

Values for evaluating community informatics

A brainstorming workshop facilitated by David Newman

CIRN Prato

Can you define *'best'* in *best practice*?

Donors, NGOs, researchers, even journalists all want to evaluate CI or development informatics projects. Practitioners want to learn from best practice. But what do we mean by best practice? What should we evaluate? Better for whom: the donors, the national NGO, the local staff, village elders, intended beneficiaries, their families, the economy, ...? What makes one application of ICT better than another?

The problem is that we do not agree on what we mean by best. Even academics disagree. The economists only look at economic inputs and outputs. Political scientists only look at power. Technologists concentrate on the technology. Each evaluates the world through their own disciplinary blinkers. Each uses their own criteria to compare projects, but ignores the values of others.

You are the judges

How do you compare projects? How would you judge one project as better than another? In this workshop we will collect all the criteria experienced researchers and practitioners use when deciding that one example of CI is better than another. Different participants will come up with different ideas: collectively, we stand a chance of covering all angles.

Rapid electronic brainstorming

We will be using WebIQ, a web-based group support system, to speed up the processes of collecting and categorizing your ideas.¹ Instead of writing up ideas on a flip chart one after each other, you will type in your suggestions all at the same time. In 5 minutes, we can collect several dozen ideas.

Then we stop using the computer for a while and make sure everyone understands the criteria others use to judge CI. That means we talk and listen: WebIQ does not replace conversation.

Then we will group together these criteria into value categories. Each set of values provides a perspective through which we can evaluate CI. Some may even contradict each other. For each value category, we can identify the best evaluation techniques.

Preparing for the workshop

Although we expect spontaneous, creative, ideas generation in the brainstorming phase, it may help if you think in advance of some CI or DI projects or activities that you thought were good, and others that you thought were bad. In what ways were some better than others?

¹ <http://www.webiq.net/>

Agenda

Participants worked through an agenda of participation stages:

1. CI project examples (collect ideas)
2. What makes a project better? (collect ideas)
3. Group criteria into value categories (organise the ideas)

The idea was to get everyone thinking of some typical examples of community informatics, before they got down to listing ways they use to judge one example as being better than another. In the ideas collection phases, everyone typed in their ideas at the same time. All the ideas then came up on the screen before them.

Now many of the criteria used to judge CI are similar. So the participants were asked to group them into categories, dragging and dropping the ideas in their chosen categories. In this way we hoped to get some idea of the values lying behind the judgement criteria.

Workshop results

1. CI project examples

Type in some examples of good Community Informatics projects, programmes or activities.

1. IT training for "disadvantaged groups" - the Tramlines project in Ballymun, Ireland
2. Tasmanian Communities Online
3. geocaching walk through a deprived area to show what locals are proud of
4. Computers in Homes
5. better health channel, Victoria (Australia)
6. Working with a neighborhood association coalition to identify and collect strategic community information
7. KNet - community-based Internet services provider for indigenous communities
8. health issues self support groups
9. Living Heritage online childrens oral histories
10. developing citizen journalism skills with youth to facilitate collection of community stories

11. Casweb Portal for 3rd Sector in London
12. remote communities radio and television production
13. clubhouse Porirua community centrecomputer
14. Stoke Goldington Flood Response
15. gps/gis of key community information
16. blogging citizen journalism community Kyrgystan
17. Anti-social behaviour response coordination
18. Babelyou global language learning community
19. community wifi in Keewaywin First Nation, Ontario
20. Hectors world online interactive web guide forr kids
21. partnering with community leaders to develop a strategic plan for social inclusion
22. social networking sites
23. Dear Elders videos in New Brunswick created by FN school children
24. Positive computing for Parents training

25. Digital City Amsterdam in the 1980-1990s
26. engaging your community conferences
27. meraka
28. Barcamp conferences
29. doing it better- victoria australia
30. atherton gardens highrise

2. What makes a project better?

Type in the criteria you like to use when judging one CI project as being better than another.

The participants came up with 43 example criteria. These are listed below, in their allocated categories.

3. Group criteria into value categories

Enter categories, then drag the ideas under each category

- 1 For funders
 - 1.1 positive response by funders/controllers
 - 1.2 attainment of the strategic outcome
 - 1.3 recognition of the limitations of the project, expectation management
 - 1.4 community involvement in project development
 - 1.5 somehow the funder allows you to follow a different path and champions it
 - 1.6 includes community-based research or evaluation component in project design
- 2 Efficacy
 - 2.1 some plans in place for sustainability
 - 2.2 effective use of financial and human resources
 - 2.3 effectiveness
 - 2.4 robust
 - 2.5 positive social outcomes
 - 2.6 flexibility
 - 2.7 effective and efficient with respect to outcomes
 - 2.8 situatedness
 - 2.9 improvement in community quality-of-life
- 3 Engagement
 - 3.1 community uptake
 - 3.2 community buy-in
 - 3.3 driven by community
 - 3.4 facilitates internal communication and understanding
 - 3.5 passions
 - 3.6 energy
 - 3.7 empowering (community well-informedness, control, influence)
 - 3.8 community governance
 - 3.9 includes marginalized members of the community, not only community leaders
 - 3.10 champions
 - 3.11 community "ownership" in real or symbolic sense
- 4 Sustainability

- 4.1 flexibility
- 4.2 helps build community capacity to further explore the ideas on their own.
- 4.3 sustainability of activity
- 4.4 identifiable character
- 4.5 builds on existing community strengths
- 5 Developmental
 - 5.1 skills and knowledge transfer (emancipation)
 - 5.2 development of new/responsive tools by ICT designers
 - 5.3 paradigm shifts
 - 5.4 platform for growth/development (of city)
 - 5.5 strengthens community capacity and resources
 - 5.6 leads to better thinking and action in other initiatives
 - 5.7 clearly defined processes
 - 5.8 life-cycle management
- 6 Audiences for reports
 - 6.1 the story is disseminated through different media and has an effect
 - 6.2 generates innovative ideas and further projects
- 7 Generalizability
 - 7.1 contribution to a broader programme
 - 7.2 generalizability of project

Conclusions

Since only a small group of people took part (less than a dozen), there are, no doubt, further criteria that might be used to judge community informatics, and other possible value categories.

Nevertheless, the participants did come up with several different criteria. These fall into three groups.

1. What the CI initiatives mean for the communities right now
 1. Efficacy, including benefits to the community
 2. Engagement, of people in the community
2. What the CI initiatives mean for the future
 1. Sustainability
 2. Developmental, including how it will help the community develop
3. Perspectives of different readers
 1. Funders, have their own needs and criteria, which are not necessarily those of the community members or the project.
 2. Audiences for reports, apart from the funders, might have different impacts

No doubt you can think of other perspectives, and possibly other value categories. To start with, please think of your own criteria for comparing two CI initiatives, and see how they fit in to the ones elicited in 65 minutes in Prato.

Dave Newman <d.r.newman@qub.ac.uk>