Web 2.0 in rural areas – myth or practical?

How does one use Web 2.0 to improve rural livelihoods when Internet connectivity is very limited or even non-existent? BROSDI – Busoga Rural Open Source & Development Initiative – contributes to bridging the gap between the farmer without Internet access and the Internet platform.

Unlike Web 1.0 where we saw information in the form of books, news, music and more being moved into a digital format, Web 2.0 rallies around not only taking this data and sharing it with other people but also enhancing creativity, information sharing, collaboration and functionality of the Web. Web 2.0 moves beyond posting, managing and sharing of knowledge to include feedback from a diverse population. As such, access to the Internet is paramount.

Connectivity in Uganda

In Uganda, access to the Internet is a venture for both the private and the public sector. Through the Rural Communications Development Fund (one of the programmes of UCC, the Uganda Communications Commission), the government has provided access to basic communications services within a reasonable distance in various districts in the country. This has been accomplished by enabling civil society organisations, education institutions and companies to set up Internet cafes and ICT training centres in most of the country's districts.

Telecommunications companies have not yet really invested in this sector. Rather, they concentrate more on the mobile phones market. Although modern mobile phones can access the Internet, they are still unaffordable for rural people. Most people in rural areas can only afford basic mobile telephone handsets. Thus connectivity in many of the districts is very limited or even non-existent.

Limitations to using the Internet

Low returns are the main obstacle to investing in Internet installation. First and foremost, it doesn't make sense for rural people to spend money just to surf the Internet they need a reason to do so; which reason should be beneficial to them, many times, financially. In fact, most people in these areas don't even know how to use it, let alone how it can be applied to improve their livelihoods. Computers are still perceived as white elephants – they are for the literate. Moreover, the training costs are too high for rural people, given their financial constraints. What important benefits could a new and even more complicated system like Web 2.0 offer them?

From the private sector perspective, high costs for hardware, software, and maintenance do not pay off. The local telecommunication companies still prefer to invest in the urban centres leaving the rural areas behind.

As a result, even if individuals wanted to invest in Internet centres in rural areas, this would not be possible because there are very limited source lines to the Internet. Resorting to the use of satellite receivership could be an alternative. It is more expensive, but also more reliable, and it provides faster connections.

BROSDI breaking the Barriers

These obstacles did not prevent BROSDI, Busoga Rural Open Source

To make Web 2.0 work, internet access is paramount.

Ednah Karamagi
Executive Director, BROSDI
Kampala, Uganda
ednahkaramagi@brosdi.or.ug

Photo: Karamagi

& Development Initiative (http://www.brosdi.or.ug) from venturing into the use of Web 2.0 applications as one of the many options to reach out to improve the livelihoods of rural people. BROSDI's activities are based on information capturing, sharing and dissemination, using Web 2.0, traditional and modern ICTs. However, the still existing barriers had to be overcome.

BROSDI aims at bridging the gap between the rural person who has limited access to the Internet and the Internet platform. For example, best agricultural practices are captured from the farmers in text and audio form, and are posted on the project blogs. When comments are written, because we know the source of the article commented on, we relay the comment to the source, mainly by telephone, get feedback and post it on the blog. Other methods used are by writing a letter and sending it out either by post or by bus. This method is normally used if the response is lengthy. By doing so, we are able to open up a conversation flow between two people who do not even know each other. In the few cases where the authors have access to the Internet, we encourage them to log on and respond on their own.

Once a year during the Annual Agricultural Knowledge Fair, BRO-SDI prints booklets of the discussions and distributes them to all the district farmer representatives. BROSDI's agricultural programme is present in 17 districts. When the farmers' representatives want to comment on a subject or send in a fresh article, they forward it, and BROSDI uploads the article on the Web, acknowledging the author as well.

Farmers need constant encouragement to value the use of Web 2.0 applications. What BROSDI does is to have print-outs of articles published on the Web 2.0 and disseminate them to all the 17 districts and beyond. This makes the authors of these articles very proud and encourages other farmers to write articles too, so that they appear in the next printout.

BROSDI has also sought contact with local rural NGOs as most of them have Internet access in their offices. BROSDI has built up relationships, asking the NGOs to open up their facilities to the farmers, the majority free of charge. This has enabled a substantial number of farmers whom we work with to gain access to the Internet. In return, BROSDI shares agricultural and health information with the NGOs and various networks.

More success stories can be found on BROSDI's new blog: http://successtories.wordpress.com.

Zusammenfassung

Wie kann Web 2.0 zur Verbesserung der ländlichen Lebensbedingungen eingesetzt werden wenn der Internet-Zugang sehr selten bzw. nicht vorhanden ist? Bei der Förderung ländlicher Entwicklung setzt die mangelnde Internet-Anbindung auch in Uganda sehr enge Grenzen für die Verbreitung von Web 2.0. Die Initiative BROSDI (Busoga Rural Open Source & Development Initiative) verbindet Bauern miteinander, die keinen Zugang zum Internet bzw. einer Internetplatform haben, mit diesen modernen IKTs.

Resumen

¿Cómo puede usarse la Web 2.0 para mejorar los medios de vida rurales cuando la conectividad a Internet es limitada o incluso inexistente? Sin duda, la Web 2.0 ofrece herramientas muy eficaces para la conexión en redes, pero en Uganda las cosas se tornan muy complejas cuando uno desea usarlas como recurso para el desarrollo rural debido a las restricciones de conectividad. La iniciativa BROSDI – Busoga Rural Open Source & Development Initiative – permite superar esta brecha entre el agricultor sin acceso a Internet y la plataforma de Internet.

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BROSDI's experiences gained in Uganda could be useful for other countries with limited internet access in rural areas.