

Mitigating Ethno-Cultural Differences: Ethical Guidelines for ICT Development in an Indigenous Community

Hasnain Falak, Institute of Social Informatics and Technological Innovations (ISITI), Malaysia

Tariq Zaman, University Malaysia Sarawak, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

[Top](#)

Community engagement is necessary for the success and sustainability of Information and Communication Technologies for Development (ICT4D) projects. To ensure active participation of community, researchers need to understand and adhere to the local cultural norms and adapt in the lifestyle of people. These cultural norms are mainly unwritten and implicit in nature. Hence the researchers spend maximum time of their field visits in observing and developing understanding of the community's life. In our long-term partnership with the indigenous Penan community of Long Lamai in Malaysian Borneo, we co-developed written guidelines for researchers and visitors. The researchers demonstrated their interest in aligning research process to the community's cultural values, however norm internalisation and development of associated behaviour is still a challenging. The written guidelines are yet only one of the attempts to the practices of community researchers' engagement and we are refining our methodology to enhance the researchers' learning process.

INTRODUCTION

[Top](#)

Community engagement is an essential requirement for the success of ICT4D projects (Gumbo et al., 2012). The "engagement" becomes vital when the interaction is between indigenous and rural community and researchers from a different cultural background. The community is the center of ICT4D project so the researchers need to develop a holistic understanding of the community's daily lives and role of designed products and services (Winschiers-Theophilus & Bidwell, 2013). The researcher needs to attain "sufficient input" from the end-users to provide sustainable solution and it will also ensure to avoid the problematic translation of researchers' desires into community's needs. Recent empirical verification of relationship between community engagement and research shows an increase in success of ICTD projects (Balestrini et al., 2014; Chamberlain et al., 2013).

This interaction between researchers and community can be considered a multifaceted process of negotiations and participation (Winschiers-Theophilus et al., 2010). Indigenous communities have diverse procedures, rules and regulations that regulate their interactions within community, with outsiders and with the territory and environment upon which they depend. However, these norms are mainly in unwritten (tacit and implicit) forms the researchers often do not understand and in result sometimes fail to respect. The failure to respect these norms, whether intentional or not, results in conflict and deterioration of relationships that leads to failures of the projects (Balestrini et al., 2014).

The authors of this chapter have been engaged in long term partnership and joint endeavour of developing/using technologies for socio-economic development of the Penan community of Long Lamai, Sarawak Malaysia. The community is receptive to new technologies; however, the process of researchers-community engagement has been equally challenging due to the social, cultural and language barriers. The situation became more complex in recent years due to the influx of less experienced and short term researchers. Therefore, the authors and community elders engaged in the process of answering the simple question, how can we inform and educate researchers about the local culture and norms of the community?

In this chapter, we introduce the guidelines designed for researchers and visitors of Long Lamai community. The aim of the guidelines is to educate novice researchers working with the Penan community of Long Lamai. The chapter is organized as follows. Section 2 presents the research background and related work. Section 3, discusses the methodology applied in research. Section 4 presents designed framework and guidelines for researchers and Section 5 provides discussion. Section 6 concludes the chapter.

Background

[Top](#)

The literature on ICT4D is replete with empirical evidence showing that ICT interventions often fail since they are often externally initiated, with very limited involvement from the affected (Heeks, 2002). The Digital Collectives in Indigenous Cultures and Communities meeting held in Hawaii brought together cultural leaders, researchers, community representatives, and development project to discuss the way digital technology might be used so that the cultures of indigenous communities could be preserved and public perception of these communities improved. The recommendations from the meeting included respect of community's cultural values and their right to decide the degree of their participation in information technology plans related to digital collectives (Holland, 2002). The recent approaches such as Participatory Design and Community-based Co-design consider local community's insight in design processes as a strong component (Holland, 2002). These approaches highlight the importance of creating and accommodating people's insight in the process of design, evaluation and implementation of a system which they will be using (Winschiers-Theophilus, Bidwell, & Blake, 2012). The end-users are treated as experts – and the goal is "mutual learning" (Kapuire, 2015). Ranjay K. Singh et al. (2013) conducted a study to highlight the ethical prospects for researchers while engaging Indigenous tribes. A framework for devising a Prior Informed Consent (PIC) agreement is developed stating the detail process and terms of research. Many researchers