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Bridging the digital divide: ICTs are not the panacea

Many 'gee-whiz' technical demonstrations of the promise of the Internet cut little ice with sceptics. The world's poor, they remind you, are more concerned about having enough to eat and they worry little about email or surfing the web. They argue that support for Information and Communication Technologies should not be at the expense of basic needs. However, the choice between basic needs and ICTs is a false dilemma. The development of ICT capabilities cannot be separated from the process of social and economic development.

By Mike Chege

In what concrete ways can ICTs and the Internet benefit the two-thirds of humanity who are more concerned about their next meal than about email or eBay? Two areas stand out.

First, there are economic benefits. Besides providing business with the opportunity to access market information, improve internal efficiencies, and complete business transactions electronically, ICTs can reduce costs. A popular example is the small company from Tanzania which replaced \$20 faxes with 10 cent emails and saw its telecommunications bill go from over \$500 per month to \$45 per month.

But all examples pale in comparison to India, the digital economy's poster child. Just as factory jobs have migrated to low-cost locations like China, clerical jobs are migrating to low-cost locations like India. Companies like GE, British Airways, and Amazon.com are shifting much of their back-office work from their home bases, often making savings of 40-60% in the process. India's National Association of Software and Service Companies forecasts that the market for outsourced business processes should bring in more than \$4 billion to the Indian economy in 2003!

Next comes health. The Internet, it has been said, is the quickest and cheapest way to disseminate medical research. Doctors in poor countries can easily and cheaply keep up to speed with the latest developments in their field as well as seek help from their peers. A dramatic example is the doctor in Kenya who solved a life-threatening case of malaria by using a low-cost HealthNet email service to contact experts in the USA. ICTs can also facilitate the tracking of diseases. Outbreaks of meningitis in Africa are tracked over the Internet so that epidemics can be stopped early.

Once we have understood the significance of bridging the digital divide, we naturally ask: "What can be done about it?"

It is necessary for developing countries to introduce regulatory and policy regimes that will attract private investment and foster efficiency amongst infrastructure providers. To minimise the danger that private sector programmes will widen the digital divide within countries by providing access to the middle and upper classes only, governments should institute Universal Service Obligations as part of the telecoms license.

But throwing computers and modems at people will not bridge the Digital Divide. Other important issues that need to be addressed include digital literacy (overcoming computer anxiety and improving computer and keyboarding skills) and the motivation to use the Internet. ICT training and local content development are two ways to overcome these barriers.

When all is said and done, ICTs are not a cure-all. Governments must still undertake the hard work of reforming administrative cultures to make them more transparent and accountable, ensuring an effective legal system, opening up markets to foreign trade and investment, and improving education.

The goal is what Chandrababu Naidu, the 'laptop' chief minister of Andhra Pradesh, in India likes to call SMART governance: Simple, Moral, Accountable, Responsive, and Transparent.

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The full version of this article is on: www.icconnectonline.org

Catalysing the Creation and Exchange of Local Content

In 2001 and 2002, the United Kingdom Department for International Development (DFID) commissioned the International Institute for Communication and Development (IICD) and OneWorld International (OWI) to examine issues associated with the generation and exchange of local content. The subsequent reports were widely circulated in the development community and led to a series of follow up proposals and recommendations. In late 2002, DFID and the Canadian Government decided to fund a follow up project entitled 'Catalysing the creation and exchange of local content' to be executed by OWI, IICD and a network of partner organisations.

