Chapter 7

Social Networking Technology: A Frontier of Communication for Development in Developing Countries

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ABSTRACT

Participatory solutions with triple-win outcomes are the thrust of contemporary community development research and practices. However, active participation and collaboration of diverse stakeholders in collective processes like community development does not just happen; it requires a facilitator with the requisite tools and strategies. Given its unparalleled ability to support facilitator-moderated interactive and collaborative systems, online social networks are now at the frontiers of communication for development research and practices. This chapter presents social networking strategies for realizing participatory community development with triple-win outcomes in the developing countries. The thrust of the strategies is the formation of online community hub through the synergy of online and offline social networking, community network weaving, and use of diverse facilitated volunteered community information and service delivery systems. Sample implementation strategy is presented to demonstrate how to actualize the community informatics social networking technology through a pilot project to be conducted in selected communities in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Several years of studies, experiments and practices have shown that Community Development (CD) is both a process and the outcome of such process.

As a process, CD is a human-centered collective effort that enables people in a community to learn how to collectively identify their shared problems and aspirations; and how to solve those problems and pursue those aspirations without compromising the ability of future generations...
to meet their needs. As an outcome, development is the improvement realized when CD process is performed. Importantly, participatory CD is a collective effort requiring active involvement and collaboration of diverse local community groups and responsive public and private institutions. In addition, participatory CD operates in such a way that the local community members get greater control over the conditions that affect their lives. In view of these sterling attributes, the thrust of contemporary community development research and practices is towards participatory solutions with triple-win outcomes. While, a participatory solution seek to ensure active participation of the local community members, especially the disadvantaged and the excluded populations; triple-win seek to achieve triple objectives; namely, economic development, social development, and environmental sustainability.

In any case, participatory triple-win CD solutions thrive on robust network of people and institutions; timely access to resource and services from the local community and beyond; and adoption or adaptation of relevant findings from across the globe to the local context. Remarkably, sustainable participatory triple-win CD can only be achieved through participatory and interactive processes (Johnson et al, 2012; Blake and Garzon, 2012; Newton, 2012). Consequently, Communication for Community Development (C4CD) was instituted by international development organizations to realize sustainable development through ‘consensus’, ‘ideation’, and ‘advocacy’. Consensus involves communication, social interaction, dialogue, and mutual understanding. Ideation is the spread of new ways of thinking and behavioral change through communication and social interaction while Advocacy is essentially an organized action that calls for change, support and the creation of enabling environment for effective communication and participation (UNDP, 2011). C4CD goes beyond concepts such as dissemination of information, consultation and persuasion. C4CD seeks to foster interactive process, strengthen local and peer-to-peer communication and learning processes. Above all, C4CD seeks to serve the needs of the poor and empower marginalized populations to participate effectively in development process (von Braun, 2010; Brown and Grant, 2010). In most cases, some community members, especially at the grassroots are economically, socially or technologically disadvantaged and hence excluded from CD programmes. Besides, conflicting interests and concerns of diverse stakeholders in CD programmes hinder participation and collaboration. In essence, participation and collaboration in collective processes like CD programmes do not just happen; they require a facilitator equipped with requisite tools and strategies that are well tailored to the situated context of use.

Interestingly, online social network has proven to be exceptionally successful in supporting facilitator-moderated all-inclusive interactive and collaborative platform. Therefore, the focus of this chapter is to present the requisite social networking tools and strategies that will enable CD organizations or social innovators to facilitate scalable participatory community development with triple-win outcomes in the various local communities of developing countries of Africa. The thrust of the strategies is the formation of online community hubs through the synergy of online and offline social networking, community weaving, community mapping, Google Maps mash-up applications and diverse facilitated volunteered community information and service delivery systems. Essentially, the community hub emerges from the strategic connectivity of people and institutions in the community networks along with the wealth of information, resources, opportunities and services that are made visible and accessible through the online community networks. A unique online community architecture called GeoHubNet is developed to guide the CD facilitator in creating, organizing and managing the online community hub.

The discussion in this chapter is based on research findings in the development of community informatics social network web application for CD in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria. According