

Community Regeneration And Ict: Is This The Answer?

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Abstract

Information and communications technology is migrating from traditional businesses into the wider community where the potential for societal harm is heightened. This paper explores ethical issues related to the introduction of ICT into inner cities through regeneration. A case study is used to highlight issues that emerge from such projects. Results from the case suggest that focussing ICT may be inappropriate. Findings from the study indicate that a coherent plan is needed involving all stakeholder groups from the community. The emerging notion of engagement is suggested as an alternative approach to the passive delivery of information or data.

Keywords

Information Systems Ethics, Social Impact, Inner Cities, Soft Systems Methodology, Multiview and Stakeholders

INTRODUCTION

Information and communication technology (ICT) is pervading society in a wide ranging manner, 'information technology is increasingly being used in systems with potential for societal impacts' (Wood-Harper et al 1996). Indeed, information technology is moving away from traditional areas such as large organisations and businesses and into the wider community. There exists real risk to society if the introduction of such technology into communities is not handled with due consideration, 'many technical professionals have viewed social concerns as peripheral' (Phil Agre 1996 in Kling 1998). Given that little is known about the effects of such interventions this paper will use a project from within the GEMISIS 2000 scheme to illustrate some of the diverse issues involved. The research study used an ethically based conceptual framework to explore the problem situation. The framework combines Soft Systems Methodology (Checkland, Checkland & Scholes 1981,1989,1990), stakeholder analysis and assumption surfacing (Mitroff & Linstone 1993) and Normative ethical theories. Interested readers may consider for instance (Wood-Harper et al 1996, 1999), the findings presented within this paper are from an initial reading of the situation and do not represent a full exploration of the conceptual

framework. However, a research protocol was devised to implement the conceptual framework through the Action Case the research method. The first phase of this protocol was to map the terrain or gain a first reading of the situation. Elements from stakeholder analysis and SSM were used to aid this process. Whilst this was originally to be carried out at the being of the study, the research subject was in a continued state of flux. Which led to the process of reading, or re-reading, the situation to continue for the full length of the study. The findings from this process are judged to be important and form the basis of the empirical work for this paper. It is important to note that this paper does not seek to provide general statements based on the findings there in. It is hoped that this paper will provide a basis, were by others may consider their findings in relation to those presented here. (Checkland 1991, Morgan 1983,86). The research is based upon one subject or study area because of the researchers belief that the area of concern requires more exploration from a neutral point of view. An exploration of the area of concern can best be achieved through in depth research; this coupled with practical constraints has resulted in the adoption of a single case study. Therefore, the adoption of a single case allows efforts to be concentrated upon a deep understanding. However, this is at the expense of more generalisable results.

THE RESEARCH STUDY

The research study is based in the Salford area of the UK. The study centres on the Little Houlton Community Campus initiative that arose from the corporate policy unit of Salford City Council. Members of the research team together with the corporate policy unit believed that while community input was vital for the long-term success of the project, there was a need to provide a beginning to the project. This was to provide impetus to the project and encourage participation from the community. The study lasted through this first phase of the project. The objectives of the initiative dealt with the community's physical isolation and social exclusion, through information and communications technology. And through community integration, by utilising the young and technically minded to bring technology and information to the whole community, see the security scenario below. The main target groups were: long term unemployed, youth, women returners and other socially excluded groups. The benefits or impacts were to be both social and economic in nature.

The first outcome of the initiative was the realisation of a series of projects to tackle the information society agenda. The firsts ideas concerning a business centre, arts and leisure, information delivery, the drop-in-centre or "virtual café" brought together different people and made the whole idea more concrete and possible. The ideas were expressed as three or four key elements that a community may need to enter the information society. However, before the project could begin a source of funding was needed. Bids were drafted and targeted towards communities that could attract outside investment. A European social regeneration bid was successful for the district of Little Houlton, which provided the necessary funds to realise the ideas. From this the original thoughts and ideas were turned into practical and operational projects.