Two approaches

Focusing on 'local content' – the expression of the locally owned and adapted knowledge of a community – this proposal supports efforts by poor people in developing countries to create and exchange useful, potentially wealth-generating, content via ICTs. The project pursues two complementary approaches:

- A. A range of 'on the ground' capacity building initiatives that strengthen the local 'push' for local content (the 'capacity building' stream). By focusing on specific sectors and countries (or sub-regions), active organisations will be brought together, providing a critical mass of expertise and experience and building on what already exists. Depending on priorities, thematic actions will be developed in development sectors like health, education, agriculture, or the environment. Sectors such as indigenous knowledge or TV and film also warrant specific attention. Locally led capacity development, process facilitation, as well as actual content creation and dissemination will be central to these projects. A key element is to document local content lessons for others to learn from.
- B. The development of an Open Knowledge Network (OKN) that provides a development content 'channel' to local and community access centres in developing countries. A network will be established at local, regional and global level to facilitate ICT-based content creation and exchange in various media and in local languages. Based on the business plan developed in the scoping phase, this network would offer value-added services to local access points coordinated and supported through regional hubs within the overall framework of a global entity. Content created at the local level, whether in the north or the south, will be captured, translated where appropriate, scanned for violations and transmitted to users elsewhere. The system will accommodate variations in technology and content regulation. The business plan shows start up costs met by donor agencies with revenue streams delivering self-sufficiency in five years.

Specifically, the project seeks to:

1. Value the local knowledge of local people and communities in developing countries, reinforcing its creation, communication and exchange.
2. Strengthen the capacities of local communities and organisations to create, communicate and exchange their knowledge, including through the use of ICT-based systems.
3. Ensure that local organisations and communities have the skills and other aptitudes needed to synthesise and adapt global knowledge for their own local use.
4. Set up an open knowledge network to assist people and communities in developing countries to widely communicate, exchange, and broadcast their 'eContent', in a variety of new and traditional media.
5. Formulate and deliver the programme in ways that promote effective local participation, local ownership, and open communication.

Sectoral focus

The project is concentrated on a few sectors - health, education, agricultural and rural livelihoods, appropriate technology and the environment. Each will be developed together with key sectoral as well as media/ICT specialist partners.

Overall management of stream A – capacity building – is provided by IICD, working with a small coordination team drawn from the stakeholders. Overall management of stream B (OKN) is provided by OneWorld International, working with an international coordination group drawn from the DOT Force Working Group and other stakeholder NGOs working in the field.

A consultation meeting will be held in Senegal in March.

More:

<http://www.openknowledge.net/>

www.dgroups.org/groups/okn

www.dgroups.org/groups/c3net

INASP Newsletter June 2002

<http://www.inasp.info/newslet/jun02.html>

Ballantyne, P.G. 2002. Collecting and propagating local development content: Synthesis and conclusions. Research Report 7. The Hague: IICD. www.iicd.org/publications

Ballantyne, P.G. 2002. Collecting and propagating local development content: The case stories. Research Report 8. The Hague: IICD. www.iicd.org/publications

Batchelor, S. 2002. Using ICTs to generate development content. Research Report 10. The Hague: IICD. www.iicd.org/publications

Pakenham-Walsh, N. 2002. Strengthening Local Capacities to Create and Adapt Healthcare Information. Research Report 11. The Hague: IICD. www.iicd.org/publications

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NEWS FROM BDO PARTNERS

The Building Digital Opportunities (BDO) programme is a package of cross-sectoral initiatives to address key barriers and opportunities for ICTs in achieving development targets. Funded by DFID, DGIS and SDC, the programme has been put together as a partnership with a number of key organisations – the Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC), the Commonwealth Telecommunications Organisation (CTO), the International Institute for Communication and Development (IICD), OneWorld International, and the Panos Institute. Its five key areas of activity are:

- Strengthening local capacity in developing countries to address policy and regulatory environments.
- Support for a programme of demand led pilot projects, implemented as part of an ongoing series of stakeholder ICT roundtable processes in selected developing countries.
- Support for information inclusion for the poor through activities on community media and linking old and new ICTs.
- A strategic partnership with a global 'development' Internet partner.
- Knowledge and research activities in key areas to support the above programme.

BDO activities to be reviewed

In the first half of 2003, elements of the BDO programme will be subjected to an 'output to purpose review.' A normal element of such programmes, the review is a learning exercise by which BDO partners assess whether their activities are actually contributing to the purpose for which the programme was intended.

Depending on the results, specific actions and activities may be re-oriented to ensure that they do address the purpose of the BDO programme, which is to 'identify and help remove some of the key barriers and to develop genuine opportunities for poverty focused ICT for Development'.

