

Uganda: Catalysing creation and exchange of local content

By: Edris Kisambira

In 2001 and 2002, the UK 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. DFID and the Canadian government funded the project, which has been executed by OWI, IICD and a network of partner organisations.

Local content refers to locally owned and adapted knowledge of a community and the project was aimed at supporting efforts by poor people in developing countries to create and exchange useful, potentially wealth-generating content via ICTs.

In Uganda, I-Network implemented the project. Natalie Kimbugwe, the programme coordinator at I-Network says five projects received funding under the one-year project. The organisations were Schoolnet Uganda, Radio Apach Women's Voices project, Community Organisation for Empowerment of Young People (COFEY) in Uganda, the Centre for Development Alternatives (CEDA) and ThinkQuest.

All these organisations received some funding to engage in content creation and exchange. As a result of the catalysing project, Schoolnet has developed a Uganda Digital Education Resource Bank, which consists of educational resources that can be used by teachers and students to support and enhance the teaching and learning process in Uganda secondary schools.

Schoolnet based in Kampala, is today enabling teachers in 90 schools across the country. It is a growing resource. It can be made available on a set of CD-ROMs, on content servers on the school Intranets and possibly on a website.

Schoolnet is a Non Governmental Organisation (NGO) whose core activities are to work with schools to help introduce information and communication technology (ICT) tools and build capacity so that educational institutions can effectively help improve the learning process.

Daniel Kakinda, the managing director of Schoolnet says building capacity is very crucial because a lot of schools don't know how ICTs can be harnessed to aid teaching.

The Busoga Rural Open Source and Development Initiative (BROSDI) have also done a lot in creating and disseminating of local content. Mr. Christopher Kadaali, the programme manager for BROSDI, a project based in Wainah village in the Eastern Uganda district of Bugiri, says they have focused their attention on creating content on a variety of crops and animals with the intention of developing the communities in which they work.

In Northern Uganda, another project, Radio Apach Women's Voices project involved women documenting content using audio and video tools before disseminating it across radio as well as video clips played on ordinary VCR sets.

The development problem/obstacles addressed

Creating and sharing of local content under the five different programmes has not been an easy process as all the programme stakeholders this writer spoke to narrated. Standing in the way of the projects were all sorts of problems ranging from attitudes towards the new technologies to long held traditions of communities holding onto their content and not wanting to share it with anyone.

For BROSDI, which was not part of the IICD supported projects, information was collected from people who have used it before. Kadaali said the information was organised into friendly literature and disseminated on the local radio, through CDs, mobile telephone via short message services (sms), brochures and newsletters etc.

"I must say in some areas, people's perception has changed," says Kadaali.

"People would get pesticides from the shops but today, they are using the local information that has been created to their benefit so now that they can apply methods that will not cost them any money," Kadaali said.

Under the Radio Apach Women's Voices project, farmer groups created music and dance, which they recorded on cassettes and CDs and on videotapes. The content was recorded for audio and video purposes and the cassettes, CDs and video clips were disseminated to help educate other women. Other members of the women's network were given slots on radio for talk shows to share content.

Under Schoolnet's initiative, a group of ten teachers were drawn from different schools and were trained to form a nucleus of trainers. Before the training, it was discovered that very few teachers use ICT in their teaching. Schools instead use computers for basic ICT training - something that Schoolnet has worked to change.

A group of ten teachers were drawn from different schools and were trained to form a nucleus of trainers. Schoolnet train teachers at the Schoolnet centres in eastern and central Uganda. Output was 60 secondary schools benefited and 80 of Schoolnet Uganda membership schools.

Impact assessment

The idea of using teachers to create content has been a very positive development because then new or additional content will be developed, using what is already in place as a basis. Traditionally, a majority of the teachers use the textbook as the basic unit of instruction but new technologies are making it possible for content to be developed/transformed into different media, which is making it easy for it to be shared across a wide audience of pupils and students.

"Getting teachers to create content is good, today teachers are creating content, they are gathering all their scattered material and putting it together in new formats and media," says Kakinda.

In this process of creating content, Kakinda believes teachers and students learn new skills as a result and that a good number of the students take up the skills while others have been inspired to change career direction and the same can also be said about teachers.

Schoolnet also provides training of schoolteachers in creation of content. The type of training offered focuses on research skills and learning activities for sharing content. But they also get training on learning activities for using those resources. Kakinda says there is content, which teachers can create like educational video clips as well as audio content. Creation and exchange of content is breaking old traditions like schools and teachers not sharing useful information for the good of every Ugandan going to school.

"Traditionally, there is little sharing across schools. Creating this spirit of sharing is a good thing," says Kakinda.

Because the starting blocks have been put into place for those teachers and students who could not initiate content creation, Kakinda believes it is now easy for more content to be developed.

