government to withdraw from running production and market operations is among the impoverishing forces. This has affected rural population in three main areas namely: changes in marketing systems, lack of price control, and inadequate extension services.

Since modern ICTs facilitate efficient creation, storage, management and dissemination of information by electronic means, they are powerful tools for fighting some of these impoverishing forces. If a poor African can send a 40-page trade document from Tanzania to Cuba for just 40 cents of one US\$ (Tsh 400) instead of paying US\$ 50 (Tsh 50,000) to courier, then there is no doubt that modern ICTs are cost effective. "While technology shapes the future, ultimately it is people who shape technology, and who decide to what uses it can and should be put," said Kofi Annan in his message to the Geneva World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS-I) in December 2003. CROMABU has done so before, by shaping ICTs to benefit peasant farmers in Mwanza since September 2001.

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