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NEWS FROM AMARC

News agency launch

AMARC Africa spent the last quarter of 2002 preparing for the launch of Africa's first community radio news agency. Simbani Africa News Agency will be launched in the first quarter of 2003, in what is a major coup for the grassroots communications sector.

Personnel have been recruited for the Agency's central broadcast studio located at AMARC Africa's Johannesburg office. These will coordinate all newsgathering and dissemination within the field of community radio in the continent.

The Agency will provide a text-based news service with local content from and for community radios. Fifty-two member radio stations will act as collection centres for news. Twenty-five of these will be trained in news-gathering, content development and in the use of new technologies. AMARC Africa will provide equipment and technical support to the selected member stations.

The news agency will concentrate on key themes of HIV-AIDS, food security, the environment, human rights (focusing on elections and conflict resolution) and

gender, and will also use traditional distribution methods via fax and mailing. AMARC Africa plans to feed the community news into mainstream news organisations.

Simbani Africa means Talk Africa in Zambia's Chewa language.

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Website provides online training materials

AMARC Africa's new website <http://africa.amarc.org> provides online training manuals from AMARC Africa, AMARC Europe and AMARC International.

Manuals include: What is community radio? A resource guide (Panos and AMARC Africa), Women online trainers guide, How to create a web page, How to network, How to find information on the Internet, The station managers' handbook, as well as modules on digital editing.

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Roundtable report

In October 2002, AMARC Africa published a report of the proceedings of six roundtable meetings held in South Africa between 1999-2002. The Roundtable is a networking and information exchange forum set up in 1999 in response to the challenges faced by South African community radio broadcasters.

This compilation is not only a resource guide giving practical steps on how to, for example, conduct audience surveys, it has invaluable information from regulators and experts in the community radio field. The publication provides case studies of the use of information and communication technologies in South Africa and tackles issues of ethics and standards in community radio broadcasting, training and sustainability.

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NEWS FROM CTO

Linking up with regional and national regulatory authorities

The CTO has continued to work together with regional and national regulatory authorities on the delivery of regulatory and regulatory skills workshops and conferences and through more specific regional and national consultancies.

The development of the material for the regulatory workshops has been primarily aimed at regulatory staff, telecommunications companies and ministry staff. But in order to build the skills needed to enable informed civil society participation in policy debates and decisions, the CTO has teamed-up with the Association for Progressive Communication (APC) to develop the same workshops tailored to civil society organisations. It is also producing a plain-language guide to policy issues oriented to the perspective of civil society organisations.

With the support of CTO, APC will pilot an Internet policy handbook and workshop at three APC-sponsored events, followed by further deliveries of this theme before the World Summit on the information Society in December 2003.

At a regional level, the CTO has carried-out a number of activities, including providing expertise on costing and interconnection for the Pacific Islands Telecoms Authority (PITA).

Southern Africa

In Southern Africa, the CTO is continuing to work closely with the Telecoms Regulatory Authority of Southern Africa (TRASA), and has received excellent feedback from participants attending workshops.

Together with the ITU, the CTO arranged a workshop presenting two *Universal Access* models to the Southern African region. The interest generated, together with the positive feedback, is expected to lead to deliveries of this workshop in East and West Africa.

East Africa

Working closely with the East African Regulatory Posts and Telecommunications Organisation (EARPTO), East Africa will, over the next few months, benefit from consultancies dealing with the Ugandan post-exclusivity market assessment as well as a consultancy which will look at inter-country interconnection arrangements between operators in Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania. Both aim to provide consultative documents for discussion at the up-coming EARPTO meeting in April 2003.

West Africa

In Western Africa, CTO is working with the newly-formed West Africa Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (WATRA), and is planning to deliver a series of regulatory workshops based on those successfully delivered in Southern and Eastern Africa.

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NEWS FROM IICD

IICD supports local content media award

AISI Media Awards encourage more informed coverage of the information society and ICT for development issues in Africa. Two IICD awards will recognise innovative local content initiatives in Africa.

