

Sustainable initiatives

An Information and Communication Technology case study

ACISAM CASE STUDY, EL SALVADOR



ACISAM

Introduction

This case study has been generated as part of a research programme into Information and Communication Technology (ICT) sustainability factors. Funded by the [Department of International Development \(DFID\)](#), the research programme identified activities that sought to benefit the poor and had an ICT component. In particular it considered programmes where ICTs had enhanced ongoing development activities, the ICT activity could be replicated without sizeable investment, and there was a measure of sustainability. Sustainability was taken to be more than financial cost recovery. Drawing from lessons learned in other development sectors, sustainability involves a combination of factors including among others, clear objectives, institutional frameworks, local capacity and development benefits. While perhaps not fulfilling all the features of a strong sustainable activity, the following case was felt to hold points of interest for the wider global development community.

Description of case Study

ACISAM, *Asociación de Capacitación e Investigación para la Salud Mental* (Association for Training and Research for Mental Health), is a Salvadoran NGO that was founded in 1986 to help the population address war-related trauma. ACISAM is one of the few NGOs actively involved in the promotion, prevention and attention to the mental health needs of the Salvadoran population, principally in the rural areas. The organization concentrates its work in the area of children and youth, community radio and television, violence prevention and conflict resolution. They also have a mental health clinic, named *Quentinemi*, and publish the magazine, "Advances in Mental Health".

Their work in the area of communications was initiated under the premise that there is an important link between mental health and communication. The production of community videos, not as instruments of propaganda, but as instruments for the promotion of mental health. The videos document the opinions and life experiences of the affected population in order to capture the collective experience of the community.

Currently the communications program has two main areas: 1. "Community Sound" project; and 2. "Community Television" project. The community sound projects uses loud speakers to play back community recorded messages. The "Community Television" project consists of filming community issues on videotape as interviews or drama, and then showing them in a public meeting place for the whole community. The idea is that these will later be analyzed and discussed. To date they have approximately 120 groups formed in different communities including both community sound and

community television groups. The groups are mostly made up of young people between the ages of 15 – 28.

ACISAM has recognized the deep need for expression that people have, and this is a long-term process, with long-term vision. Their goal is to help communities change their values, from looking out for one's own interests to working on behalf of the community's best interest. Through their persistence, many communities demonstrate a total change; whereas before they were isolated, "abandoned" people, today they are people who have a voice, who can communicate.

Key Strategies

Using loud speakers and video recordings to raise community awareness surrounding mental health issues in order to address the mental trauma of war and rebuild communities.



Photo 1: TV in the public plaza—one of the aims of community TV is to reclaim the public plaza as a place to discuss problems.

Development benefits

Include improved community self-esteem through increased participation and communication within the community.

According to ACISAM, there is evidence that the project has helped raise people's self-esteem through their own reflections at viewing the videos. The communities have mentioned gaining a sense of who they are, and of what the problems and issues in their community are. For example, if they recognize that there is family abuse, ACISAM helps them see that there are also resources within the community - loving parents, helpful teachers, etc. From this they create a collective dialogue, which is then transformed into actions, and later, change.

Hindrances

Video equipment – current levels only allow 6 communities out of a total of 120 to use the equipment at any one time. With only 1 community being able to edit.

Initial community level self esteem prevents members from feeling that they are able to contribute to the project, or have the skills.

Often limited community access to a telephone in order to be able to contact ACISAM to request help or use equipment.

Local power conflicts where leaders may want to use the project for their own political benefit.

What helped it Succeed

- Funding availability.
- Support from local government
- Enthusiasm for the project from communities.
- National linkages with trainers in equipment usage and repairs
- The successful use of Video and Radio technology to promote mental health.

Sustainability factors

Objectives

To enable members of a community to acknowledge their human capacity and address common mental health problems in order to improve their social, economic, cultural and ecological environment.

For community video projects to become self-sustaining.

Policy environment

Current 'Superintendence for energy and telecommunications' (the national body that controls the use of telecommunications technology) policy limits access to television and radio licenses to the highest bidder. At present large media corporations are not working on alternative communication channels and this has created the space for ACISAM to be able to work in this area at the regional level.

Institutional arrangements

The Community Television project has project facilitators, a project co-ordinator who is part of the communications team. This team is then answerable to the associate director, then Director, then the Board of Directors.

Communities and the project have grown together and so ACISAM and the User groups appear clear on their roles and responsibilities.

Constraints are mainly due to a lack of finance as equipment is expensive. Current plans are to move on to digital equipment but again this is expensive.

Review and evaluation procedures include local monitoring through community facilitator reports.

Target groups

Target Groups are defined according to the needs of the community. A situation that ACISAM claims increases ownership of the project.

Through the use of community basketball courts for the display of initial community attempts opens up access to the project to the whole community. Thereby increasing the opportunity for participation.

Quotes from users:

"Now people can tell others what they feel and they can see the results."

"Information is used so we can see our own problems. For example, we dramatized a trip to the United States. When they were about to cross the river (on the border), two people died there, four were captured and put in prison, and only two passed.."

"I think an evidence is that the sugar mill now wants to hire us to work for them."

