

Sustainable initiatives

An Information and Communication Technology case study

Development Network of Indigenous Voluntary Associations (DENIVA), Uganda



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

Representatives of 21 NGOs founded the Development Network of Indigenous Voluntary Associations (DENIVA) in 1988. DENIVA membership comprises Ugandan NGOs and CBOs – international organisations are only eligible for associate membership, a feature that distinguishes it from the other national networks (Uganda National NGO Forum).

Their mission statement is to be:

“A network of indigenous voluntary associations strengthening civil society organisations in the quest for transparency, equity and democratic governance through advocacy, networking and capacity building for sustainable development in Uganda”

The activities of the organisation fall under three programme areas:

- Networking and information sharing (NISP);
- Self understanding and capacity building (SUCB);
- Policy research and advocacy (PRAP).

The first of these, NISP, is the core programme which underpins the work of the organisation and has been operating for many years (>6), as has the SUCB programme; PRAP was started more recently.

NISP addresses information management, and recognises the potential of modern ICTs, aiming to enable members to *“acquire new ideas, designs and perspectives through effective horizontal and vertical interaction and making use of new ways of relating with each other such as the email, internet and other new electronic communication innovations”*. The case study will, therefore, focus on this programme.

There is a demand for ICT services within other DENIVA programmes e.g. they have conducted research into the role of women councillors under the PRAP and want to publish it more widely through the web site.

Key Strategies

Through the use of ICTs, enabling members to acquire new ideas, designs and perspectives through improved interaction and communication techniques.



Photo 1: Improvements in the quality of telephone services has recently made it possible for member organisations, such as SODANN, to use email communications and internet access.

Development benefits

DENIVA used to distribute information by post but this was expensive and takes a long time. They would also hand deliver to local representatives of organisations, relying on them to distribute more widely. Electronic communication results in considerable cost saving with a members mailing list of 550, plus an external mailing list (e.g. international organisations) of a further 250.

For users, benefits of DENIVA membership have included a calendar and newsletter; some information is sent to members via email.

For DANIDA (donor) benefits from the use of ICTS in conflict include giving people the ability to tell their own story. They also propose that communication is an important weapon in easing tensions. It is, therefore, ironic that telecoms services are not available in those areas of conflict.

Hindrances

Technology:

This case study is an example of how ICTS can be embedded in the day-to-day operations of NGOs. As such it did not acquire specialist experts of trainers for an 'ICT' project'. As a consequence DENIVA staff recognise that they lack certain technical knowledge and this is a handicap.

The ability of DANIVA to take advantage of electronic communication with members is constrained by the lack of ICT facilities and user capacity in most of the member organisations. Also computer viruses, power shortages and problems with gaining a phone connection for the email system cause most computer problems.

Socio-economic:

Both DENIVA and SODANN (a member organisation) comment on the reluctance of donors to fund ICT equipment and running costs as a hindrance to its both its sustainability and expansion.

What helped it Succeed

Technology:

The use of standard computer equipment and the local ICT industry to service and support the technology.

Socio-economic:

DENIVA has a long track record and has established a good reputation over many years. It is, therefore, a valuable stakeholder in ongoing policy reform processes in Uganda, particularly the decentralisation process, which relies on the participation of citizens and the effective dissemination of information, so local CBOs are an important feature. The broader policy context also influences the view of donors, and it is their support for ICT that has enabled DENIVA to promote the use of ICTs.

Sustainability factors

Objectives

To make use of new technologies to facilitate vertical and horizontal integration of members. Areas of focus include information management, gender mainstreaming, environment, decentralised information exchange and others.

Programme goals include strengthening the capacity of members to manage information; improve access to information on poverty and other development issues; improve research into development information; strengthening resource centres; and Increase dialogue with other development stakeholders.

Policy environment

Ongoing government processes aimed at improving communications infrastructure in remote rural areas will improve the ability of member organisations to benefit from electronic communications facilities.

Institutional arrangements

Programmes are directed by the Board of Directors (9), which includes representatives from all over the country, and a range development interests including agriculture, environment, health, education, gender, disabilities, micro finance.

There is no formal arrangement between DENIVA and members concerning ICTs - rather, the network makes what use it can of facilities enjoyed by members.

DENIVA is currently debating how best to ensure quality control and have elected a computer committee to take responsibility for purchasing, servicing, and demonstrating transparency in associated purchasing

procedures.

Target groups

Member organisations are primary target groups for programmes; most goals of the NISP specifically refer to members.

