An ICT Enabled "Community" in Rural Nigeria and the UK

Pamela McLean
Cawdnet (CAWD)[1] and Dada McLean Ltd.[2], UK

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[1] 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[3] 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 a (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."[4] 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

opportunities afforded by e-mail, it would not be exploring the various collaborative projects on community development that are currently under consideration.

CawdNet uses e-mail for internal communication. This is not desk-to-desk office e-mail communication. CawdNet workers typically have to travel to cyber cafes to send e-mails. This is necessary because their community work is based beyond the reach of the telecommunications infrastructure. VSAT links are making e-mail increasingly available. This means that access is gradually improving, regarding distances travelled, but expense is still a great barrier. As e-mails become easier for more people to send, there is a gradual increase in information exchange in the CAWDNET network. Also with increased access, more CawdNet workers, beyond the CawdNet core members, are communicating with CAWD volunteers. This improves the quality and quantity of information exchanged between the rural areas and the connected community.

The CAWD volunteers in the UK began their work through links of friendship with Peter Adetunji Oyawale, not through prior knowledge of the development initiatives. Hence there was a need for extensive effort to learn about the Nigerian development issues using e-mail and the Internet, which is supplemented by "on the ground" understanding in Nigeria. For most CawdNet workers in Nigeria, surfing the Net is excruciatingly slow and prohibitively expensive. Therefore, the CAWD volunteers undertake Internet work for other CawdNet workers and the communities they serve. The resulting information is forwarded by e-mails and on CD-Roms. Using such processes volunteers are often able to find out about free material that can be supplied to them and which they would not otherwise have known about if they had relied upon traditional government services.

The e-mails to CAWD volunteers from the community are currently both short and few in number, but this traffic is increasing as access, knowledge and trust increase. It is important to understand that to the volunteers every e-mail is significant not just for what it says, but also for what it represents. The two following examples give some context to this:

1. The farmer society of Ago-Are are progressing and we are preparing for harvesting of yam and maize. Mr. Oyawale also said you should help him greet the Oyawale's family over there. Bye.

To the volunteers a personal greeting such as this plus a sentence about the harvest represents the very first report from the Farmers' SIG (Special Interest Group). It is evidence that the representatives of this group are trying to keep in touch. There is communication across the digital divide. Most of the people in the Ago-Are farmers group are illiterate and struggling in poverty, yet representatives of this group are making the effort to send traffic along the information "footpath" (it is far from being an "information highway" yet).

2. Dr E.Akioya:-"pls lorain can i get any free cd rom on HIV/AIDS,and polio. i was directed by pam.I am a medical doctor in nigeria.pls also keep me posted on other available health cds."

An e-mail from a doctor, requesting specific information, is evidence that the Health SIG is beginning to "pull" information, where previously the information had been "pushed" by the volunteers.

Discussion lists, virtual conferences and other interactive exchanges on the Internet have two important functions for CawdNet. First there is a lot to be learnt from acquaintances in this way. Secondly, some of these acquaintances develop into friends. Fantsuam Foundation and CAWD volunteers were Internet acquaintances long before they started working closely and the name CawdNet was adopted. Most of CawdNet's friends began as acquaintances on the Internet. This is even true of friends based in Nigeria, including some who are in fact geographically close to CawdNet core members.

In the connected community, CawdNet has friends and acquaintances from many parts of the globe, including Nigeria, and from many sectors: academia, development organisations, the Diaspora, alternative technology groups, ICT professionals, Open Source groups, research and development people, publishers, health professionals, social entrepreneurs, and others, each with their own particular area of interest which relates in some way to rural development. Most of these contacts have come through the work of Fantsuam Foundation and CAWD volunteers, actively reaching out to the connected community. Others have come unexpectedly, through people finding CawdNet through the Internet, via the Web sites of FF, or CAWD, or through the e-newsletter.

There are many virtual communities. What makes the small CawdNet community unusual is the boundaries that it crosses, by working both in the connected communities and in rural Nigerian communities. CawdNet has links, through personal networks, beyond the telecommunications infrastructure. Someone in the connected community who links with CawdNet, links with the formal and informal networks of rural Nigeria. OCDN, FF and RUSEL are grassroots organisations, led by people deeply embedded in their communities. They are networking with the poorest and most un-empowered members of their communities-subsistence farmers (men and women), petty traders, and unemployed youths-as well as knowing the elites, the highly educated, the professionals, business people, traditional rulers, chiefs,

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