

Community Informatics Strategies: A *Summary of Issues and Resources*

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2001

A. Community Informatics Strategy Content

ICTs (information and communication technologies) do change the way communities view themselves; giving communities hope, acting as a tangible sign that external agencies are helping. Nevertheless, overarching community objectives (outcomes) do make sense as the starting point for ICT strategy, ensuring that ICTs are primarily seen as a means to community ends.

Strategy can be structured around the notion of input-process-output-outcomes: inputs of ICTs and related inputs will, via various electronic delivery/digitisation processes, lead to outputs of digitised community information and services, leading to outcomes of improvements in various community economic and social indicators. In a way, this can be a kind of mission statement for the community informatics strategy.

The content of the ends/what part can relate to:

1. Outcomes sought. These, in turn, can be structured by community beneficiary groups such as residents, businesses, community institutions (government, others). Some of these could be broken down further or with specialist/target groups highlighted, e.g. 'residents' could be broken down into the old, the young, the unemployed, etc.

Alternatively, outcomes could be structured by primary community objectives such as increased employment, reduced crime/better quality of community life, increased trade, increased resident numbers, increased community identity and cohesion.

2. Outputs sought. The outputs of community informatics can be seen as secondary community objectives such as more electronic delivery of community/public services, more electronically-available of community information, more electronic availability of community learning resources, more digitised community commerce, more teleworking from within the community, more ICT-based community enterprises (these readily lend themselves to targets, e.g. 50% of all formal sector community businesses will have a Web presence by 2002)

The content of the means/how part can relate to:

3. Inputs/Processes. These mean ICT infrastructure, ICT and related skills, etc. There could be a further process objective/target in the use of recycled computers.

Targets for all categories, from inputs to outcomes, can be focused by asking 'What would success look like?'/ 'What would failure look like?'

B. Examples of Community Informatics Strategy Objectives

Blackburn with Darwen

Detailed targets/objectives for community informatics in Blackburn with Darwen, UK. Divided into four areas: e-learning, e-community, e-commerce and e-governance.

"By 2006:

- All citizens will have had the opportunity to develop significant ICT skills to help them in their work and in their personal life. They will also have access to ICT facilities to help them learn other broader, life-enhancing skills.
- All significant community and voluntary sector organisations will have had the opportunity to develop the use of the web as a means of sharing information and improving and promoting their services.
- All small and medium businesses will have had access to assistance to help them to develop a web presence and, where appropriate, to use e-commerce in their organisation.
- The Council [local government] will be able to communicate electronically with all citizens who wish to use this mechanism and a significant proportion of citizens will be able to communicate with the Council either from their homes or from community facilities." (Blackburn with Darwen strategy for the information age; <http://www.blackburn.gov.uk/regenera/commiakw.htm>)

Each of these is developed into a set of more specific objectives in the strategy document - <http://www.blackburn.gov.uk/regenera/pdf/executivesummery.pdf>

Community Grids for Learning

Objectives (mainly outputs) for community informatics:

- Lifelong learning (e.g. local media centre, ICT-mediated distance learning)
- Social justice (e.g. ICT-based service delivery, microenterprise ecommerce, ICT skills training)
- Active citizenship (e.g. edemocracy)
- Community capacity-building (e.g. ICT-based community discussion fora)
- Community information (e.g. community GIS)

(Community Grids for Learning;

<http://www.ngflscotland.gov.uk/communities/gettcon/grid/gapps.asp>)

BayNet Initiative

A mixture of outputs and outcomes:

"To promote public awareness;

to encourage shared resources;

to encourage co-ordination and co-operation within/between sectors;

to maintain/create jobs;

to encourage telecomputer consumption"

(BayNet Initiative; <http://www.city.north-bay.on.ca/bay-net2/baynet02.htm>)

Specific goals of same initiative: to create new jobs/protect existing ones by providing North Bay as a 'telecomputer hub'; to educate the community to the uses of IT; to identify potential new uses of IT in health, education, and public/private business (BayNet Initiative; <http://www.city.north-bay.on.ca/bay-net2/baynet03.htm>)

Association for Community Networking

Community network goals:

"To increase communication between local residents, so they will get to know each other and their community better, and thus strengthen their sense of local community

To increase communication between citizens and their government, encourage more involvement in local decision making, and thus improve democracy

To ensure universal access

To promote universal creation and encourage people to be creators and not just consumers

To promote diversity of perspectives and content

To promote local economic development" (Association for Community Networking; <http://www.afcn.net/resources/goals.html>)

C. Examples of Community Informatics Mission/Vision Statements

"The BayNet Initiative is based on a community strategy and an action plan which focuses on making information technology a major force driving job maintenance/creation, quality of life and service provision." (BayNet Initiative, Canada; <http://www.city.north-bay.on.ca/bay-net2/baynet03.htm>)

These three categories - jobs, quality of life, services - seemed helpful

Others:

"A community network will empower the community, through a socially-interactive information and community network, to access community services and information." (Smart Choices, Canada; <http://smart.knet.on.ca>)

