A Rural Multi-Purpose Community Centre in South Africa

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INTRODUCTION

There is an increasing focus on the growing disparity between the involvement of developed and developing societies in the new "information age." ICT are often seen as being the critical link to bridge this gap (Chapman, 2002). An ICT initiative that has been receiving increasing attention is that of the telecentre, and the related concept of the Multi-Purpose Community Centre (MPCC). The South African government is strongly promoting the diffusion of these MPCCs throughout the country, particularly in rural areas. An MPCC is specific type of telecentre, or "physical space that provides public access to ICTs for educational, personal, social, and economic development" (Gomez et al., 1999). The authors define an MPCC as a "telecentre which has a political motivation to aid in the upliftment of a disadvantaged group." However, successful MPCC initiatives are still few and far between. As Benjamin (2001) notes, "while there is much talk in international conferences of them, there are not many successful [telecentres] in developing countries." The reasons for the failure of many of these initiatives are still not clear, despite a number of research efforts (Avgerou, 1998; Montealegre, 1999; Moyo, 1996).

A growing strand of literature in the ICT for Development field refers to the interaction between technology and society (Brohman, 1996). This approach is often referred to as the socio-technical paradigm of technology. This study embraces this school of thought and hermeneutics is used as a theoretical foundation with which to explore the implementation issues.

BACKGROUND: THE MPCC IN DWARS RIVER VALLEY

The Dwars River Valley (DRV) of the Western Cape of South Africa is situated in a picturesque mountainous area traditionally known for its wine farms. There are a few large commercial wine farms in the valley, but the majority of the population lives close to the poverty line with high levels of unemployment present.

The Dwars River Valley MPCC (DRV MPCC), was implemented in 2002 and 2003, after a lengthy implementation process. The process started in 1998, when the *dominant* community within the DRV, Pniel, applied for government funds to start a Youth Centre. When the funds were approved in 2001, the amalgamation of the valley had already taken place, and the concept of the youth centre had evolved into the concept of an MPCC. Thus, what was originally planned to be the Pniel Youth Centre eventually became the DRV MPCC. The DRV MPCC was implemented with the goal of providing upliftment to the six communities of Kylemore, Johannesdal, Pniel, Lanquedoc, Banghoek, and Groot Drakenstein.

A project manager, with extensive experience in MPCCs, was brought in to manage the implementation process. The implementation was funded by two governmental funds: the Local Economic Development (LED) fund and the Human Settlement and Redevelopment (HSRP) fund.

The MPCC consisted of 10 computers, a printer, and a single dial-up Internet connection. Software on the computers included Windows, the Microsoft Office suite, and Microsoft Project. The centre was housed within an existing municipal building in Pniel, also the most central community in the valley, with plans to build a new, separate building during 2004.

The explicit aim of the MPCC when it was implemented was to foster economic development within the valley by creating spin-off projects that could use the MPCC infrastructure but would be separate entrepreneurial ventures. These ventures would contribute to the sustainability of the MPCC by paying for the services they required such as business support, desktop publishing (DTP) and so forth. The MPCC would also serve as a centre for individuals who needed training, telephony and other services.

The MPCC business plan was built around the centre eventually becoming a self-sustainable entity with the help of initial, start-up funding from government. It was

estimated that the centre itself could provide enough of an income to support three full-time employees.

In 2002, a committee of 12 community representatives was elected to make decisions regarding the MPCC and its implementation process. The committee was ultimately responsible for the project and consisted of two representatives from each of the six communities.

After an extensive consultation process supervised by the project manager, the committee decided on four focus areas for the valley: tourism, water, housing and agriculture. The tourism project was the most successful resulting in a number of spin-off projects, including a successful business removing alien trees from the river bank.

RESEARCH APPROACH

This article explores the implementation issues of an MPCC in a rural development situation by means of an analysis of the emergent themes of the study. The Hermeneutic Spiral is used to guide this analysis process, as each of the themes is examined individually.

The use of hermeneutics was inspired by the recommendations from Klein and Myers (1999) who present an excellent guide on how to conduct interpretive case studies in information systems and recommend hermeneutics as a useful form of interpretivist research. The Hermeneutic Spiral can be seen as the overarching principle of hermeneutic interpretivism where the movement of understanding is constantly from the whole to the part and back to the whole, in an attempt to increase understanding by refining and extending the themes emerging from the analysis. The harmony of all the details with the whole is the criterion of correct understanding. Although this process was followed in the full research process, this paper does not allow the space for a full discussion of the process. In what follows, only the results of the research are presented, namely the themes as they emerged by following the Hermeneutic Spiral research process.

The source materials are various written documents as well as in-depth interviews with many of the stakeholders involved with the MPPC.

THE EMERGING THEMES

Community Dynamics: The Power Game

The most consistent theme which emerged from all three rounds of interviews was the importance of understanding and handling community dynamics.

There was an obvious rivalry between the dominant community of the valley, Pniel, and the most isolated, rural community, Groot Drakenstein. This rivalry was aggravated by various factors, including the perception that Pniel was always the beneficiary of upliftment projects. Pniel was already home to the municipal buildings, the post office, the library and the most affluent inhabitants of the valley. So when the MPCC was also situated there, it was understandable that the other communities felt somewhat aggrieved. However, Pniel is situated in the middle of the valley, on the main road, making it the most accessible area and therefore the logical place to put an MPCC that is meant to serve the whole valley. As the project manager commented:

Now the problem that you have is that there is one prominent community, Pniel. It's on the main road, it's where the municipal offices are, it's where the more affluent people of the valley live, so they tend to look down their noses at the rest of the valley, make discouraging comments about them, according to where they live. And then the other communities comment on the 'uppitiness' of the people of Pniel.

As a result of this division between the communities, the MPCC ran into a number of problems. Many of the participants commented on people "boycotting" the centre simply because it was located in Pniel and not in their own community. There was a perception as one of the participants noted that, "Pniel's people don't let people feel at home."

As a result of these difficulties, which were caused by a small minority of people in the Groot Drakenstein community, the whole process was almost "derailed." It is hardly surprising then that when asked the question, "How would you go about implementing an MPCC if you were given the job of project manager?" almost all respondents said that community buy-in was the most essential aspect. Municipal officials, who were responsible for establishing the initial committee, were also unanimous that "community dynamics" was the most difficult aspect when it came to implementing the MPCC. One official went as far as saying, "I can honestly tell you that community—that's why they call it the Dwars River Valley—they [are] a bit 'dwars'. [T]hey try to be difficult and one can say stubborn or arrogant in some ways." ['dwars' is an Afrikaans word meaning 'across']

The MPCC as a Vehicle for Economic Development

From the interviews there was a distinct spectrum of understanding of MPCCs and their role in development between the different groups of actors.

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