Adding a mobile component to the E-Society project in Apac?

Draft field report, Apac 3-5 of June 2009, Johan Hellström (johan@upgraid.org)

The purpose of the trip was to learn more about the E-Society and to find out if the project would benefit from adding a mobile component, i.e if a mobile phone application or SMS tool would improve service delivery and community participation in Apac District.

What I’ve read and knew beforehand...

E-Society is a project with financial and technical support from Hivos, IICD and SPIDER, run by WOUGNET and I-Network in partnership with local government and civil society organisations in Apac District. The board of trustees consist of a group of influential people representing the local government, civil society and private sector in Apac.

In short, the overall purpose of E-Society is “to have an improved service delivery and community participation through Local Government, Private sector and Civil Society collaboration in Apac” (http://www.iicd.org/projects/uganda-e-society) with the specific objectives to improve communication between district, the town council/sub-counties, civil society organisations and citizens through the use of ICT (internet, radio, newspapers). A key pillar in the project is the establishment and use of community information centres in Apac town and in three (out of 15) sub-counties in Apac District.

What I saw and heard...

Apac is the main town in Apac District. Basically a roundabout with an empty bill board in its middle and houses spreading out in all four directions. It is a quite, nice town where there are more bars than cars. The main exports from the district are cotton, beef and fish. There is a lot of water in the area which makes Apac lush and green (but also a hang out for mosquitoes – Apac is in-famous for its high prevalence of malaria). Apparently there are four internet cafés in town, though I only saw two and entered one (it had a printer, photocopier and two computers sharing a MTN GPRS-modem). I saw four mobile base stations whereof the network of MTN is the most popular (it also proved to be the best one). The generator of Zain burnt up on the night of arrival making my Zain number useless.

I visited two of E-Society four information centres, the one in Apac town and another one in Akokoro sub-county:

**Apac District Information Centre**

A big white hall, with a huge pile of newspapers in one corner and seven new desktop computers with flat screens evenly spread out along the walls. They were all shut down, not because of electricity but because there were no customers. According to Joan, working as an administrator and trainer at the information centre, internet was down and had been so for the last eight months. UTL being the provider but it was unclear if the interruption was due to them or a non paid bill (project coordinator later said it was an unpaid bill and that he waited for IICD to send money). Joan told me that electricity used to be on and off and despite having a brand new diesel generator they never used it because there was no budget for diesel.

A man came in and started to read this weeks newspapers. A lady from Kubere Information Centre also dropped by and borrowed a projector for some ongoing training for women entrepreneurs in a building across the road. Otherwise, for the two hours I was there waiting for the coordinator to
show up, there were no other visitors. Looking in the visitors book, people seemed to be happy with the facilities and the ICT training but a majority asked for more instructors and more computers.

**Akokoro Community Information Centre, Akokoro Sub-County**

40 minutes outside Apac, on the way back to the ferry and road leading to Kampala, I made a quick, unannounced stop at the information centre in Akokoro Sub-County. It was locked when I arrived but after a few minutes a lady came and opened up. I asked why the place was locked and she said it was because they had no training at the moment. According to the visitors book they had training roughly twice a month. Three computers, two solar panels, three batteries, and a GPRS-modem made the place. On rainy or grey days they ran the gears using a diesel generator. The lady started the three computers, of which all indicated that the virus definitions were long overdue. She showed me the material they had on different topics (basically a power point presentation with links to chosen articles and film clips on topics like agriculture, health and ICT4D). I asked the lady if they produced any content themselves and sent it to Apac and she said it had never happened. On the wall they had glued last year's budget for Akokoro sub-county.

**The centres and the project**
The information centres provide a physical place where citizens can come and get ICT-training (in group) and access information (internet, newspapers). Everything is free to utilise and the users range from youth, women, farmers, partner organisations, and local government officials. However, in Apac town the officials do not turn up any more since the Internet link is down. Apparently the district headquarters is not connected either except the Resident District Commissioner that has a connection in his office.

Talking to staff, users and citizens in Apac, it became clear that most efforts and interventions have been focused on capacity training in ICT targeting the nearby community/ies. Most of the people I talked to (a random sample in Apac town and in neighbouring villages) had heard about E-Society but could not really explain what it was all about. The ones that could offer an answer said that “E-Society is a NGO offering ICT training”. The governance component (service delivery, participation, interaction) was not known of. “E-Society is good ... [but]... the idea and content is not well packaged”, said the coordinator at NGO Link Forum and staff from TAACC said that “the project is not for the common man” and that it needs to be re-launched to gain momentum.

