

“Many developing countries remain poor largely because they had let the Industrial Revolution pass them by. They can ill afford to miss the information technology revolution”. M. S. Swaminatham (ICT for Poverty Reduction: Myths, Realities and Development Implications)

Information Communication Technology (ICT) is the modern day driver of economic growth and poverty alleviation. PCDI embraces this principle and works at bridging the digital divide in the rural communities of Cameroon through a multi-pronged approach. Firstly through **IT training**.

PCDI runs a school where software and hardware courses, and full time and part time courses are run. In fitting with PCDI’s objectives, places at the school are offered **at no cost to vulnerable women and children**. During our last graduation, we were proud to graduate one of these students and we will continue to offer her the necessary support so as to allow her to develop herself.

Secondly through offering **internet access** (PCDI is the only provider of such services in the division of 13 villagers).

However the reality is much more complex than these text book solutions suggest.

The proclaimed revolution in **Mobile Phones** technology is indeed being felt in Cameroon. It is rare for an individual to not have a phone. But it is equally rare for the normal populace to be able to afford to make a call. The phones are sold on a pay-as-you-go basis and people cannot afford to purchase the credit. So communication is via a system of “beeps”, whereby one person calls another but before the receiver can pick up the phone, the caller has hung up. This is a

message to the second person that the first person wishes to communicate and if the second person has credit they should call back. Normally they do not have credit to return the call.

Despite these obstacles the transformation caused by the introduction of telecommunication is obvious, even to the casual observer. The computing revolution in contrast, has been much slower to take root. Before PCDI there was another **internet café** in the village. But the enterprise has long since shut its doors. This is PCDI’s second attempt to provide internet services to the village and now we face a daily battle to survive. The future of our internet café is by no means certain.

In a background where there is little consumer protection, faulty equipment and bad business dealings, makes private enterprise particularly where expensive equipment is concerned, extremely hazardous. This was the cause of PCDI’s first failure.

The repercussions are severe. If the enterprise was financed by borrowed money, these setbacks are such that are difficult to recover from. The banking system in Cameroon is underdeveloped and credit is not easily available. Borrowing is at 3-10% per month and reflects the high rate of defaults and the costs the banks incur to regain their money.

These crippling start-up costs usually mean that the enterprise will have high overheads.

A lack of infrastructure will generally mean that the enterprise will have high running costs. Telephone land line infrastructure is thin on the ground and unreliable and in Ngoketunjia we are reliant on purchasing a satellite dish for a system of wireless reception. Due to its nature this wireless signal is subject to noise and interruptions.

For example cloud cover can have a significant impact on the signal being received. This in a country which has a 6 month rainy season.

And the costs are prohibitive to the majority of the population. For example with the current equipment PCDI are able to relay the signal locally. However the purchase of the receiving equipment (satellite and radio unit) is prohibitive and we remain the only centre with internet facilities in the division.

Then consider the demand. PCDI operates in Bamunka which is the centre of the Ngoketunjia Division of 13 villagers. It is a rural area where farming takes precedence over every other activity. PCDI is the only internet café in the division and yet for over 75% of the operating day, PCDI's computers are underutilized.

The problem is firstly lack of resources. In a community where the essentials of food, medicine and education can be unaffordable, internet services are not an essential requirement. In fact internet access can be considered to be a luxury commodity and the majority of the population cannot afford it.

PCDI charges 300frs – 450frs (0.6-0.9 US\$) per hour for access to the internet, yet it is not uncommon for people to not have 100frs for a loaf of bread.

The second battle that PCDI faces is in computer illiteracy. The majority of the population are unable to use a computer. The majority of students when they enter the school, may not have seen or touched a computer before. At our school some of our students are senior civil servants (including judges) and they are unable to use a computer.

As a result the community does not fully appreciate the power of the technological revolution occurring around them.

Although we can boast of the advantages that the cyber brings to the local community and we can use as examples individuals from the community who use our facilities to partake in on-line training courses from MBA's to teaching qualifications, the truth is that the use of the internet and computing is restricted to the elite and the educated of the community.

The dilemma is that without the customer base, given the running costs incurred for the maintenance of an internet café, our rates are high and we cannot reduce them.

So the answer must lie in the sensitization of the population. Partly this sensitization of the population must occur from their education. Yet, whilst the government of Cameroon has a professed IT policy with regard to education, little of these policies have been affected at the grass roots. The majority of the schools in the region are poorly equipped. A study by PCDI into the schools in the region found the following:

It is common for computer teachers to be either lacking in experience in teaching or to be lacking in experience in computing. Upto 50% of their equipment may be unusable due to an inability to look after the equipment.

So PCDI's battle is in the sensitization of the population.

This is a difficult task. We offer our customers free training on the internet. They refuse to participate (due to lack of time). We offer the traditional councils free places in our schools for vulnerable children. They do not attend.

But with all battles we must start with small victories. On the 17th of May we organised a free seminar for school teachers. We spoke to them about techniques of teaching computing, we taught them some basic software and hardware skills.

But we consider our greatest victory in this seminar in the fact that we got the schools to collaborate with us. With this first step, we hope to organise a series of subsequent seminars over the next few months. We hope to use this as a medium to collaborate with the schools to offer the schools free use of PCDI's fully equipped classroom and to offer the schools free internet lessons for their students.

“History has shown that technologies, left to their own devices, will only exacerbate existing differences. Information and communication technologies are no exception”. M. S. Swaminatham