Although the media in Africa are beginning to report on ICT issues, there is still a wide gap in their knowledge and comprehension of the subject in relation to development trends within their national context. The AISI Media Award Programme has the following aims:

- Create greater awareness on the role of ICTs in the development process within the framework of the African Information Society Initiative (AISI);
- Support African media to specialise and master ICTs and development issues, thereby sharpening their skills and knowledge base;
- Enhance access to information on this subject area by various African stakeholders, thereby raising greater awareness;
- Stimulate national debates on key issues and emerging trends.

The AISI Media Award is an initiative of the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), and is currently supported by the Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa (OSISA). The International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and the International Institute for Communication and Development (IICD) are also sponsoring special interest categories:

- IDRC Award on Reporting ICT Research and Innovation. This award is geared towards encouraging Media practitioners' focus on issues related to ICT research and innovations in Africa under the framework of the International Development Research Centre's Acacia Programme.
- IICD Award on Local Content Applications. This award aims to recognize users of innovative or pioneering applications of ICTs to local content, defined as "the expression of the locally owned and adapted knowledge of a community", in Africa. Applications can be from any sector and use of any medium with a demonstrated link with ICTs that provide opportunities for local people to interact and communicate with each other, expressing their own ideas, knowledge and culture in their own languages.
- IICD Media Award on Local Content. This second IICD award will recognize an outstanding story, campaign, or project in which the significance of local knowledge and content is raised in local, national, or regional fora.

The closing date to submit an entry to any of the awards is 28 February 2003. Submission forms are available on the AISI web site:

www.uneca.org/aisi/mediaawardentry_form.htm

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IICD and bridges.org launch ICT case studies

Before taking action in development, it is essential to examine what current and past efforts tell us. Stories and case studies are useful for this. Storytelling is an increasingly popular approach of knowledge management practitioners and, for instance IICD works with InfoDev on an annual ICT Stories competition. While case studies have been around in management teaching for many years, their systematic use in ICT and development circles is only recently emerging.

In 2002, IICD and bridges.org joined forces in a case study project to search for innovative and effective uses of ICTs at ground level and to disseminate objective information about them in a comparable and user-friendly format. The project started by looking at ICT use in a few African countries. The first case was published in January 2003. In the coming months, the other cases from the first round will be disseminated and we will extend the series with a set of new cases.

The case studies are presented in a simple but structured format that highlights the lessons learned, without focusing on the mistakes that are a necessary part of any learning process. The case study template has four parts:

I. Overview: Provides basic information about the initiative, such as the organisation driving it, target audience, type of technology used, and key development obstacles addressed.

II. Gauging Real Impact: Considers whether and how the initiative has made a real impact at the ground level.

III. Lessons Learned: Shares the views of the people driving the initiative on their greatest successes, the challenges they faced, key constraints and dependencies that affect the initiative, opportunities for future improvement of what they do, and anything else they have learned.

IV. The Story: A narrative description of the initiative that highlights why this use of ICT for development is particularly interesting.

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More: http://www.bridges.org/iicd_casestudies/



The 2003 ICT Stories competition will open soon!
Keep a close watch at: www.iicd.org/stories

Recent IICD publications

- **Sustaining ICT-enabled Development: Practice makes Perfect?**
- **The Cultural and Political Environment of ICT Projects in Developing Countries.**

These and other publications are available at www.iicd.org/publications

NEWS FROM ONEWORLD

OneWorld on Yahoo! News: Influencing thoughts and actions

In November 2001, OneWorld International launched a news syndication service on the Yahoo! News 'World' section. The service made OneWorld the fourth source for world news on Yahoo! (the others being AP, Reuters and NPR) and represented the first-ever non-profit world news syndication to a major Internet portal. OneWorld on Yahoo! features daily stories focusing on events relating to human rights, world poverty, social justice, the environment and sustainable development.