From within the corporate policy unit the project became known as the Little Houlton Community Campus (or LHCC). The LHCC was to:

- raise awareness of technology and the benefits of information

- provide access to the technology together with the knowledge to use it
- and deliver content to give purpose to the newly found “awareness and access”

This was to be achieved through three essential project elements: Community Information, Business Centre and Access Centre. However, each element could be housed, be physically located, in a number of different sites throughout the community. The physical dispersal of each element throughout the community was not seen as a potential problem by either the corporate policy unit or by the other groups involved, due to the site being a “tight geographical zone.” During one visit to the community site a member of the corporate policy unit considered the site and remarked that a handkerchief could be thrown over the site and touch each of the facilities. One reason articulated for the need for different sites was that some people within the community might not be comfortable going to a library or especially a school. The project included:

- *Information Delivery* – to provide access to relevant information to improve the quality of life for all citizens of the community via suitably trained information officers and front-of-house facilities, remote access points, work-placed or home-based workstations and through cable television and phone services.
- *Business Centre* – to provide a business focused centre to develop awareness, knowledge, skills and expertise in information and communications technology. The business centre was seen as income generating and as a platform for training and job creation, run by local people for local people and businesses.
- *Community Wing* – located within the community school was to allow access to education and training resources through telematics to all citizens, to improve their life style and foster community business. The Community wing was also the base for a youth and community facility.
- *Community School* – to provide access to ICT and the information society to pupils and staff, to enable them to develop the necessary skills and technological knowledge. To be delivered through a network room and a further two independent facilities.
- *Library* – providing access to all citizens' relevant information to improve the life style, through three services: a one-stop-shop, homework club and a technological solution to the library reference services.

Facility	Public Informa tion	Education	Access	Employment Creation
Business Centre		*	*	*
Community Wing		*	*	
School		*		
One Stop Shop	*			
Library	*	*	*	
Kiosk	*			
Medical Centre	*			
Salford College		*		
Youth & Community			*	

Table 1: The Campus Model

From this background and initial discussions, a first analysis of the overall situation, this was presented to the corporate policy unit. Outcomes from the document and this stage of the study included an initial rich picture, stakeholder map and a root definition for the initiative. The document also indicated the complexity of views and stakes stemming from various interested parties.

The Initial Root Definition was:

“A community based, City of Salford operated, information services provision system, to enable community members to manage their lives and fulfil their potential, by providing the right information at the right time in the right place via the right delivery method and by raising awareness, providing access and content.”

The analysis below demonstrates that there are divergent issues within such community-based projects that require a diversity of thought and approaches. The following examples of the diverse views arose from discussions within the various community groups, including the Little Hulton Information Development Organisation (LIDO) and a number of community officers.

Structural or Physical Changes

The physical and structural impact of the information technology was seen by some of the participants of the LIDO group to be very important, that is the changes required to physical buildings to allow members of the community to have access to information and communications technology. During one such meeting a plan of the community school was presented to the group, detailing the room layout and showing available entrances and exits. Discussions followed concerning the need to alter a number of rooms to accommodate the computing facilities, including workstations and also the necessary wiring for network access and power. Other discussions dealt with keeping the equipment secure from theft and to allow access by other members of the community. Also at this point the use of the new technology or computing rooms was considered. Members of the school attempted to match the physical layout of the rooms to the different scholarly needs, considering group sizes, their activities and the school curriculum. An extension to the community library was another structural change to the community initiated by the introduction of ICT. This extension was to provide access to information technology to the whole community and to provide a homework club aimed at school children. Changes to other community facilities, including the health center, were also needed to accommodate and utilize information technology and the community campus services.

Funding

Introducing information technology into the community is an expensive exercise; therefore monetary issues cannot be overlooked. As mentioned above the LHCC was to be partly funded through a European social regeneration initiative but other funding was essential for the viability of the project. This additional or ‘matched’ funding came from a variety of sources, needing careful balancing and management. Various sources of funding included:

- the Social Regeneration Budget (further complicated by being divided into revenue and capital sections and by the inclusion of another district)
- European Regional Development Fund

- Capital Challenge
- Local Authority
- the Private Sector
- Salford University (with its partners in the GEMISIS project)

These funding arrangements were spread across the LHCC project elements with different funds either supplying the bulk or the matched part of the funding. This was further complicated due to the different timescales and constraints attached to each fund. Some sources of funding were to only fund the actual ICT equipment and its installation. However, from the above discussion on structural changes that are needed to accommodate the technology, other sources were needed to fund capital expenditure. Funding was also needed for an information officer, seen as vital as a buffer between technology and community members who perhaps lack the technical skills to seek valuable information. This again requires a different and on-going source of funding.

