An ICT Enabled “Community” in Rural Nigeria and the UK

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INTRODUCTION

Development initiatives in Nigeria tend to be delivered down through layers of administration, from federal government, to state government, to local government, before they get implemented. Often developments are concentrated in urban areas rather than rural communities.

CawdNet aims to link top-down research and development initiatives with people at the rural grassroots, not just through NGOs working with the “grassroots” community, but also by opening up existing communication channels amongst farmers, women, teachers, health workers, and young people, and integrating them into the communication channels of the connected community (McLean & Johnson, 2004). CawdNet has worked across the digital divide in its internal organisation, since 2001. Increasingly CawdNet is looking outwards and as a result members of the rural communities and members of various “connected communities” are becoming directly involved in these information flows.

THE CONTEXT OF CAWDNET: THE WORK AND WORKERS

CawdNet is an informal group, a “community,” whose existence has been enabled through Information and Communication Technology (ICT). The core members of CawdNet collaborate on work concerned with farmers, women, micro-credit, livelihoods, youth, health, education and other aspects of community development. The CawdNet core members are from Oke-Ogun Community Development Network (OCDN), Fantsuam Foundation (FF) Rural Searchlight (RUSEL) and CAWD volunteers. Although most of the core members are in local community development organisations in rural Nigeria, there are two CAWD volunteers in the UK, who act as (proactive) link between the Internet and CawdNet in Nigeria. All CawdNet core members in Nigeria have some kind of e-mail link with CAWD volunteers, even if their access to e-mail can only happen infrequently because of difficult journeys to a cyber cafe.

There are very few paid “CawdNet workers.” Most work with their CawdNet organisations happens “as and when” that work can be fitted in around other responsibilities and “day jobs.” All CawdNet workers, except for the CAWD volunteers, are active in rural Nigeria.

“CawdNet friends” are comprised of individuals, groups or organisations that are helping (or have helped) to forward CawdNet’s work in some way. Friends may have a formal or informal relationship with CawdNet, or with one or more of the organisations it represents. Many CawdNet friends are engaged in some kind of information exchange, free of charge, which enhances CawdNet’s work. Free information exchange can range from someone sending occasional e-mails, with advice or information, to a graduate student working with the project for weeks or months at a time. Some friends help in cash or in kind. Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) has been a much-valued friend in this way, but information is a more usual form of help. Most, but not all, of the CawdNet friends who give information are involved in some aspect of development in a professional full-time way. Some are exploring ways to collaborate on various planned projects.

Acquaintances of CawdNet are those we know less well, familiar names from discussion lists, or contacts at face-to-face meetings, people we have exchanged ideas with in a public way, who have helped to influence our thinking, but not in the personal, specifically “CawdNet directed” way of friends.

CawdNet, ICT AND COMMUNICATION

CawdNet’s initial existence and subsequent development is totally an outcome of ICT. It is not a traditional organisation or group where communication, and the relationship to information, is simply enhanced by ICT. Without e-mail CawdNet could not have come into being. Without the Internet, CawdNet could not have learnt so much about the “development world” of which it is a part. Without mailing lists and discussion groups CawdNet could not have started to make a place for itself within the wider context of the “development world.” It could not have established many of the relationships that it values highly. Without those relationships, and the...