iREACH Project in Cambodia (IDRC funded, 2006-2010)

Goal:
Alleviate poverty and promote empowerment through the creation of two 'eCommunities' that would evolve into community owned enterprises.

Location:
Two poor rural areas, Kep located by the sea and a fishing/farming community, and Kamchai Mear (KCM) a farming community with a rural university in the area.

Core Means:
Enabling supported access to ICTs at ten community 'hubs', each connected to the internet with a Community Facilitator, and all connected in a Broadband Wide Area network, covering a population of about 50,000 people.

Physical Infrastructure:
- Satellite internet connection from the central Pilot HQ,
- A broadband wireless network using 20 metre towers, using early WIMAX technology.
- PCs in each Hub (several in the HQ), and a wireless network around the hub.
- Later, 200 XO laptops were added for children, from the OLPC programme.
- Mainly solar power.

Support and Research Infrastructure:
- Local Project Management by a national NGO in Kep, and by the CSUK university in Kamchai Mear, including a Manager and Research Coordinator
- Using Participatory Development Communication and PRAs, a needs assessment was prepared, covering all communication issues;
- A Baseline study was completed by means of a Household survey
- A participatory monitoring and evaluation system, software supported (SPEAK)
- 'Product development' research and analysis
- Outcome studies, using interviews and focus groups, with extensive volunteer participation.

Community Infrastructure:
- Local Community Management Committee elected in two part process involving thousands of villagers (core of the local CBO emerging at the end)
- Each Hub has a local community facilitator, in a community-provided premises.
- Three Content developers, also local people

Services Provided:
- Supported internet access at all 10 hubs (in each of two pilots) for all uses
- Computer literacy training at each pilot
- Live Thematic Expert presentations, interactive and distributed (agriculture, health etc.)
- Virtual Village Meetings, broadband audio/video-conference: 'Village to Village'
- Low-cost telephony 'Family link-up' mainly international to family and friends
- Video programme production (with local volunteers)
- Provision of market prices for farmers
- Audio programme production with local volunteers broadcast mainly by loudspeaker
- Mobile internet and video programmes
- School student use of 200 OLPC laptops for educational and learning purposes

Outputs: Services
• Early 2008 - August 2010, over 35,000 individual villagers (over 12,000 female) used services in both pilots, making a total of almost 170,000 visits. Almost half the population.
• Number of users grew by 42% between mid 2008 early 2010 and is still growing.
• Over 50 Live Thematic sessions
• Audio programmes: 304 topics in Kep and 114 topics in KCM, including volunteers,
• Over 100 mobile video shows. 41 in KCM and 68 in Kep
• international publications in various contexts

Outputs/Outcomes: Community Institutions:
• Elected Management Committees, led by women, trained to manage and run a community enterprise, now generating and administering small income, and leading the Initiatives
• Moves to create a CBO in place, as a community-owned enterprise
• Local research teams, supported by volunteers, capable of, and experienced in, initiating impact assessment studies using a variety of research methodologies for social analysis;
• Social communications with outside by the villagers, reducing of a sense of loss;
• Better informed villagers on events outside their areas;
• Improved farming and health management life-skills;
• Greater awareness of and attention to gender issues;

Sustainability:
• Inclusion in the Commune level plans, with ongoing in-kind support and modest grant
• Volunteer support for Hubs as community facilitators
• Income generating services, to better-off households, businesses, service substitution
• Mainstreaming through universal service policy in telecommunications
• Ongoing grants etc

What the Villagers think:
Random survey in Feb 2010, 500 people, equal gender: Did iREACH contribute to:
• Education and knowledge: 95%
• Improved relationship within families: 80%
• Improved relationships within villages: 65%.
• Improved relationships between villages 62%
• Economic development opportunities: 59%
• Improved health: 58%
• Knowledge and preservation of cultural and natural heritage: 44%
• Governance, institutions, and security: 40%
• Improved the situation of women: 38%
• Empowerment in general: 37%.
• Living standards for the poorest: 34%.

Focus groups indicated that iREACH has become part of the social infrastructure, driving many positive changes, including new forms of engagement within and between different parts of the communities, especially more marginalised. iREACH's encouragement of volunteering - from assisting with its research activities to preparation of audio programmes and passing on computer skills to community members - has enhanced positive social capital.

Also showed stronger focus on empowerment, particularly for women. Being better informed, they were in a stronger position to effect improvements in their quality of life: Key contributing factors: education about domestic violence, providing meeting places at the hubs, and encouraging other activities supporting self-confidence of many villagers. Some references to villagers being more empowered to engage with people in authority, e.g. report issues to the police and commune council members.