LHCC Project Element	Source(s) of Funding	Timescales
One Stop Shop (including the information officer & kiosks)	Challenge Fund Social Regeneration Budget (3)	1998/99 1997/98, 98/99, 99/00, 02
Telematics	Capital Challenge	1999/00
Business Telematics	Social Regeneration Budget (3) European Regional Development Fund	1999/00 2000/01, 02

Table 2: Example of funding complexity

During discussions with the members of corporate policy unit and others concerning funding arrangements for the information technology and social regeneration projects, a number of reoccurring themes emerged, as follows:

- The inclusion of information technology projects within bids was seen as a way to ensure funding for other schemes, information technology was a “hot issue.” The participants believed that the funding agencies, including European agencies, were proactively looking for technological projects and thus by including technology in bids the success rate could be improved. Examples articulated suggested that were non-technological project bids had failed, the inclusion of information technology within a subsequent resubmission could often result in the funding of the project.
- The measurement of quality by the funding agencies seemed to be numerically based. A member of the corporate policy unit referred to this as counting “boxes and bottoms.” In other words quality was to be measured by counting the number of computer workstations and the number of people using them. These measurements also formed part of the constraints for the continued funding of the projects. This was seen as a limiting factor to the development of the project. Positive outcomes (for example job creation) from the use of the ICT were seen as more important than just the maximisation of the number of terminals within the community.

From the discussions above and the complexity of the funding aspect of the project, it should be no surprise that the complexity of the interlocked and overlapping bids

became a source of many problems within the corporate policy unit and other agencies.

Temporal

The management of time was also crucial to the potential success of the LHCC intervention, partly due to the various funding bodies assessment criteria, as stated above. However, perhaps a more important aspect of the timing of the project was the need to keep the members of the community interested in the venture, whose support was vital. Indeed, one of the first views expressed during the discussions with members of the corporate policy unit, LIDO and City of Salford Members was the need for a “quick win” project. This was seen as important to keep the people of Little Hulton interested in the project as a whole and to develop ownership of the project. A sense of being involved and creating the solutions that people want in order to develop long term use of the new services. There was also a general feeling that the information society agenda was about the future, “testing and building models for the future and future generations” was seen as important, however, “the community has problems now.” Young people leaving school under qualified, young single mothers giving birth to unwanted children and people with aspirations feeling there was no way of achieving them, were all sited as problems of here and now. Whilst the information society only offered solutions for the future. Indeed one view from the corporate policy unit suggested that the information society agenda does not offer solutions rather it poses only questions. Further to this the overall progress of the project was seen as too slow, any positive outcomes from the project were seen as far off whilst the funding constraints required positive results in the short term.

Social

During discussions with the corporate policy unit, LHCC project groups and other parties a number of issues or ideas emerged that were social in nature, they concerned the social well being of the community. One of these issues, which was related to the structural concerns, was how to provide adults with access to the information technology within the school site whilst keeping the pupils, staff and school property secure. There is a need to balance the rights and concerns of one section of a community with another. The adults have a right to access to information and information technology but this must be balanced with the rights of the school pupils and staff to feel and be secure and the right of the community to prevent damage or theft of school property. Amongst many of the participants within the various groups, there was a view that access to information technology should be secondary to the need for social inclusion and cohesion within the community. There should be opportunities for people to come together in a social setting where information technology ‘was available’ but not paramount. The vision was to provide services that use information and communications technology for social inclusion rather than social isolation. One idea based on this was to present the ‘drop-in-centre’ as a place where people could drop in for a coffee and ‘if’ they wanted to gain access to the community campus services. Another was to use the community wing of the school as a venue for social occasions whilst also allowing access to community information services. During similar discussions on social and community welfare a community officer provided the group with a document that contained the rights of community members as seen by community and council officers. Examples include, all community members have a right to employment and all community members have a

right to feel and be secure. A member of the corporate policy unit first ventured one of the most important ideas concerning social issues. This idea was that no matter how well the technological aspects of the project were managed and implemented, there was a need to create a better social environment to engender a change in attitude within the community. "People need to feel better about themselves and where they are living [their environment] before they become a full member of the community and take part in the information society." The planting of trees and painting of fences was seen as important as the laying of cables and the installation of computer workstations. The provision of better physical communication links within the community and the provision of better local shopping and services were also considered to be vital to the regeneration of the community.

Word of Mouth

An important issue that was raised within the various community groups was the notion of information diffusion via 'word of mouth'. It was recognised that while information technology could provide some information to some members of the community the vast amount of information diffusion would be, for the foreseeable future, via word of mouth. With this in mind community officers devised a number of plans to assist in the diffusion of information throughout the community. These included:

- The support of community representatives, recognising that 'community representatives come into contact with a great many people, both on an informal basis and at public meetings, ' to 'help them become real live carriers of accurate information;'
- The community participation network, which co-ordinates community officers and representatives

Whilst recognising the role of 'word of mouth' for the diffusion of information throughout the community other methods were not dismissed, rather a range of delivery methods was considered including: word of mouth; press; newsletters; information technology and community/officer networks. Information technology was not seen as a replacement for other information delivery methods. Rather, ICT was seen as part of a co-ordinated community based information strategy, information technology was, however, seen as an enabler to in this co-ordinating process.

ENGAGEMENT

During discussions within the various community campus groups, the corporate policy unit and within the further community, the researcher began to consider the role of information, its delivery and use within the community. A notion of engagement emerged prompted by a number of discussions with the leader of the corporate policy unit and a community health information officer. The idea stemmed from an agreement that the provision of information through ICT was not sufficient for the aims of the community campus project. People behind the community campus project wanted to target two groups of people, those who had an information need and those who had a problem but could not translate this into an information need. Churchman (1971) ventured this idea with reference to a library of science; the library of science is referred to as a body of all knowledge. Through work based upon inquiry systems, this notion of a library of science was questioned. Importantly, one of these questions considered the case where a person could not pose an appropriate question or

did not know what question to ask. It was believed that those with an information need could use ICT, with training/assistance, to meet or fulfil their needs. For those who were not at that stage there was a need to get them involved in information. With this in mind together with the way in which the community information officers targeted community members, a notion of engagement was formed. This is the engagement of community members in information resulting in effective action being taken. From the corporate policy unit's perspective two strands of information were considered, information describing public services and lifestyle or information based aspirations. The first strand was to deal with immediate practical solutions via council services, examples problems articulated included a leaking roof or rats in the back garden. The lifestyle strand was to provide information to allow members of the community to develop themselves or meet their aspirations, for example career guidance or training and educational guidance. It was the lifestyle strand that seemed more appropriate to the notion of engagement. An example was outlined based upon a person wishing to improve their employability but not taking advantage of the information services detailing education and training. The question was asked how do we engage this person in information. A number of possible answers to this question were ventured, of which two are presented here:

- The use of information co-ordinators and other actors within the community, including health visitors etc, to engage people in information was seen as an extension to the community information strategy. In this role community workers would provide information to people they came into contact with and attempt to engage the people in that information.
- The way in which information was presented to members of the community was another possible approach to engaging the community in information. It was believed that by supplying information and then directing people toward taking action in the local community was important. An example of this was delivering information concerning health and fitness and then directing people toward local sports groups and facilities.

Central to the notion of engagement is turning information into action. If a member of the community has access to information providing a possible solution to their needs then he/she should be able to act on that information without hindrance. This brings us back to the rights for the community and its members developed by community workers. Those rights need to be reconciled with the rights based on ethical justice (Mason et al 1995) and ethical principles (Churchman). The right to have access to relevant information, through the ethical distribution of information technology must lead to the fulfilment of the rights and aspirations of the community and all its members. Engagement cannot be achieved through training initiatives that only address the technical nature of ICT. If people do not see information as a resource, information that has potential to improve their lives, they will not engage. Therefore, the first step to reaching in information or informed society must be the engagement of all people in information. By all people we mean those who recognise that they have an information problem and those who have yet to make that connection.

CONCLUSION

Findings from this study suggest that while ICT certainly has a role in the economic and social regeneration of communities, ICT is not hold dominant part in such projects. Moreover, ICT may only offer solutions in the long term whilst certain

communities have immediate problems. The diversity of issues that the introduction of ICT into communities raises cannot be ignored. Whilst the exact issues raised here may not appear in other situations or communities, there will be a wide range of issues that are beyond the areas of technology and information. The implications of these findings question the role of ICT and IT professionals within such projects, who should be running or controlling such ventures and what role does ICT play in such projects need to be investigated further. Whatever the answers to these questions are, there can be no doubt that introducing ICT into an existing physical community impacts upon a wide range of issues. The idea of engagement has been proposed as a possible alternative to a technological approach to the introduction of ICT into physical communities.

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