The computer revolution: Struggling for survival in rural Cameroon

Tamara Palamakumbura
Partners for Community Development Initiative (PCDI), Cameroon

ABSTRACT

PCDI (http://www.pcdi-cameroon.org) is a local CIG (NGO) based in rural Cameroon. This article
discusses our efforts to "bridge the digital divide" and the reality behind the technological
revolution. We face a battle on two fronts. Firstly, chronic poverty. For most of the population
technology and its benefits is a luxury commodity. The necessities are foods and medicines and
in a time of rising food prices, the luxuries must be cut down. We offer the only internet access in
the entire division of 13 villagers and yet we face a daily battle to survive. The continuation of the
internet services is by no means certain. Secondly, computer illiteracy. Much of the community
has not and cannot use a computer. Yet when we offer free internet training, they refuse.

INTRODUCTION

"Many developing countries remain poor largely because they had let the Industrial Revolution
pass them by. They can ill afford to miss the information technology revolution". M. S.
Swaminatham (ICT for Poverty Reduction: Myths, Realities and Development Implications)

Information Communication Technology (ICT) is the modern day driver of economic growth and
poverty alleviation. PCDI embraces this principle and works at bridging the digital divide in the
rural communities of Cameroon through a multi-pronged approach. Firstly through IT training.

PCDI runs a school where software and hardware courses, and full time and part time courses
are run. In fitting with PCDI's objectives, places at the school are offered at no cost to vulnerable
women and children. During our last graduation, we were proud to graduate one of these
students and we will continue to offer her the necessary support so as to allow her to develop
herself.

Secondly through offering internet access (PCDI is the only provider of such services in the
division of 13 villagers).

However the reality is much more complex than these text book solutions suggest.

The proclaimed revolution in Mobile Phones technology is indeed being felt in Cameroon. It is
rare for an individual to not have a phone. But it is equally rare for the normal populace to be able
to afford to make a call. The phones are sold on a pay-as-you-go basis and people cannot afford
to purchase the credit. So communication is via a system of "beeps", whereby one person calls
another but before the receiver can pick up the phone, the caller has hung up. This is a message
to the second person that the first person wishes to communicate and if the second person has
credit they should call back. Normally they do not have credit to return the call.

Despite these obstacles the transformation caused by the introduction telecommunication is
obvious, even to the casual observer. The computing revolution in contrast, has been much
slower to take root. Before PCDI there was another internet café in the village. But the enterprise
has long since shut its doors. This is PCDI's second attempt to provide internet services to the

village and now we face a daily battle to survive. The future of our internet café is by no means certain.

THE REALITY

PCDI operates in Bamunka which is the centre of the Ngoketunjia Division of 13 villagers. It is a rural area where farming takes precedence over every other activity. PCDI is the only internet café in the division (of 13 villages) and yet for over 75% of the operating day, PCDI's computers are underutilized.

The problem is firstly lack of resources. In a community where the essentials of food, medicine and education can be unaffordable, internet services are not an essential requirement. Internet access can be considered to be a luxury commodity and the majority of the population cannot afford it.

PCDI charges 300frs – 450frs (0.6-0.9 US$) per hour for access to the internet, yet it is not uncommon for people to not have 100frs for a loaf of bread.

The second battle that PCDI faces is in computer illiteracy. The majority of the population are unable to use a computer. The majority of students when they enter our school may not have seen or touched a computer before. At our school some of our students are seniour civil servants (including judges) and they are unable to use a computer. As a result the community does not fully appreciate the power of the technological revolution occurring around them.

Although we can boast of the advantages that the cyber brings to the local community and we can use as examples individuals from the community who use our facilities to partake in on-line training courses from MBA's to teaching qualifications, the truth is that the use of the internet and computing is restricted to the elite and the educated of the community.

The dilemma is that without the customer base, given the running costs incurred for the maintenance of an internet café, our rates are high and we cannot reduce them. Ironically the running costs are high. Our internet provider does not have allocated band width for Africa. So the charges we incur are high, whilst the quality of the service we receive is poor. So the answer must lie in the sensitization of the population. Partly this sensitization of the population must occur from their education.

Yet, whilst the government of Cameroon has a professed IT policy with regard to education, little of these policies have been affected at the grass roots. The majority of the schools in the region are poorly equipped. It is common for computer teachers to be either lacking in experience in teaching or to be lacking in experience in computing.

A survey of 25 Schools in the relatively urbanised Bamunka, highlighted the following statistics:
- 56% of the schools do not have computers
- Of those that have computers, 50% have 2 computers or less
- Of the schools that do have computers, 40-50% may be in a state of disrepair and unusable due to inadequate maintenance procedures
- More than 80% do not have text books
- When surveyed, 67% of school computer teachers indicated that they needed additional training

THE WAY FORWARD

So PCDI's battle is in the sensitization and training of the population. This is a difficult task. We offer our customers free training on the internet. They refuse to participate (due to lack of time). We offer the traditional councils free places in our schools for vulnerable children. They do not attend.

But with all battles we must start with small victories. On the 17th of May we organised a free seminar for school teachers. We spoke to them about techniques of teaching computing and we taught them some basic software and hardware skills.

Here are some of the questions asked of us by the teachers during the seminar:
•   I have heard use of the term computer virus. What is a computer virus?
•   If a flash or diskette is contaminated with a virus, how to clean the flash or diskette?
•   If I move the mouse and the line on the screen does not move, what should I do?
•   Can I use water to clean the computer?
•   How do I explain to the students what it means to save a file and what it means to send it to the recycle bin?

But we consider our greatest victory in this seminar in the fact that we got the schools to collaborate with us. We hope to use this as a medium to develop a forum with the schools with the aim of improving the quality of ICT education in Ndop.

We will organise a series of subsequent seminars over the next few months. We have offered the school a one-time free maintenance visit to their computer labs by PCDI's hardware engineers. We will collaborate further with the schools to offer the schools use of PCDI's fully equipped classroom and to offer the schools the use of our internet facilities.

"History has shown that technologies, left to their own devices, will only exacerbate existing differences. Information and communication technologies are no exception". M. S. Swaminatham

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