Like on OneWorld.net (www.oneworld.net), the syndication on Yahoo! aims to use the Internet to give a voice to those typically overlooked by the mainstream media and policy makers. The syndication on Yahoo! particularly intends to amplify those voices to a new mainstream audience.

One year after the launch, in October 2002, OneWorld implemented an online survey to check whether the news service was meeting its aims and to measure user satisfaction. OneWorld USA conducted this survey with the financial support of Cable and Wireless, the global telecommunications group.

The results of the survey show that OneWorld on Yahoo! does succeed in reaching a new mainstream audience. Unlike the visitors to OneWorld.net, the audience of the Yahoo! News service is USA based (83%), male (66%) and middle aged (41% between 36 and 50). About one-third of the respondents work in the business sector and only 12% in the non-profit sector (OneWorld.net: 9% business; 31% non-profit sector).

Another encouraging outcome of the survey is that more than half of the respondents (55%) say that a OneWorld on Yahoo! News article has influenced their thinking on current events. A surprisingly high number (23%) stated that they have taken action as a result of such stories.

Examples of those actions are: Writing letters to America Congress members and other public officials, taking part in campaigns and demonstrations, making donations to charity organisations, linking to the stories on websites and in newsletters, using them as input for discussion and forwarding them to NGO grassroots organisations.

This is the first time OneWorld has had such clear proof of the impact of its content on users. The idea now is to include more action-related links in the articles on Yahoo!.

The online survey was only the first stage of evaluating OneWorld on Yahoo! News. As a follow-up, three focus groups will be conducted in early 2003. One focus group will take place in India with OneWorld partners that have been highlighted frequently on Yahoo! and two other focus groups will take place with users of the service in the USA.

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DFID's ICT Knowledge and Research Projects

Each year, DFID's Infrastructure and Urban Development Department issues a call for Knowledge and Research (KaR) project proposals. It is intended that ICT KaR projects lead to a better understanding of the realistic potentials of ICTs and of how such technologies can contribute towards a more suitable pro-poor ICT policy framework. We report on some recently initiated projects.

Strategies for pro-poor sustainable agricultural knowledge centres in East Africa

This project develops sustainable mechanisms for using ICTs to deliver agricultural information to rural and peri-urban poor communities.

Agriculture production for local consumption and export plays a critical role in the economies of East Africa. In Uganda and Kenya, 75-90% of the population make their living from farming. The targeted 4% annual growth in African economies requires a 6% growth in agriculture.

Yet the basic unit of production in the region is a small-scale family holding, a high percentage of whom in both Uganda and Kenya live below the poverty line. Improving small scale agricultural production is therefore key to improved rural livelihoods, food security and national economies as a whole, a fact recognised in national poverty eradication programmes.

If agriculture is the engine of economic development, information could be described as the fuel. Surveys show that farmers require more information on a range of issues, particularly crop production, credit, agro-inputs and markets.

Modern Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) now offer unprecedented potential to deliver information to rural communities, and thus contribute to alleviating poverty and transforming social and economic conditions. It has been said that "information technology, together with the ability to use it and adapt it, is the critical factor in generating and accessing wealth, power, and knowledge in our time". However, although the potential exists, a number of questions need answering if the potential is to be realised:

- How can ICTs be most effectively used to deliver the information required by rural farming communities?
- How can their benefits be made available to the more disadvantaged groups?
- What mechanisms or models for their use will prove sustainable?

Building on the experience of the project team with pilot information centres of various kinds in East Africa, this project will address these questions to develop strategies to ensure agricultural knowledge centres based on ICTs provide sustainable benefits to the rural poor.

Main planned outcomes:

1. Documented lessons from use of ICTs in rural information centres in East Africa.
2. Agricultural knowledge centre business models.
3. Pilot agricultural knowledge centre.
4. Smart practice outreach and dissemination manual for agricultural knowledge centres.
5. Plan for establishment of a network of agricultural knowledge centres.

6. Project management system installed and operational.

Project owner: CAB International
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Pro-poor satellite broadcasting: Reality or myth?