Another major component in the project is the community radio station Radio Apac. It is a commercial entity, owned by chairman of E-Society and Apac Town Mayor, Jimmy Okello. To make a brief announcement using the station you have to pay roughly 4000 Ushs (2US$). Discount is given if it is a death announcement (usually half price according to Jake who works at the station). To run an one hour show costs in between 200’-400’000 Ushs (100-200US$). Many of the local organisations (like NGO Link Forum and CADOVIC) run weekly shows and the number of people calling in is high. According to Jake at the station, the number of callers are sometimes so high that there is no chance to check the SMS's sent to the same number. E-Society sometimes use the radio to promote the information centres and inform about up-coming training.

What I think...

...about e-governance in general

ICT (here computers and internet) is by its nature very appropriate for the capture, processing, storage, organisation and presentation of data and information. e-governance facilitates openness and transparency and creates a freer flow of information between departments, institutions and layers within government. ICT also facilitates a freer flow of information between government and citizens and opens up for opportunities for citizens to participate more directly in influencing decisions that effect them. However, to make this happen in reality, on the ground, in a developing
A country in a rural setting is hard. E-Society constitutes a great example of how hard it is.

**...about E-Society**

If E-Society is supposed to be “an incubator for a workable e-Society model at the district level that can and should be rolled out in other districts” (http://www.i-network.or.ug/news/what-is-new/the-apac-e-governance-programme.html) there is a long way to go. Briefly, this project seems to have fallen into every pothole there is on the ICT4D highway. The ICT4D mantra usually goes something like this: ensure local ownership and appropriation, focus on people, not technology, develop local content, ensure language and cultural pertinence, and ensure participation. However, looking at E-Society it is more like this:

- a project captured by local patronage rather than owned by the community
- focus is on technology and ICT training and not people, collaboration and interaction
- content is not a priority and the main language of the few available documents and material are all in English (and nothing in Lango/Luo, which is the local language spoken)
- no clear, innovative business model in sight that will sustain the project
- people in Apac do not understand what the project is really about

Visiting Apac and the project raised a lot of questions. What are the real needs of the citizens in Apac and what would make them come to the resource centres in the first place? Why would they go the district information centre to get information about the local government if the district headquarters are located across the street? Looking at the expenses, i.e. salaries, cost of internet connection, electricity, licences (yes, the computers all run on Microsoft Windows), maintenance etc, makes me worried. Who will cover for these costs once the funders are moving on? Also, dwelling a bit on the ownership issue and board of trustees. All but one in the board are middle-aged men who apparently receive 60'000 Ushs (30US$) in sitting allowance for every meeting conducted. Given the structure of the board, there is an imbalance in power: both within the board (elected men with certain power versus civil society representatives who should act as a watch dog of the elected versus private sector representatives with understandably private interests), and between the board and the secretariat (who is running the day-to-day operations).

**...about using mobile phones in governance in general**

The potential of using mobile phones for service delivery and participation is huge and mobile telephony is often seen as the panacea. We have witnessed that mobile phones help to create an informative, connected, innovative, participative and converging society all over the world. Also, looking at Uganda it does make sense to use mobile phones for good governance. Why?

- Access and penetration rate is ever increasing and even more have access through shared usage and ownership
- Reach – mobiles can reach areas where there is no other ICT infrastructure
- Adoption and ease of use
- Interaction and possibility for a two-way dialogue as opposed to radio, brochures, posters, public speeches etc
- Costs – relatively low cost compared to PC/internet technology. Affordability is still a concern though.

There is a very wide range of potential governance related services which can be delivered and communicated via mobile phones, including services relating to health care, agriculture, education, employment, transportation law and order, tax, judicial and legal systems, etc. Mobile payments like MTN's Mobile Money and Zain's ZAP, opens up for even greater opportunities and possibilities for transactions (bill/loan/fine payments and mobile payments for a variety of public services like transport and school fees).
...about mobile phone usage in Apac

Mobile phone ownership and usage in Apac most likely differ some from other regions in Uganda due to poverty, context and geographic isolation. It is hard to do estimates without proper research but comparing the national figures from UCC (penetration rate 26%, mobile coverage 80%, mobile expenditure of disposable income 49%, this figure from Research ICT Africa), the figures for Apac would likely be much less on penetration, more or less the same on coverage and higher on mobile expenditure of disposable income. I saw very few young persons and hardly any women with mobile phones. The men in town town had them though. The acting coordinator at CADOVIC, Tomas Opiokene, told me that if women in the villages own a phone and not their man it often constitutes a problem since the woman will “overpower the man”. The phone is seen as a mean to talk to other men and sometimes it is; Tomas told me about a recent case where a man had scrolled through his wife's contacts and found “Sweetheart”. The wife was seriously beaten. Tomas further told me that often when men found out that their woman had a phone they would take it with the motivation that “it could be a gift from another man”. As in the rest of Uganda, people use pre-paid airtime and a majority are on a per second scheme (which makes it more expensive to talk a whole minute but much cheaper if you stay briefly). The “SMS culture is not deeply rooted” as chairman Jimmy Okello put it. The reasons for this are usually several. For example, a per second scheme gives more value for money when talking than using SMS does. If you hang up in time, that is. Another explanations is trust in oral communication (according to Apac District 2002 Population and Housing Census, 58% percent say that word of mouth is the main source of information compared to 49% in rest of Uganda). Illiteracy and/or inconvenience are others – many do not know how to use the SMS function.

