Chapter 2
Designing and Implementing Online Collaboration Tools in West Africa

Caitlin M. Bentley
Royal Holloway University of London, UK

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter explores how the Web 2.0 principle of the Web as a platform was applied in the context of a development aid-funded project aimed to enhance online collaboration capacities of 17 Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in five West African Nations. The main issues confronted in the project related to the linear project design and a misconceptualisation of technology as an input, thus separating the design and implementation processes from the ultimate collaboration aims that are desired outcomes. It is therefore argued that technology-mediated collaboration initiatives within development cooperation contexts can draw from underlying Web 2.0 principles, but that these principles could more usefully be linked to development concepts in order to further enable critical reflection by primary stakeholders, so as to include them in all aspects of technology design. By focusing less on technology provision and more on the capacity of users to assess their own emergent needs has potentially more important long-term collaboration impacts.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-2515-0.ch002

INTRODUCTION

In 2004 and 2005, directors from 17 CSOs in five West African nations—Ghana, Mali, Niger, Senegal, and Togo—were brought together by a Canadian international development organisation, Crossroads International, for regional workshops. Following the workshops, the CSOs voiced a strong desire to continue to meet with each other and to begin collaborating at a networked level. They wanted to share knowledge, resources and coordinate their efforts, thus creating common strategies for cross-cutting sectoral and regional issues. In 2006, Crossroads launched an experimental project in order to explore distance-based means for the CSOs to continue to build these collaborative relationships. The project's objectives were: 1) to identify the connectivity, equipment, and skills necessary to participate in technology mediated means of collaboration; and 2) to guide the participating organisations through a pilot project experience, in order to identify the learning and results attributable to the project (Crossroads International, 2006).

As many of the CSOs were not connected to the Internet prior to this initiative, we had the opportunity to explore whether technology could play an incubation role for emerging collaboration networks. O'Reilly (2005) lists the first core Web 2.0 principle as "The Web as Platform." One way of envisioning this principle is to think of the Web as an interactional performance. Instead of approaching the Web in terms of what users can *get* from it, rather, consider what users can *do* with the Web. This change is commonly presented as a paradigm shift from the dichotomous depiction of a transmission-based Web 1.0 (*e.g.* reading) to an interactive Web 2.0 (*e.g.* reading and writing) (Levy, 2009; O'Reilly, 2005; Thompson, 2008). In this sense, we hoped to create a collaboration platform that could be used for a variety of collaboration outcomes.

This chapter begins by exploring how inter-organisational collaboration tends to be envisaged by CSOs, and subsequently what constitutes appropriate Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) for use within CSO collaboration networks. Following this, I explain how the project was carried out and discuss the results we obtained, in order to highlight the difficulties we faced in marrying the cultural, communicative, and technological factors that varied considerably across the CSOs. The remaining sections investigate the reasons why we had difficulty achieving our objectives, followed by an analysis of how similar initiatives could build upon or improve the notions we explored. The ultimate goal for online collaboration initiatives is not to create the 'killer app,' but to explore how the principle of creating a space on the Web for people to take and *do* however they please can be taken advantage of in the context of development. This chapter therefore has the following objectives: