GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2018

Community Networks

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This edition of GISWatch came into being alongside a brand new baby boy. Welcome to the world, Ronan Diga!

Community networks as a key enabler of sustainable access: A review

Michael J. Oghia
https://linkedin.com/in/mikeoghia

One of the most significant problems vexing the information society is the lack of a holistic perspective when it comes to technical and policy development. Take, for example, the issue of access to information. Often it is considered solely from a rights-based perspective – i.e. that access to information is a right that is often hindered or impeded in some way, such as by a governance or policy decision. Likewise, from technical protocol and standards development to content-related issues like hate speech, actors tend to organise among stakeholder groups and conduct their operations in silos. Although the multistakeholder model is championed as a way to alleviate this tendency, there has yet to be a silver bullet that fully addresses the lack of holistic vision that is necessary to govern an inherently collaborative and global resource such as the internet while also addressing its fundamental challenges.

If we revisit the example of access to information, we can see how this has played out with one particular and lingering problem: sustainability. Democracy is built on the ability to access information, which is why access to information is such an important pillar of the United Nations Sustainable Development Agenda[1] – along with the fact that access to information facilitates myriad social, educational and economic gains as well. At the same time, however, how can individuals – particularly those four billion or so people who are not connected to the internet – be expected to access information digitally when they not only face significant barriers to connectivity, such as poor or non-existent infrastructure and/or the lack of user capabilities, but the electrical backbone necessary to even *power* internet infrastructure is often lacking?

In a chapter I wrote titled "Community networks as a key enabler of sustainable access", which was published in the Dynamic Coalition on Community Connectivity (DC3) 2017 report[2] for the Internet Governance Forum (IGF), I described how connecting another billion people to the internet will require more than an internet-connected device; such an endeavour requires significant long-term vision, investment in both technology and human capacity building, as well as communities committed to ensuring their access is useful, meaningful and sustainable. For this to occur, however, such communities must be invested in the process of connectivity – from energy access, to network set-up and maintenance – as well as leading this process based on their own needs, context, and developmental challenges.

Community networks are vital to catalysing this investment – not in terms of financial investment, but in terms of community development. A key shift in thinking is necessary for this to happen, however, in part because

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1 https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/development-agenda

2 Oghia, M. J. (2017). Community networks as a key enabler of sustainable access. In L. Belli (Ed.), *Community Networks: The Internet by the People, for the People. Official Outcome of the UN IGF Dynamic Coalition on Community Connectivity*. https://bibliotecadigital.fgv.br/dspace/bitstream/handle/10438/19401/Community networks - the Internet by the people%2C for the people.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

the challenge of generating reliable energy to power infrastructure continues to pose a significant barrier to lowering costs and the ability to scale. I argued that one way this can change is by replacing the focus that sustainable development places on the role and proliferation of information and communications technologies (ICTs) with the concept of "sustainable access" – a term I coined that broadly refers to the ability for any user to connect to the internet and then stay connected over time. Sustainable access encompasses various aspects of the relationship between technology, society and the environment – everything from infrastructure, energy and the availability of radio spectrum, to the recyclability of ICTs, how internet-connected devices are manufactured, and even space junk. The concept is meant to address a larger gap in current practices *vis-à-vis* development and ICTs – i.e. that facilitating access to the internet and expanding connectivity in general must be seen as a holistic, interconnected process involving multiple stakeholders.

The core thesis of this perspective is that internet technologies are largely unsustainable at present. This relates to overall lack of design consideration of ICTs for sustainability (such as recycling or energy scaling), but also reflects serious challenges such as the exponential growth of data use and generation. Because of this, we cannot legitimately discuss internet access without addressing sustainability – even though, conversely, ICT sustainability is largely viewed as a future concern, not a present one, and is therefore largely overlooked.

This is not the case for community networks, however, which generally operate in rural or remote areas that often do not have access to electrical grids, depending on the region. This point is emphasised in the chapter I wrote by outlining the role that community networks can play in catalysing sustainable access, and focusing on efforts and initiatives used by such networks to electrify their infrastructure and ensure their energy sustainability. It also addresses how energy, the subsequent costs of infrastructure (both initial investments and upgrades), and the inability to recycle equipment or use it over the long term can significantly hinder the sustainability and growth of a community network – as well as its ability to scale.

The chapter concludes by stressing how if we truly want digital technology and the myriad emerging technological innovations that are beginning to scale to become ubiquitous, sustainability must be addressed more prominently as a core component and within the design of ICTs. We cannot disregard or downplay sustainability with the hope that the inherent problems with our digitised world disappear – time will only exacerbate them. On the contrary, it is clear that there are unexplored and underemphasised synergies and areas of collaboration between the energy and ICT sectors, which undoubtedly include the internet governance community, that could better address sustainability as a whole. Therefore, since sustainability and access are intrinsically connected, the role of community networks in ushering in the next phase of the internet's development should not be underestimated. Instead, it will benefit anyone seeking to make the internet more sustainable to offer more financial, technical, policy, legal and regulatory support to community networks, and ensure that such initiatives are viable, sustainable and successful.

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THE 43 COUNTRY REPORTS included in this year's Global Information Society Watch (GISWatch) capture the different experiences and approaches in setting up community networks across the globe. They show that key ideas, such as participatory governance systems, community ownership and skills transfer, as well as the "do-it-yourself" spirit that drives community networks in many different contexts, are characteristics that lend them a shared purpose and approach.

The country reports are framed by eight thematic reports that deal with critical issues such as the regulatory framework necessary to support community networks, sustainability, local content, feminist infrastructure and community networks, and the importance of being aware of "community stories" and the power structures embedded in those stories.

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