"Not everybody needs to start from scratch, creating an ongoing one-stop centre is good because others have a starting point, so the online repository is a good starting point for people who could have given up," says Kakinda.

The new technologies are also forcing attitudes to change, as teachers need now to come out of isolation and compete with others on equal footing. It would be wrong to conclude that without the 'catalysing' project, Schoolnet would not have made progress but there is the data bank to show for it and that is just the starting point given its potential.

Already, not only schools in Uganda are sharing the growing content that has been created as a result but even those from the United States of America and the United Kingdom. For BROSDI, Kadaali says it is now possible to disseminate new content on agricultural practices to farmers from one part of the country to another part and vice versa.

"We have for instance been able to create and transfer content on the growing of rice from Mayuge district in the east to Kabala, where they grow Irish potatoes in the south west," Kadaali explained.

"The same way we have been able to transfer content on the cultivation of Irish potatoes to farmers in Mayuge, meaning that the two communities have benefited as a result."

BROSDI has created a network of farmers in the areas they work as one of the major platforms of exchanging content.

Challenges

BROSDI's Kadaali says one of the lasting challenges to creating local content and sharing it is the perception of the local communities.

"Some of this information has been kept secret by communities the same way a company like Coca Cola guards its beverages formulae. So in the

beginning people held onto this information, not wanting to give it," Kadaali narrated.

What was/is worse is people wanted to be paid for information that was going to benefit everybody and we just could not afford it. That though has changed in the recent past given that people now realise that it is give and take as everybody will benefit.

The low penetration of mobile telephony was a shortcoming initially (short message service is one of the sharing platforms) which will be overcome gradually as mobile telephony expands into the villages. As far as mass dissemination of content goes, Kadaali says it was expensive to buy airtime on FM radio stations across the country but BROSDI has gone around that by recording content on radio cassettes as well as video clips.

"We had to buy airtime on radio for audiences in far-away places but that was expensive because we couldn't afford programmes on all the FM radio stations across the country," says Kadaali.

BROSDI has also encountered challenges of basic ICT infrastructure, which has major shortcomings today.

Schoolnet's Kakinda also talks about serious infrastructural shortcomings like lack of electricity in some schools, schools that cannot afford to buy computers, let alone connect them to the Internet because of the small budgets they operate under.

There is also a lack of awareness about the potential of ICT for development. According to Kakinda, this lack of awareness of the potential of ICTs starts at the policy making level down to the learning institutions. Kakinda says schools in Uganda today are buying computers to train students on the basics of using a computer, which he adds is not a bad idea, but that school administrators need to know that they can do a lot more with the equipment. Kakinda says school teachers are not interested in ICTs and it is a challenge to get the teachers interested. Other challenges are of capacity.

"You have to ask yourself, how long will it take to train teachers on how to take up these skills?" Kakinda wondered.

Money for funding capacity building is also not easily available. Some schools do not value capacity building for teachers fearing that a teacher will join another school after money has been spent to train them. Kakinda says that there is also not enough content.

"All in all content is a big problem," Kakinda noted. "If you are to buy content, it is expensive and if you are to create it, it takes you a lot of time."

He says creating content is like mixing colours whereby one has got to do a good mix of infrastructure, building capacity and creating the content itself.

"You have to have these ingredients in equal measure or nothing will come of it," Kakinda noted.

"A lot of schools get to focus a lot on infrastructure; very few schools look at the training of teachers, let alone creating the content."

Ultimately, the low levels of bandwidth are a big shortcoming to programmes of this kind. While there is widespread understanding that information plays a significant role in the development process, there is apparent lack of interest in some places as some people would rather go to work as they consider ICT as some kind of entertainment.

Embedding

Kakinda says creation and exchange of local content as it were has been integrated into the mainstream activities of Schoolnet.

"Part of what we do now is to network and share content," says Kakinda.

As Schoolnet goes around Uganda carrying out training sessions, the new resources that get created as a result get added onto the resource bank.

".....it is an ongoing process and it is something we at Schoolnet still have a passion for," Kakinda noted.

He revealed that Schoolnet do some work with the Uganda Communications Commission (UCC), the telecommunications regulator, which has expressed a lot of interest in what Schoolnet is doing with the resource bank. I wouldn't mind if the project is replicated elsewhere but not in areas we work because that will create conflicts. Oh yes. If a donor pulled out the project would not collapse. People have been trained."

Lessons Learned

"Integrating technology in the classroom is a slow process requiring patience, exposure and training," Kakinda noted. "It is an evolution and not a revolution."

Kakinda is of the view that head teachers/medical superintendents/district agriculture officers must be involved in the training of lower ranked officers saying progress cannot be made unless the bosses are brought on board.

For further information contact the iConnect team: editor@iconnect-online.org

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