Chapter IX

Connecting the First Mile: A Best Practice Framework for ICT-Based Knowledge Sharing Initiatives

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Abstract

This chapter characterises the use of information communication technologies (ICTs) to share information with people at grassroots as connecting the first mile. It examines the literature about connecting the first mile and identifies the key debates: whether solutions should be participatory or top-down, technological or social, whether they should focus on global or local information, and the overall potential of ICTs for development. The chapter synthesises the lessons from a range of practical studies to identify
the factors that contribute to the success of a project. A framework of best practice is offered, divided into three dimensions: the environment, the project level, and the local level. Whilst recognising that initiatives will vary according to the local context, the authors offer the best practice framework to support practitioners in addressing the challenges of connecting the first mile and empowering marginal communities to participate effectively in the information society.

Introduction

The international development sector has focused in recent years on the need to share knowledge more effectively in support of poverty reduction efforts. Multi- and bi-lateral agencies and NGOs are increasingly putting knowledge sharing at the centre of their organisational strategies. And, in the context of a perceived knowledge divide, they are addressing the challenge of how to respond to the knowledge needs of people living in poverty in developing countries.

Information and communications technologies (ICTs) such as the Internet, mobile phones, and radio offer opportunities to connect people to information quickly and in large numbers, transcending geographical barriers. The challenge for information providers in development is how to share information with people who have little access to ICTs, low levels of literacy, little time or money, and highly contextualised knowledge and language requirements. For many years reaching people living in poverty with information was characterised as the last mile problem, a term borrowed from the telecommunications field, where it referred to difficulties of improving connectivity in remote rural areas. In recent years, this problem has been reconceptualised in terms of connecting the first mile, which privileges the needs of people living in those remote areas (Paisley & Richardson, 1998). In this chapter, connecting the first mile refers to ICT-based projects aimed at sharing information at grassroots.

This chapter aims to identify best practice in development projects using ICTs to connect the first mile, through a review of existing literature and case studies. It begins with a discussion of the role of ICTs in development and an examination of the different ideological approaches adopted by authors, before drawing together a framework based on the lessons and recommendations from the literature. It concludes by examining the trends that will impact on information networking for communities at the first mile and discussing potential applications of the framework.
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