Highlights of the discussion

National Telecommunications Project: Bridging the gender and digital divides
9 December 2015

This brown bag is part of a how-to series that the DER Project Communication group regularly conducts for operations staff. Project leaders share practical strategies on how communication was effectively designed and used to engage stakeholders, change behavior, and mitigate risks - for better project results.

DER co-organized this brownbag with the Gender Equity Thematic Group.

Case for discussion:
National Telecommunications Project (2015-2020) in Myanmar
- US$300 million (Private Cfs); US$150 million (loan) to Ooredoo and Telenor
- Consists of a nationwide telecommunications infrastructure rollout that will provide a full range of fixed, 3G mobile and data services
- Aims to increase telecommunication coverage from 10% (2013 data) to 80% within five years, and make services available to the public at affordable prices

Speakers:
- Robert Lockhart, Investment Specialist, PSIF2 Viswanathan Ramasubramanian, Safeguard Specialist, PSTS
- Imrana Jalal, Senior Social Development Specialist (Gender), SDGG

The telecom sector in Myanmar
- Myanmar has the lowest teledensity in the world (11% mobile subscriber penetration in 2013)
- Political and economic reforms has promoted recent development of the telecommunication infrastructure for Myanmar's 53 million people (2014, World Population Review):
    - Populace is largely young (around 85% are below 54 years old) and literate
- In 2013, through an international competitive bidding process, the Government of Myanmar awarded two licenses to Ooredoo (Qatar) and Telenor (Norway) to provide telecommunications services on a build-own-operate basis
    - Ooredoo is known for having gender equity as a core part of its corporate DNA
- The government is set to issue two more licenses to local telecoms operators

The communication and gender context of the project
- ADB viewed the project as an opportunity to mainstream gender equity in private sector operations, and with Ooredoo, developed a Gender Action Plan (GAP)
- To input into the GAP, Ooredoo conducted a study of the socio-economic benefits of women's inclusion in the telecommunications sector. The study identified the following key factors hindering women's adoption of mobile technology and services in Myanmar:
    - <u>High cost:</u> SIM cards used to cost US$1,500 prior to the shift to a civilian government making them too prohibitive in a country where average annual income is less than US$200
    - <u>Low awareness of the benefits of mobile technology:</u> After decades of isolation and mobile services that used to be only enjoyed by a very small minority in government, a majority of the population was not aware of ICTs or the possibilities of using technology for empowerment
    - <u>Low technical literacy:</u> With electricity concentrated in urban centers and a lack of necessary infrastructure, accessibility to ICTs has not been widespread. Rural women, particularly, have the lowest literacy levels online and offline
    - <u>Lack of online content relevant for women:</u> While there are emerging websites in various Myanmar languages especially after the shift to civilian governance, online content that are relevant for and address women's specific needs, have to be increased and promoted
- The targets detailed in the project's GAP include the following activities to give women greater access to the tools of communication:
    - Enable access to mobile/internet services to five million women, mostly first time users of accessing mobile / internet by 2020
    - Develop and roll out at least one additional application benefitting female users by 2020 to support women's empowerment
- To address the key barriers to women's adoption of mobile technology and meet the GAP targets, Ooredoo conducted the following communication activities:
    - <u>Connected Women conferences -</u> first-ever technical platform where women and other stakeholders in Myanmar's ICT sector met to discuss how ICTs can be leveraged to address both technical and gender divides