"Well, I've left all my vices so that I can work with these guys." (vices refer to smoking, drinking, gambling, etc.)

ACISAM initially lend out the ICT equipment to the community video team. These teams are then trained in the use of the video equipment. Some members are given scholarships for full training, which includes editing. Thereby increasing the communities control over the final product. Benefits include the final product being produced in a format appropriate to that community.

Should the community video team require the help of a project facilitator they contact them via a local telephone.

Constraints in reaching target groups have included local power struggles. Where certain community members wish to use the equipment to promote their own political party etc. This situation has been addressed through facilitators emphasising that the aim of the project is to enable the community to see each others point of view and so work closer together.

Technology

Includes: 6 sets of video equipment (camera and microphone). Currently include VHS, Super VHS and one digital camera; 1 Panasonic machine for linear editing.

According to ACISAM each community has a favoured technology – loudspeaker or video. However for the Users which technology they use depends on which ACISAM deems as most convenient for that area and local interest.

Technical Assistance initially is provided through ACISAMs own technician. Where possible the project facilitator will replace the broken equipment. Should the technician be unable to fix the equipment is taken to a specialist repair shop. Repair time varies according to the problem. ACISAM are also part of the El Salvador Association for Participatory Radio Programs network. A network that provides training for radio and electronic repairs in rural areas.

Access to the equipment is limited to a Community video team having a work plan, a work schedule and agree to take responsibility for the equipment. ACISAM also make sure that the team are able to use the equipment.



Photo 2: ACISAM promoters working with a youth group

Finance

Most of the equipment has come from Europe in the form of a donation.

Other financing comes through the sale of video production services to other NGOs.

Budget:

- Capital = 1,000,000 colones = aprox. \$US 115,000
- Installation = 300,000 colones = aprox. \$35,000
- Maintenance = 3% budget
- Replacement parts = 5% budget

Their annual budget is around \$80,000. This is a sum of funding received from donors, local contribution, and sale of services. The income received from selling services is used for equipment maintenance.

Cost recovery is not a goal for ACISAM. Instead donor funding is sort for training, and sustainability at the local level is obtained through encouraging local teams to find a way to purchase their own equipment. So far this has been through relatives in the USA or through a local donation.

The project process

On initial entry ACISAM will carry out an assessment of the community to identify community themes and the most vulnerable groups. ACISAM staff and a few members of the groups identified then produce the first video or community 'radio'. This is shown to the whole community. After which more communities members come forward to participate (usually 10-15 youths from 15-28 years old) and are trained in video production and

ANECDOTE

In one community, the ACISAM team got the mayor (an ex-guerrilla) interested in the video project. To begin with the community videos didn't favor the mayor, as he received a lot of negative comments. However through them he started working harder on his social responsibilities. He also used the community video team to help him do propaganda for his work. When an outside donation came into the township, the mayor requested that the donation be used to give the camera team the latest digital video equipment, including digital editing equipment. Through national linkages ACISAM was able to contract outside help to train the community team on digital filmmaking.

Points of Interest

Use of outside groups to train communities in use and repair of equipment. This training appears to then stay within the community, rather than enabling those trained to leave to find jobs elsewhere using their newly acquired skills.

The use of video as a tool to initiate discussion of community programmes appears to be very useful.

The recent involvement and interest of local businesses in the project.

editing. Participants must show a certain level of commitment as training takes 6 months. On completion the participants begin to take on their own projects based around their own themes.

With regards to application, ACISAM usually initiates the community process. Once initiated, the community members can approach ACISAM at any time in order to make a video. Quality control is assured through constant monitoring of the production process by ACISAM staff. Community Video groups complete monitoring forms to make sure that they are on schedule and using the equipment appropriately.

There is no formal handover of the project. Instead the community has to fund the production of its own video productions (excluding the loan of technical equipment) once ACISAM assigned funding has finished.

Key linkages

The initial link is created with the local government through the application to work with community members.

For the users interviewed a key project linkage was with the local sugar mill. The mill has agreed to donate video equipment to the community video group and has worked with the group to produce a video of a local football team.

National linkages include being part of a network called ARPAS. Through ARPAS they are able to offer training workshops for radio and electronic technicians in rural areas.

Their international linkages are used for funding.

Intermediaries

Community teams appear to have full control over video content and production, as well as perceiving ACISAM to currently interpret their needs correctly. They are subsequently happy with the editing and final content.

Their main problem is the demand on video equipment.

Training is provided by ACISAM, with further training through a network organisation.

Capacity

ACISAM staff qualifications include training in Art, Social Communications and Cinematography; as well as journalists, psychologists and social workers.

Staff are trained by ACISAM in the use of communication technology, participation, and conflict resolution.

Users interviewed received scholarships for 6 months of training with professional filmmakers, editors and news broadcasters. Participants are selected for training from the target groups, which is open to anyone who wants to commit to 6 months of training.

Stakeholders Consulted

This case study information has been gathered through the assistance of ACISAM staff, who facilitated interviews with a range of stakeholders. These included the local Sugar mill Owner who claims that through the project the sugar mill has begun to take an interest in the community. A number of project participants who highlighted how their confidence has increased through the project and they feel that they are more readily employable.

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