...about adding a mobile component to the E-Society

There are many possible interventions and possibilities in using mobile phones to improve service delivery and community participation. Some ideas that emerged during the trip was to use the mobile platform for:

- Alerts, announcements and reminders about meetings, upcoming events, radio shows, training etc. Receiving a mass SMS is still considered more personal than hearing a radio announcement about the same thing. As always, a triangulation of methods will give best results.
- Agenda, both to disseminate it but better still, to open up for dialogue and make it possible for citizens to set the agenda too.
- Results from meetings, studies etc. Hard to capture in 160 characters but at least make people aware that the results/outcomes are there.
- News – local and relevant that can go both ways, i.e. in and out (work with local media and citizen media, how to verify?)
- Polls can easily be conducted regarding various issues, for example collate citizen opinions and priorities and forward them to local government and parliamentarians.
- Whistle blowing – alert (not report) head quarters of corrupt police officers and civil servants.
- Connecting to an already existing spaces, for example the DDP (District Development Plan) cycle or to the village health teams etc (ideas from Line Gissel from MS).

There are other possible mobile phone usages worth thinking of too. At the moment there are only four information centres in Apac District’s 15 sub-counties. A possible way to speed up the roll-out in a cost-effective way could be to use GPRS enabled smart phones and printers + notice boards instead of desktops and solar panels. There are some rumours going on about using MTN’s Village Phone Operators as a way improve service delivery and increase participation. There might be ways to combine these ideas with E-Society, to collaborate and find a good model for this.

The simple communication between the district information centre and community information
centres needs to be improved too. At the moment it is by using the mobile phone (simple voice). However, if the programme will be scaled-up, mail must be used to a greater extend and bulk SMS might be a good solution to gain immediate attention.

...in the end
On paper it looks great to add a mobile component to the project. In reality my feeling is that there are too many challenges in the project set-up already and adding another component to it would not be a wise move. Citizens of Apac have not yet embraced the project and there might be a need to re-launch it but in a slightly different way. However, what needs to be done immediately is to secure the Internet access and to clearly display what kind of local, relevant content is available (basically to have a document on the notice board stating which documents, film clips etc is ready available), identify what kind of content is needed (in partnership with NGO's and CSO' in Apac) and a plan to create/make available relevant, needed content (again in partnership with others). The training needs to be taken one, two, three steps further and not only concentrate on the technical know-how. Empowerment comes with right, innovative usage of the technology. A small idea related to this: regardless if mobiles are to be introduced in the project or not: mobile phone training should be a module in the ongoing training so that people will learn how to best utilise them fully.

So, as for now I do not think it is not a good idea to add a mobile component to the E-Society project due to its fragile state and because the model is not scalable as it is right now. By adding a mobile component to the E-Society project I think that it will at best invent a space for citizen participation (which is good but maybe not the intention and really hard work), not invite to an already existing one (simple because it is not there at the moment).

Having that said, I must also say that I do see a clear need for a local mobile platform that can be used by all NGO's and CSO's (and local government) in Apac. A kind of mix between a noticeboard, a question box, a suggestion box, a whistle blower, a village horn etc. A community mobile application for information sharing and communication in all directions. This product could be hosted by the E-Society but if so it must be very independent and have its own structures.

People consulted
Bruno Okwir, Project Coordinator of E-Society
Joan, Administrator at the E-Society District Information Centre
Jimmy Okello, Chairperson Board of Trustees. Owner of Radio Apac and Apac Town Mayor (LC3).
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Francis Ateng, Treasurer Board of Trustees, Assistant Chief Administrative Officer
Sam Jamara, Vice Chairperson Board of Trustees. Coordinator, NGO Link Forum
Odyek Marino, Programme Officer, Finance and administration, NGO Link Forum
Akite Brenda, Programme Officer, Building local democracy, NGO Link Forum
David Odongo, TAACC (The Apac Anti-Corruption Coalition)
Jake at Radio Apac
Moses at KIC Kubere Information Centre
Line E. Gissel. Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation Advisor at MS, Danish Association for International Cooperation
Tomas Opiokene, Acting Coordinator CADOVIC (Campaign Against Domestic Violence in the Community)