- After the first launch in 2015, three more conferences will be held to achieve the following identified priority areas for research and action:
    - Increasing health knowledge for women (particularly those in the rural areas)
    - Using ICTs for capacitating women (for basic and higher education, digital careers)
    - Digital entrepreneurship
    - Creation of relevant online content in various Myanmar languages
- Geek Girls Myanmar - a community of female ICT professionals, students and enthusiasts seeking to encourage greater engagement and female participation, particularly young women, in the industry
    - While 60 percent of university students in computer courses are women, the number dwindles in the field after graduation. Geek Girls Myanmar encourages female students and graduates of ICT courses to stay and be actively engaged in the field
    - This "product" came out from the project's "Ideabox," Ooredoo's platform to encourage female entrepreneurs and start-ups to invest in ICTs
    - The Geek Girls Myanmar's activities include the following: networking and support for IT students and professionals; regular workshops on programming languages, seminars on digital entrepreneurship, and professional development sessions on public speaking and crafting online image
- "Maymay" (mother) app for maternal and child health - designed to provide maternal and child health advice to women during pregnancy and for three years after birth.
    - Maternal mortality ratio (2013) is 240 deaths per 100,000 live births (UN Women) – one of the highest in the region due to the women's insufficient access to basic and reproductive health information and services
    - Users of the app can:
        - receive three maternal health advice alerts per week tailored to the user's stage of pregnancy
        - seek advice from a dedicated hotline operated by trained staff from an NGO, Population Services International
        - search for the nearest health workers and check their contact details
    - "Phayphay" (father) version of the app is being developed
- Airtime agents – the project partnered with Cherie Blair Foundation for Women to recruit 30,000 women as entrepreneurs by selling prepaid airtime cards to rural communities
    - This activity helps to address the low female participation in the labor market (63.1% compared to the men at 85.1%):
        - The women will be also be educational agents explaining the benefits of smartphones and 3G connection to women, and promoting the "Maymay" app
        - Hands-on training on digital entrepreneurship will be provided to the women

- To address the supply side, Ooredo and Telenor introduced US$1.50 SIM cards increasing the people's options for mobile services

Challenges and Lessons
- ICT projects that recognize the digital and gender divides can help provide women with equal access to communication tools to increase their voice and representation. Private companies can help facilitate civic dialogue and engage women not as simple ICT consumers but creators of content and active in business processes
- The multiple, value added services for women that Oredoo is introducing, demonstrate the many ways that technology can help empower women. ICTs can be used for information dissemination and behavior change (e.g., MayMay app) or to carve space for women to create their own technology or content relevant to their needs (e.g., Connected Women conferences, Geek Girls Myanmar).
- Working with a private sector client with a track record in gender inclusion is a good starting platform for ADB project teams. The National Telecommunications Project is the first PSOD project recognized for mainstreaming gender equity and based on the team's experience, the following are the key challenges that private sector projects continue to face on gender and stakeholder engagement:

    1. The private sector is driven by commercial incentives and may not fully understand the benefits of gender equity as part of their business plan and strategy
        - Communication efforts must also target corporate leaders to emphasize messages about the commercial benefits of gender equity: competitive advantage, differentiation, higher productivity, wider talent pool, improvement of corporate image, etc.
        - The development of more private sector case studies and stories will help increase the awareness of corporate leaders in DMCs on the processes, available resources, possible incentives and corporate impact of gender inclusion in business
        - Incentives such as annual awards for top corporate clients that successfully incorporated gender inclusion in their business strategies and activities – will reinforce initial behavior changes and convince more private businesses to replicate gender mainstreaming efforts

    2. Gender Action Plans (GAPs) are regarded as rigid, a liability, risky and require additional work
        - To minimize the fear of private sector clients that unsuccessful implementation of GAPs will reflect on their loan and affect future business opportunities, GAPs should be promoted as part of corporate, innovative practices that may require trial and error, but are eventually beneficial not just to companies but to the markets they serve
        - GAPs can be marketed as evidence-based and directly addressing issues that affect the private sector: how does the lack of women's participation and involvement in ICTs affect the labor force? How do maternal mortality and well-being affect productivity?

3. The buy-in of corporate management is critical in implementing GAPs
   - Incentives such as providing TA resources, concessional funds, awards and recognitions, and speaking engagements can increase ownership and sustainability

4. Myanmar's rapidly growing mobile market and the marketing of smart phones to young, urban users may further exclude rural women who are not technically literate and do not have access to ICTs due to its cost and lack of infrastructure in rural areas
   - UNDP and other development groups have also introduced women-focused applications (such as iWomen). Coordination and linkages with institutions and individuals with similar initiatives will complement the communication activities under the National Telecommunications Project, and avoid overlaps

5. Stakeholder consultations and engagement by private sector groups such as Ooredoo and Telenor need to be made proactive and increased in newly emerging democracies such as Myanmar. ADB due diligence processes have to be strengthened to mitigate and manage stakeholder complaints.