Reducing "white elephant" ICT4D projects: A Community-Researcher Engagement

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ABSTRACT

Participation is a key requirement to ensure that ICT4D and HCI4D projects succeed. Specifically, the relationship between the research and community is necessary for any ICT4D project; without this cooperation, the proverbial white elephant project will result. Existing literature provides much evidence on the need and importance of this participation. However, many researchers lack the skills and knowledge to be able to build, develop and maintain the relationship, as many interactions are based on assumptions. We investigate challenges and frustrations as expressed by a community with whom we have established a long term collaboration. This provides further evidence on the need to guide and educate novice researchers working with the community. We have conducted a workshop to raise the awareness among *guest* researchers. The workshop comprises a series of presentations, discussions and reflections. We have recorded guest researchers' responses within the workshop to evaluate further needs for researcher-community interaction preparations. A workshop is yet only one of the gatekeepers' obligations to protect the community. We equally promote continuous engagement with the community itself in the design of critical incidents based on established cultural protocols as well as preparing the community for the novice researchers to maximize research benefits to the community. We discuss potential roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders, partner community, gatekeepers and guest researchers aiming to sustain a coherent research and development collaboration.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

J.4 [Social and Behavioral Sciences]

General Terms

Management, Human Factors.

Keywords

Community engagement; cultural protocols; gate keepers; long term collaborations; rural communities; ICT4D; Long Lamai

1. INTRODUCTION

"Research in the wild" and ICT community projects are increasingly reported in the HCI literature. While the focus is mostly on the technology and the methods deployed, only few report on the challenges of the engagement itself [1]. "The 'invisible' work of engagement is frequently overlooked, and yet it plays an important, often pivotal role within many design-based research projects." [2]

The authors of this paper have been engaged in long term academia-community collaborations of technology development with a specific rural community. While this has shown to be very beneficial for joint co-design of technology it has equally been challenging in terms of relationships between community members and researchers. As in all long term partnerships, roles, responsibilities, expectations and benefits have to be continuously renegotiated within a fluctuating context influenced by outside parameters (such as funding and politics) as well as researchers joining and leaving the different projects [3].

Given the established strong relationship (beyond the initial project over the years) with specific communities, other *guest* researchers can now fast track their entry into the communities. *Guest* researchers refer to those who have recently joined the project, and new to the community. As entry points or *gatekeepers* between the community and the other researchers, we are primarily concerned with the responsibilities towards the community but equally towards the *guest* researchers with the interest of maintaining the well-established relationship. *Gatekeepers* in this case are institution and researchers who have worked with the community over many years, and have gained the trust of the community. The community selected the *gatekeepers* to act as proxies of the communities to liaise with the *guest* researchers. Over the years a number of isolated conflicts have occurred between *guest* researchers and the community, which has also at times placed the *gatekeepers* in a difficult position and provided us the direction to conduct this research and explore this subject in more detail.

Initially a community-driven cultural protocol was established and published, however, *guest* researchers do not seem to have internalized it. Hence, the goal of the study is to explore the bonding aspects of community-researcher relationship, which is the key element of success for community development research projects. We emphasise on carrying out research that is not only beneficial to the researchers, but must also benefit the community. In addition, we highlight that the research should address the needs of the community and not deploy another "alien" technology which is imported into the community, tested, and