

Information Technologies for Disadvantaged Communities

By
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1. Introduction

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are an integral and even indispensable part of our lives today. ICTs play a big role in different aspects of our lives, making communications easier and more efficient. Many of us take these technologies for granted but there are still places in this country where people have never even seen a telephone let alone a computer.

The term 'digital divide' is used to describe the gap between those who can effectively use new information and communication tools, such as the Internet, and those who cannot. A more detailed definition of this phenomenon is given by the Global Information Infrastructure Commission¹. "... the digital divide refers to a collection of complex factors that affect whether an individual, society, country or region has access to the technologies associated with the information economy as well as the educational skills to achieve optimal application of those technologies."

It is clear from this definition that to fully exploit the benefits of ICTs, one must possess the necessary skill sets needed. Providing the members of marginalized communities with the basic skill sets that will allow them to access and effectively use ICTs will go a long way in creating bridges for this gap.

But we should not be naïve in thinking that ICTs offer a magical solution to the problems associated with poverty. Digital Opportunity Trust in their book, *People, Potential and the Power of technology: Connecting the DOT*, make an interesting observation that captures the spirit of human capacity building in the area of ICTs.

Much attention in recent years has been invested in the effort to 'bridge the digital divide'. The imperative to 'build on-ramps to the so-called information super highway, and enable access to those who lack the means', has become a top priority of the global development movement. Perhaps owing to the magnitude of how the issue is observed from a global perspective, there is often a mystical quality to what ICT-for-Development really means. Really, it comes down to

¹ GIIC Analysis of the Digital Divide, PowerPoint presentation, October 2000
www.giic.org

connecting individuals with their unlimited potential that is unleashed by the use of technology.

Therefore the goal of capacity building in disadvantaged communities is to offer them the skills and that will open up a world of opportunity for them to better their lives, their businesses and their communities.

Digital Opportunity Trust's (DOT) flagship initiative is the Global NetCorps (GNC) Programme. Global NetCorps was designed to be a global, sustainable, in-country capacity building Programme that trains youth to have a social and economic impact in their own communities by training others in the use of information and communications technologies (ICT).

The pioneering programme in Jordan conducted a best practices research and from it was generated a set of guidelines that have consequently illuminated the way forward for subsequent country programmes to ensure their successes.

The critical success factors when designing and implementing an ICT driven Capacity Building programme for disadvantaged communities are highlighted below:

2. Capacity Building: Critical Success Factors

Understanding and Respecting Local Gender Realities

In Kenya, just like in many developing countries; women have borne untold discrimination in how they carry about their day to day activities in and outside their communities. This calls for special remedial measures to ensure that the same trend does not emerge when delivering Capacity Building training in ICTs in marginalized communities. Indeed, in Jordan, when appropriate measures were put in place it emerged that ICTs were presenting a never before explored opportunity for women to participate undeterred in the advancement of their communities.

Local Ownership

Building capacity cannot be implemented successfully without a strong sense of vested ownership by local stakeholders. This requires that ownership should be established during or prior to programme design. All direct and indirect stakeholders and beneficiaries need to have ownership of the design, the implementation process and the results of the programme or initiative. Besides the interns, who are all recruited locally and are therefore a fully-embedded first point of diffusion; the GNC Programme is aligned to national priorities during its

planning phase through mechanisms that ensure the government ministries, civil society and private sector are engaged in the visioning process.

Demand-driven Response to Community Needs

As sophisticated as capacity building programmes may seem, they are not exempt from being governed by the basic commerce laws of demand and supply. This principle reflects that the priority issues of each region and community must be reflected in the programme products. It would be pointless to develop curriculum supporting Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises among pastoralists and then turn around and hope to deliver it among the fishing communities. Conversely, capacity building programmes must add real value to the lives of the intended beneficiary communities if the members of the community are going to invest towards the acquisition of these skills.

Regional/local champions playing a critical role

The nature of Capacity Building programs calls for their promotion by selected members of the community we have dubbed 'Champions'. Champions are respected, committed, influential individuals at regional and local levels who actively support and promote the cause of capacity development. Their involvement in a programme confers priority and credibility to it. Do not be startled at the number of people that would take a particular self-enrichment course, for instance, or read particular books just because 'Oprah has read it, or Oprah recommends it'. The local Champions would play a similar role among their own community when implementing a capacity building product such as GNC programming.

Involvement of local stakeholders and the power of convergence

Convergence has very strong connotations around having Voice, Video and Data over one channel. It ensures maximum use of available bandwidth. GNC programming also ensures maximum use of available resources (logistical, human as well as financial) in furthering the impact of these programmes. The key here would be to leverage partnerships of like minded people and organizations to further the common cause of bridging the digital divide. For instance, when implementing an ICT capacity building program like GNC, it would be important to identify organizations/institutions such as tele-centres in close proximity to the target beneficiary community and roll out programming there. As opposed to beginning to seek finances to build a brand new computer lab that may not come with the goodwill of the community and that then pose serious risks when considering fiscal sustainability of the computer lab and hence the program.

Capacity building involves cascading processes

Models such as the training of trainers and dissemination of information are effective ways to create the needed multipliers. Spill-over effects from other GNC programmes suggest that the programme keeps on giving, as one trained person trains more – family members and friends through volunteer networks

This programme repeatedly demonstrates that if one person is trained, this one person will educate many. Once made aware of the power of computing, this knowledge had clear spill-over effects in everyday life – buying a computer, using the Internet to maintain and expand social and knowledge capital, incorporating ICT into business practices, starting a business using ICT, and/or for training others. In addition to impacting on people's professional lives and business practices, NetCorps training has clear spill-over effects in terms of encouraging those involved to make an investment in computing.

Participation takes time and resources

Participation is time-consuming and requires considerable effort. It is a long-term process that cannot be achieved through single meetings or discussions. Time and resources need to be dedicated during development of the initiative, including extensive organized consultations with stakeholders to agree on the components and implementation arrangements. These are processes critical in achievement of the above point on local ownership.

3. Conclusion

Computers, Internet, Printers and faxes would remain practically worthless to the larger masses even if each village in Kenya had a state-of-the-art cyber café until such a time as the villagers themselves have had their capacities built or have been sufficiently **empowered** to use these technologies to make their day to day activities more efficient. And if they have, the sky is the limit.

References

1. Digital Opportunity Trust, **People, Potential and the Power of Technology: Connecting the DOT**, 2005
2. Fillip, Barbara, **Digital Divide** on www.giic.org, Washington, 2001

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