Digital sound and text broadcasting technology is still in its infancy, and its potential for improving the livelihoods of poor people in remote communities is as yet largely untested.

Research related to other ICTs suggests that there are various key research topics associated with modern ICTs, especially with regard to issues such as literacy, language, content relevance, perceived trustworthiness and technology affordability, etc., which have not yet been tested. These issues require specific attention if the potential for new ICTs to appropriately meet the needs of poor communities is to be assessed.

ITDG East Africa is hosting the ALIN (Arid Land Information Network) which is one of the first and few examples of new satellite technology being used to reach remote communities (in this case in four countries of East Africa). Assessing the reality of the impact of this technology and the information it carries, upon the livelihoods of poor women and men in these communities forms the central purpose of this research.

The objective of the research is an independent assessment of the impact of, and potential for, satellite broadcasting technologies to enhance the sustainable livelihoods of poor people in isolated rural communities.

Main planned outcomes:

1. The content of satellite broadcast material assessed in terms of origin (info providers), relevance to women and children, timeliness, accessibility (language etc.) and reliability.
2. The constraints upon community level access to satellite transmitted information compared against conventional information systems (technical, financial and social).
3. Regional policy and legislation restrictions (present and pending) regarding satellite broadcasting researched and documented.
4. Project findings disseminated through Southern and Global networks in at least 2 media (e.g. print, audio tape) and to audiences at 3 levels (community, national, international).

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Gender evaluation methodology for ICT initiatives

This research is intended to understand the change associated with an ICT intervention from a gender perspective. It focuses both on understanding how this change affects women's lives as well as gender equality at the individual, household and community level. At a broader level, the research will delve into identifying and understanding gender issues in the ICT sector and specifically women's empowerment issues in ICT projects for economic development and social justice.

The ICT sector is the fastest growing area in the global economy. Women everywhere are using ICTs to strengthen their organisation and movement building at the local, regional and global levels. However the introduction of ICTs takes place on unequal terms that are defined by broader governance, social and economic frameworks.

Under these conditions, there is growing concern that women in particular have to contend with ideological, systemic and institutional barriers in accessing the benefits of ICTs. Women are also unequally affected by the so-called digital divide.

Hence, ICTs can be deployed in ways that replicate or perpetrate gender stereotypes and biases, and can have unintended negative impacts on women. For example, there have been documented instances of male violence against women resulting from women-only e-commerce projects in developing countries. Project implementers empowered poor women entrepreneurs with ICT skills, but didn't think to involve men during the project conception phase. If they had, the resulting male resentment of the women's advancement could possibly have been anticipated and circumvented. Gender evaluation methodologies therefore can be used

to ensure that ICTs are used in ways that transform gender biases and roles and do not simply reproduce and replicate existing ones.

Main Planned Outcomes:

The overall project goal is to strengthen and sustain gender accountability in global, regional and national ICT networking initiatives by developing evaluation methodologies, generating research on the gender dimensions of ICT development and catalysing a process of resource sharing and tools-building in gender evaluation through collaboration, testing and refining, among members and partners of Women's Networking Support Programme (WNSP).

To achieve this goal, APC-WNSP intends to enrich and extend the initial gender evaluation framework development work completed thus far, through the following means:

1. Enriching and refining the existing draft gender evaluation framework through regional testing and interpretation.
2. Capacity building of ICT policy and advocacy champions, both individual men and women as well as organisations, to use the methodology.
3. Dissemination and promotion of the Gender Evaluation Methodology.
4. Extracting lessons about the transformative impact of ICTs on gender equality through the evaluation of real-life projects and initiatives.
5. Developing a business plan for a gender evaluation service for ICT initiatives.

Project owner: Association for Progressive Communications (APC)

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KAR project update: Micro-media and the poor

By Rob Aley, ITDG

Project field staff has conducted field research with isolated rural communities to map the information and communication systems that exist in this context. Part of the research offers an interpretation of the current and potential impact that modern ICTs have on the information systems of such communities.

