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Mobile phone technology to offer real-time support to Bangladeshi women

23 March 2016

In an isolated agricultural area five hours out of Dhaka, where floods and poverty are commonplace, Rimi is worried about her cow. The cow was a huge investment, and Rimi has noticed several bloated ticks attached to its neck. Where can she turn for trustworthy information on how to treat the infestation? In the near future, purpose-built systems based on mobile phone technology could help Rimi get the advice she needs.



A five-year partnership between Monash University's Faculty of Information Technology, Oxfam and local Bangladeshi organisations, known as PROTIC (Participatory Research and Ownership with Technology, Information and Change), is working with women like Rimi to build a portal that could provide real-time information for rural farmers.

Many rural Bangladeshi women work as farmers, minding crops and cattle on their own while their husbands work in the city. The women want access to comprehensive, timely and accurate information, on topics ranging from weather warnings and disaster recovery to agriculture and fisheries, right through to family health. Monash University's Dr Larry Stillman recently returned from a regular field visit to Bangladesh, where he met with some of the women involved in the project.

"We were speaking about the potential uses for smart phones, when one of the women figured it out. 'I could take a selfie of my cow!' she said. If she sent through the photo and talked to the information centre we're developing, the animal

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husbandry specialist or vet attached to the project could potentially provide a diagnosis in voice, text and pictures. It would be almost instantaneous and also shareable in the future with hundreds of thousands of people,” Dr Stillman said.

Only a small number of the farmers have smart phones at the moment, but Dr Stillman predicts that as prices drop, it won't be long before smart phones become commonplace.

“They have 3G coverage in most rural areas in Bangladesh, so whatever we develop should function on that network. The other thing we have to take into account is that the levels of literacy are quite low, so we're potentially looking at interactive voice and vision applications” he said.

Researchers at Monash University will work with their counterparts in Bangladesh to develop a range of technologies and systems to facilitate this significant project, but additional funding is required. Dr Stillman is hoping to secure philanthropic backing for further field work in the villages and support for the Bangladeshi researchers, among other things, all of which are vital to PROTIC's success.

M.B. Akhter, Programme Director at Oxfam in Bangladesh, said the project will bring optimism, space and opportunity for the women to learn new skills by using mobile phones and digital technology.

“It's a means of personal and community empowerment, away from their daily poverty, suffering and gender discrimination, and it will also help non-government organisations to deliver better information and services,” Mr Akhter said.

Dr Stillman said one of the most important aspects of the project is that the people who will be using the service will have the final say about what is developed.

“It's a real partnership,” he said. “The community is involved right from the beginning – in the design, and the testing. It's quite likely that the community will even end up running the information service. Someone will need to be there, managing it, so it will provide employment as well. This is something we will be talking to the Bangladesh government about,” Dr Stillman added.

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5 April, 2016 from 4:00 pm — 5:30 pm

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