

Chapter VII

Capacity Development Initiatives for Marginal Communities: A Few Case Studies

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ABSTRACT

Capacity development initiatives for marginal communities with information and knowledge under the contemporary global scenario perhaps could be one of the effective instruments to make a meaningful change towards sustainable human development in developing countries. Information networking can play a key role in the initiatives toward enhancing opportunities for improved livelihood, health for all, food security, disaster management, and sustainable development. Best practices are already known in this regard such

as e-commerce for better livelihood and employment, telemedicine for health, tele-food for food security, early warning for disaster preparedness, and sustainable development network as a comprehensive treatment for the sustainable development. This chapter focuses on how capacity development initiatives for marginal communities work with reference toward achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in developing countries. It approaches the issues and concerns related with the empowerment of the marginal communities, problems, and apprehensions in human and social capacity development in the information and

communications technology (ICT) sector. A lot more effort is required from governments, NGOs, and other multilateral agencies in order to bring about a sustainable mechanism of ICT planning, implementations, and development in developing countries. This chapter aims at highlighting the importance of ICT development, and the issues and concerns that are related for its expansion in the developing world for securing sustainable development.

INTRODUCTION

The 21st century predominately constitutes an information- and knowledge-based society, where every country hopes to achieve its goal of social and economic development, including education, food security, health, environment, gender equity, and cultural pluralism. However, the most important problem remains attaining and sustaining these goals. Therefore, every continent should concentrate on building its own information society, until a global village is formed.

In contrast to the developed countries that have been steadily capitalizing the rapid pace of information and communications technology (ICT), a large number of developing countries, particularly low-income countries, have failed in the adaptation of these technologies by contributing to the digital-divide (UNDP, 2001). This is also true for rural villages where modern technologies have yet to reach. The majority of people living in rural areas has neither access nor the means to obtain modern ICT because of their low economic position (Gunatunge & Karunanayake, 2004).

For the past seven years, it has been fashionable to speak of the global village, yet the Human Development Report of 1998, published by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP, 1998), indicates that not everyone is a full member of this village. The benefits of globalization have largely gone to the developed and wealthiest nations (Landes, 1998). In fact, information tech-

nology is scarcely available in parts some areas of the developing world. This is especially true for Africa. According to the UNDP report, the 22 nations with the lowest human development index are in Africa.

ICT brings profound changes to every community. It influences how the community knows and understands the world. It changes working methods and the ways in which people communicate. Similarly, it affects how the community accesses and shares it with others and establishes information as an important source of power (Heeks, 1999). By acquiring the equipment and necessary skills to use information effectively, the poor and marginalized population can gain access to power. The Internet can act as the tool to raise their skills and share knowledge-based information among communities.

Even though there have been increased global initiatives to reduce digital divides, the technology gap is expanding at the periphery. An electronic divide is amplifying between developed and developing countries; between reached and unreached, the haves and have-nots, especially in developing countries (Norrish, 1998, 1999). According to the Global Reach (2001) survey, about 218 million of the world's population use English (45%) as their medium of communications, while 266 million use other languages (55%). However, the first cluster is representing a community of English-spoken countries of about 500 million (44%) and the other cluster is representing the rest of the global population of nearly 5,600 million (5%).

Another survey by NUA (2002) found that the number of users connected to the Net is about 605.60 million: World Total 605.60 million, Africa 6.31 million, Asia/Pacific 187.24 million, Europe 190.91 million, Middle East 5.12 million, Canada and USA 182.67 million, Latin America 33.35 million.

It is an indicative picture that Internet subscribers are rapidly increasing in Asia, Africa, and Pacific regions. Thereby, taking pragmatic steps (discussed in following case studies), marginal

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