Technology

Although DENIVA has several offices with PCs, only 1 PC is connected to email. They are not satisfied with their ISP, and plan to change (Infocom to UTL online).

Of their membership, only around half have email addresses, and some of these may be accessing via cyber cafes. Some members are now beginning to create web sites, but at around \$5,000 - \$8,000 the cost is prohibitive. Members in remote areas can access faxes through post offices.

For SODANN the quality of the telephone network has improved recently to the point where it is possible to keep an uninterrupted internet connection for 20 minutes.

The programme also makes use of national radio and mobile phone communication.

Common problems include computer viruses, power cuts, poor email connection and email illiterate members.

With regards to maintenance and repairs DENIVA used to have a regular maintenance contract but this proved too costly. They currently use a pool of approved firms. For SODANN equipment has to be carried to Kampala for repair.

Finance



Photo 2: DENIVA has built up a reputation over many years, and has consistently worked on issues of networking and information sharing. More recently, their programmes have evolved to reflect the growing importance of ICTs.

DENIVA relies on funding from donors and from membership subscriptions. The NISP and capacity building programmes received 5 year funding from NOVIB (Netherlands). This covered support for ICTs, personnel and workshops, and came to an end in 2001. All programmes are supposed to contribute towards the running of the web site (and other communication services such as ISP, telephone and computer maintenance).

DANIDA do not believe in economic sustainability of ICTs, but are convinced of the social sustainability of ICTs and the contribution communications can make towards breaking marginalisation. They want to create networks of CSOs, and provide them with access to

Anecdote

Regarding knowledge of ICTS: The director of SODANN was being severely frustrated by the mouse (cord connected) on his laptop PC. He was delighted when a visitor demonstrated that the ball could simply be removed, the dirt build up on the rollers removed by hand, and the mouse function repaired. He exclaimed that when he got sufficiently frustrated, he would have travelled to Kampala (a day's journey) to take the mouse to a repair shop, who would have charged him handsomely for the repair, stayed the night in Kampala then spent another day returning to Soroti. This is an example of how a lack of local knowledge creates barriers to the use of modern ICTs.

When organising a workshop on "Decentralisation policy and advocacy", SODANN wanted some advice on content for the training programme, so they sent an email to the Director of DENIVA attaching the draft programme for the workshop along with an outline of the key issues for discussion. He was then able to inform them of a previous workshop, and suggested that, rather than coming up with a new (duplicate) set of recommendations, they should build on the outputs of the previous workshop.

Points of Interest

It is not actually an ICT project but an adoption of modern technology into normal working practice.

It is the speed of communication that really helps the members in their work, improving communication and support to their own target groups. An example of this is where DENIVA have used email to improve contacts with donors and link them to member organisations.

Both DENIVA's information officer and SODANN's director put their computer skills down to self teaching rather than attending specific courses.

It is a successful, locally initiated and run networking organisation.

the internet; they will pay costs.

With regards to cost recovery SODANN face the problem that they are not able to add the cost of ICTs to costs of activities e.g. workshops, as donors are unwilling to fund this.

The project process

Network and capacity building are enshrined in the mission statement of DENIVA (see description of organisation) and is evident in the development of the NISP as the core programme. As this has evolved and the importance of ICTs to networking has been recognised, ICTs have become an important part of the programme.

Key linkages

The focus of DENIVA is on links to members organisations. Linkages between members themselves can be an effective means of capacity building e.g. swap librarians.

Intermediaries

With regards to information requests, collection and dissemination the NISP manager is expected to put information on the web site. The manager is also expected to edit the information into a web-friendly format; obviously this can cause problems where the manager has no knowledge or understanding of the topic in question. Of the members themselves only about 25% take the initiative to request information. Also, only about 25% take advantage of the opportunity of submitting information for distribution via the network.

Capacity

Staffs have received training in regarding the web site, with some staff sent for training, and one who has received training on Photoshop and Corel Draw.

DENIVA have also developed booklets on resource centre management and can carry out trainings on computer basics and information management.

Stakeholders Consulted

This case study information has been gathered through the assistance of DENIVA staff, who facilitated interviews with a range of stakeholders. Members are the focus of any network, and this is very much the approach of DENIVA, so it was interesting to talk to a very small member organisation operating in a more remote area of the country. This organisation, in turn, acts as a network to support the work of village level groups dealing with a range of agriculture and poverty related issues – very much “grass roots”. Both levels of networks, in common with most NGOs, depend largely on donors for financial support, so it was important to gain an understanding of how donors justify their investment in simple communication facilities.



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