"Use ICT to identify and harness local skills and talents in a collaborative partnership, sharing knowledge and trading together for a sustainable future." (Harborough ComKnet, UK; <http://www.comknet.org.uk>)

"To strengthen the community's ability to use the Internet, improve the quality of life, and enhance the economic competitiveness of local businesses." (Connected Communities in Silicon Valley, US; <http://www.redbricks.org.uk/permaculture%5Cscel/cases.htm#IV>)

"ALEX exists to bring the whole community online and by doing so to enhance citizenship, community-building and learning" (Electronic Alexandria Community, US; <http://www.alex.org/news/faq.htm>)

"The mission of the Davis Community Network is to strengthen the community by helping people understand and benefit from participation in the electronic information era." (Davis Community Network, US; <http://www.dcn.davis.ca.us/dcn/dcnorg/vision.html>)

D. Examples of Community Informatics Process/Output Statements, Dealing with Role of the 'Informatics Agency'/Community Network

A number of vision/mission statements relate more narrowly to the role of the informatics agency or the network. They tend to focus on 'means' rather than 'ends' - e.g. they are about access rather than about any broader sense of what they seek to achieve, i.e. how the community will be different as a result of ICTs. In other words, they focus on process not on outputs or outcomes. Some justify this on the basis that it is up to the community to determine the goals to be achieved once exposed to ICTs rather than trying to impose such goals from outside and prior to ICT exposure.

Examples:

"Austin Free-Net is a non-profit corporation providing public access to the Internet and emerging technologies for all Austin residents, especially those who don't have computers in their homes. The Free-Net is a community-driven project and our Web site is a virtual reflection of what we're doing in real life." (<http://www.austinfreenet.net>)

"The Vancouver Community Network strives to be an inclusive, multicultural, community-based organisation which ensures the free, accessible electronic creation and exchange of the broadest range of information, experience, ideas and wisdom." plus 10 goals that relate to access, participation, partners, etc. (<http://www.vcn.bc.ca/vcn/documents/mission.html>)

Other:

<http://www.dcn.davis.ca.us/dcn/dcnorg/vision.html> - focus mainly on process, with only a generic statement of outcomes

<http://www.scn.org/ip/commnet/principles.html> - the principles underpinning the Seattle Community Network

E. Other Community Informatics Issues

1. The process of strategy creation:

1a. - How should a strategy be formulated: particularly having input into (hence, ownership of) the strategy from community stakeholders; and the validity of an iterative/prototyping approach to strategy - putting some kit and high-speed links into the community to see what benefits and objectives members themselves develop through use.

1b. - How should the strategy be used/promoted: e.g. as a tool for defining territory; as a tool for eliciting further funds from governmental and other sources.

There are a lot of guides, toolkits, etc. for community networking at:

<http://www.makingthenetwork.org/>

2. Community champions. Who, within the community, is going to give leadership to ICT efforts? Can this be a collective activity?

3. Wiring the community: who pays? Options - identify high demand institutions (schools, hospitals, local govt. institutions, community centres) and encourage private firms to wire to and around these; community-based wiring (e.g. via NGO/local govt) that then sells capacity to local residents; external funder approached on the back of a particular community purpose/project.

F. Online Community Informatics Resources

F1. CI RESOURCES: Background/support materials

<http://www.makingthenetwork.org> - guide to getting communities connected; routemap; avoiding the technology trap; toolkits; evaluation surveys, etc.

<http://databases.si.umich.edu/cfdocs/community/mission.cfm> - links to community networking vision, mission and goal statements and to policy and legal documents

<http://www.outreach.missouri.edu/moexpress/guides/moexp5-1.htm> - the importance and principles of establishing a vision for community informatics

<http://www.ciof.org/policy/policy-agenda.htm> - justification for community informatics initiatives

<http://www.ciof.org/toolkits/policy/ciof-policy.htm> - 10-point guide to building policy support for community networking

<http://www.ciof.org/resources/SWOT.html> - SWOT analysis for community networking

http://www.ciof.org/toolkits/policy/chabran-point/ciof-policypoint_files/ - PowerPoint presentation on community networking

F2. CI RESOURCES: General links pages

<http://www.afcn.net/resources/resources.html> - AFCN links page

<http://www.afcn.net/world.html> - international community network activities

<http://virtualcommunities.start4all.com/> - links to all aspects of virtual communities (not just community-based initiatives)

F3. CI RESOURCES: UK-specific

<http://www.redbricks.org.uk/permaculture%5Cscel/cases.htm#IV> - Redbricks Online: residents' initiative in Hulme, Manchester; includes details of leased line access approach

<http://www.comknet.org.uk> - vision for the Harborough 'Community Commerce and Knowledge Network' project

F4. CI RESOURCES: Other

<http://www.conectando.org.sv/English/Strategy/Summary.htm> - Strategy for Building a Learning Society in El Salvador

<http://www.ngflscotland.gov.uk/communities/gettcon/plan> - overlaps with www.makingthenetwork.org