'Net' Social Change:
Grassroots Empowerment for Sustainable Development

Subas P. Dhakal
Curtin University, Australia

ABSTRACT

The notion of empowerment broadly refers to the ability of actors to fulfil their missions. However, assessing Information and Communication Technology (ICT) specific contributions to this remains an exigent task in the context of grassroots organizations. The objective of this chapter is to analyse the differences in levels of empowerment between ICT adopters and non-adopters Grassroots Environmental Organizations (GEOs) in Perth, Western Australia. The chapter draws on organizational empowerment theory and proposes an evaluation framework to assess ICT-mediated empowerment for sustainable development. Utilizing a survey of GEOs and interviews with leaders, the chapter unravels the contributions of ICTs in enabling these grassroots actors. The chapter ends with the discussion on the need for overcoming digital divide and recommends strategic support for GEOs that are either not able to or not willing to keep up with the emerging trend of ICTs.

INTRODUCTION

Grassroots sustainable development initiatives have been considered to be more effective at the regional scale because regions are large enough for federal and state authorities to deal with, yet small enough for community based actors and local governments to participate in the decision-making process (Dore & Woodhill, 1999; Lawrence, 2005). The basic premise of the notion of sustainable development is that centralized and fragmented emphasis on economic-growth at the expense of social and/or environmental costs is eventually detrimental to the overall societal well-being. The very essence of this notion has inspired various grassroots actors to mobilize themselves to bring about social change to reverse the trend of escalating environmental degradation around the world. For instance, Australia has been dependent on thousands of Grassroots Environmental Organizations (GEOs) across the country in order to safeguard local environment. This is done through activities that range from conserving threatened biodiversity to restoring degraded habitats in the regions like Perth, capital city of Western Australia, where two-thirds of native ecosystems have been lost in the past 150 years (Davis & Froend, 1999; Stenhouse, 2004; Dhakal, 2014a).

On the one hand, GEOs operate in challenging circumstances because of the lack of a) availability or access to adequate funds and volunteers, b) capacity to forge partnerships with other actors, and c) certainty over long-term viability to accomplish organizational missions (Simpson & Clifton, 2010; Tennent & Lockie, 2013; Dhakal, 2015). On the other hand, despite being under-resourced and volunteer-dependent, GEOs are often considered reliable partners by governmental and non-governmental organizations in terms of bringing about social change for sustainable development (Smith, 2000; Anheier, 2005). Consequently, the role that Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs), for example, the Internet and Internet based tools play is important in enabling GEOs' driven environmental stewardship initiatives. In recent years, this role has been increasingly acknowledged around the world (Kutner, 2000; Burt & Taylor, 2003; Horton, 2004; Hawken, 2007; Dhakal, 2011). It is in this context that an important question of 'To what extent do ICTs enable grassroots actors to become significantly empowered?' is critical. This question forms the basis of discussion in this chapter.

The theoretical conjecture that links ICT-mediated empowerment and GEOs proposes that empowered grassroots actors are better equipped to undertake sustainable development initiatives. However, the ways to ascertain empowerment levels, be it those mediated by ICTs or not, remain methodologically difficult. This complexity is partly brought about by the multiple descriptions and dimensions associated with the notion of empowerment. The possibility and practicability of evaluating empowerment may thus become confusing or even controversial.

24 more pages are available in the full version of this
document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart"
button on the publisher's webpage:

Related Content

Data Quality in Data Warehouses

William E. Winkler (2009). *Encyclopedia of Data Warehousing and Mining, Second
Edition (pp. 550-555).*

www.irma-international.org/chapter/data-quality-data-warehouses/10874

Knowledge Acquisition from Semantically Heterogeneous Data

Doina Carageaand Vasant Honavar (2009). *Encyclopedia of Data Warehousing and
Mining, Second Edition (pp. 1110-1116).*

www.irma-international.org/chapter/knowledge-acquisition-semantically-heterogeneous-
data/10960

Ontologies and Medical Terminologies

James Geller (2009). *Encyclopedia of Data Warehousing and Mining, Second Edition
(pp. 1463-1469).*

www.irma-international.org/chapter/ontologies-medical-terminologies/11013

Clustering Data in Peer-to-Peer Systems

Mei Liand Wang-Chien Lee (2009). *Encyclopedia of Data Warehousing and Mining,
Second Edition (pp. 251-257).*

www.irma-international.org/chapter/clustering-data-peer-peer-systems/10829

Soft Subspace Clustering for High-Dimensional Data

Liping Jing, Michael K. Ngand Joshua Zhexue Huang (2009). *Encyclopedia of Data
Warehousing and Mining, Second Edition (pp. 1810-1814).*

www.irma-international.org/chapter/soft-subspace-clustering-high-dimensional/11064