It is clear that at present, modern ICTs remain very marginal contributors to the knowledge systems of people using traditional livelihood practices. By far the most dominant systems of communication are those associated with embedded cultural norms. Amongst the Turkana pastoralists of North-eastern Kenya for example, information is shared principally through social structures based upon the hierarchy of local Chiefs and elders, and by word of mouth during normal social interactions. The traditional rivalries with neighbouring tribes over livestock ownership, mean that sophisticated local 'security intelligence' systems such as tracking and eavesdropping are also significant.

In this social context therefore, conventional applications of ICTs has to be reassessed. The established constraints concerning infrastructure, power supplies

and technical skills remain acute. However, it is equally important to recognise that long-established local knowledge networks are set to play a crucial part in determining ways in which modern ICTs will be rejected or adopted.

It is interesting to note that individual ICT enthusiasts seem to exist even in the most isolated communities. These people are often frustrated with the lack of ICTs access, and claim that they could benefit greatly from facilities which connect them to the global knowledge society. These people are potential 'early adopter' and in some cases may be the catalyst for the local permeation of new technologies.



mapping the local information systems of the Turkana people of NW Kenya.

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Dgroups: Development through Dialogue

A vital task in any organisation today is communication – internally among staff, and externally with clients, suppliers, partners and other stakeholders. Increasingly, this communication is taking place electronically as well as by tried and tested face-to-face means. Using ICTs to connect and mobilise communities and expertise is becoming a key aspect of an organisation’s knowledge management strategy. However, the necessary technical expertise and software are not always available or affordable.

In our development business, the need for effective communication platforms and tools has taken on an even greater importance. To truly practice what many European donors call ‘international cooperation’ among countries and people, we need access to places and spaces where dialogue and information exchange can effectively take place. The need is so great, that we are seeing the rapid emergence of all kinds of intermediary organisations, brokers, and networking efforts whose primary aim is to bring people, ideas, and resources together.

As part of the Building Digital Opportunities Programme (BDO) funded by the British, Dutch and Swiss governments, IICD and OneWorld International have joined with other partners – Bellanet, DFID, the IDRC Internet Connectivity Initiative for the Americas, and UNAIDS – to create a shared electronic platform where they and their partners can more effectively communicate and exchange ideas.

Dgroups (www.dgroups.org) evolved from an established service provided by Bellanet to the development community. It is designed for use by all kinds of organisations working in development, particularly those operating with low Internet connectivity or with limited technical expertise or other capacities. It provides a simple and easy to use tool by which individuals, communities and networks can get together electronically – mainly by email; web is also widely used.

Six months after its set up, there are more than 200 dgroups in operation. Some are test sites, some are moving slowly, others are booming. Each has its own administrator and community and is discussing issues in an open or closed environment. Some examples are listed in the box alongside.

Of course Dgroups is only one example of such a platform. Its uniqueness is that it is jointly developed and

jointly owned by a group of development organisations. Over time, we hope that this group will grow and that users of the platform will begin to support each other – especially in the tricky art of e-facilitation and e-moderation.

Examples:

- www.dgroups.org/groups/inars - open space discussing ICTs and agricultural research
- www.dgroups.org/groups/okn - open space discussing the open knowledge network project
- www.dgroups.org/groups/ict4djamaica - open space to discuss ICTs in Jamaica
- www.dgroups.org/groups/bdo - closed space for partners in BDO programme to share reports and plans
- www.dgroups.org/groups/iicd-local - closed space where IICD knowledge sharing partners exchange ideas on local networks and activities
- www.dgroups.org/groups/ito-editors - closed space for editors of the iTrainOnline ICT training project
- www.bellanet.org/leap - open space where communities discuss the evaluation of ICTs and information activities
- www.open.bellanet.org/km - open space where a development community is sharing ideas on knowledge management

Dgroups went into operation in mid 2002. In early 2003, it is being upgraded and the feasibility of a fully open source application is being assessed. A major launch is planned for March/April 2003 when the sponsors hope that many more organisations or networks will join and set up their own Dgroups. Other sponsors are also sought to help build and sustain the platform as a public development good.

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