

WORKING DRAFT

Please do not quote, cite, or
reproduce without explicit
permission from the author.

**WHERE'S THE POWER IN EMPOWERMENT? HOW
COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS SHAPE SOCIAL
POLICY**

Laxmi Ramasubramanian
The University of New England

Prepared for the 2001 INDEPENDENT SECTOR Spring Research Forum

*The Impact of Information Technology on Civil Society:
How will online innovation, philanthropy, and volunteerism serve the common good?*

Washington, DC
March 15 – 16, 2001

Where's The Power in Empowerment? How Community-Based Organizations Shape Social Policy

Laxmi Ramasubramanian

Introduction

The information technology revolution in low-income communities is well underway. One of the more compelling arguments frequently put forward to support the widespread adoption and use of computer-based information technologies in low-income communities is their potential to facilitate the participation of people traditionally marginalized from decision-making processes. However, I believe that the steadily growing digital divide separating the “information rich” from the “information poor” (Wresch, 1996; Benton Foundation, 1998) challenges and places limits on cyber-utopian visions of individual and community empowerment created and sustained by information technologies.

InfoCities and Informationless Enclaves

In the United States and in many other technologically advanced countries, the digital divide now mirrors and exacerbates existing divisions such as those based on race, gender, age, and income (National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA), 1999; Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 1999; European Institute for Media, 1999). The same technologies that create infocities also create informationless enclaves, further disadvantaging many of our most vulnerable populations. Many low-income communities, devoid of electronic connectivity are disenfranchised because they are denied the opportunity to participate in our global, information-based economy. At the same time, people living in these so-called “electronic ghettos” are further disadvantaged because they can no longer rely on familiar routes to accessing basic services because governments and businesses continue to pare down their

visible presence in low-income communities, moving towards electronically mediated forms of communication and decision-making.

Community-based Organizations as Mediating Institutions

In many “poor” communities, community-based organizations (CBOs)¹ now mediate the relationship between citizens and various city, state and federal agencies, as they work to ameliorate the most negative impacts of the digital divide. Equipped with anecdotal evidence of the powerful transformative role that information technologies can play in community development, many CBOs are developing IT-based community development initiatives in an effort to become better advocates for their constituents (see Krieg, 1995 for examples). While some have expanded the scope of their services to facilitate community access to IT, many others have developed an on-line presence to reach a wider audience and improve operational efficiency. Such initiatives are now used to address a wide range of social problems in many “distressed” communities (Mitchell, 1997; Shaw & Shaw, 1999; HUD, 1997; HUD, 1998). Governmental and private funding has been crucial in the development of IT-based solutions targeted towards low-income communities.

However, prevailing discussions about the digital divide leave many issues unaddressed. For example, the push to bridge the digital divide is partially based on a utopian belief that simultaneous and almost instantaneous access to information will place individuals with little or no formal power on par with individuals with considerable power within the rapidly expanding information economy. Many community development investments are now directed towards electronic networking, Internet connectivity, and information dissemination, sometimes at the

¹ In the context of this paper, the term CBO is applied to “local” organizations that are situated in and linked to a geographic community or place. In the case of national or regional organizations, this term will apply to the local or regional chapter.

expense of more traditional “organizing” or service-oriented programs. Furthermore, the goal providing “poor” people access to information technologies has become wrapped up in debates about community empowerment in the absence of a clearly articulated theoretical understanding of how access to data and information technologies can actually lead to sustainable development in low-income communities.

Although information technologies (IT) are frequently credited for “empowering” individuals and organizations, there is very little research-based evidence that explains how CBOs actually use IT² to influence, challenge, re-shape, or counter-act policies and programs developed by dominant economic interests. Through in-depth interviews with program participants, community leaders, community organizers, and senior staff associated with four community organizations, my research provides an in-depth understanding of how and why CBOs adopt and use information technologies both in their day to day decision-making and in their strategic planning.

Research Objectives

I address two major themes in this paper. First, I present a conceptual model that links the burgeoning IT literature with Community Development literature by placing IT adoption and use within the context of community-based decision-making. Second, I use data from case studies of advocacy organizations in Boston and Chicago to describe how and why community-based organizations use information technologies. In my presentation, I hope to briefly discuss the Australian experience, particularly the issues that affect rural Australia.

² For example, digital maps and data using Geographic Information Science (GIS) played an important role in settling the NAACP v. American Family Insurance Company case related to Insurance Redlining in Milwaukee.

Linking Information Technologies and Community Development

Academic literature regarding information technologies (IT) and community development is generally organized along a continuum between theory and practice. While IT theory literature emphasizes the transformative power of technology (see Naisbitt, 1994; Negroponte, 1995; Mitchell, 1995) Community Development theory literature explains its philosophical underpinnings and emphasizes the transformative power of people and their capacity to facilitate social change (see Freire, 1989; Friedmann, 1987, 1992; Rivera & Erlich, 1998). IT practice literature provides numerous examples of successful and unsuccessful examples of technology adoption and diffusion in various institutional contexts (see Kraemer, King, Dunkle & Lane, 1989; Mitchell, 1997). Community Development literature that emphasizes the practice side of the continuum documents the process of community development as well as successful and unsuccessful outcomes of community development efforts (see King, 1981; Park, Brydon-Miller, Hall & Jackson, 1993; Medoff & Sklar, 1994; Nyden, Figert, Shibley & Burrows, 1997).

There are strong linkages between theory and practice literature discussing information technologies as with the literature pertaining to community development. However, the links across IT and Community Development can be described as tenuous at best, and non-existent at worst. This should be expected because there are some inherent tensions between IT advocates and Community Development advocates. Although the theorists in both camps share a common desire for social change, they disagree in many ways about what such a changed or transformed world would look like. For the techno-theorists, information technologies are an inevitable part of the future and are an intricate part of a transformed world. They tend to dismiss the popular “unscientific” perception that information technologies are merely tools and subscribe to

technologically deterministic view of the world (albeit in varying degrees). On the other hand, Community Development theorists aspire “to create conditions of economic and social progress with the active participation of the whole community and with the fullest possible reliance on the community’s initiative” (Rothman, 1974 cf. Levine and Perkins, 1997; 396). Community Development theorists emphasize social learning, and in some instances, advocate social mobilization as one of the logical outcomes of that learning. Furthermore, Community Development theories argue for the development of critical thinking and problem solving capabilities among *all* citizens, rather than a privileged few. Technological development is subsumed under human development and technology is generally considered a tool that can facilitate human development *if* used appropriately. In addition, some Community Development advocates have traditionally viewed computers and other sophisticated technologies as suspect, associating them with techno-rational methods of decision-making.

Given the divergent philosophical values that underpin IT and Community Development theories, Community Development advocates despise and resist the idea that some techno-elites can determine the future for all citizens, while IT advocates do not perceive a problem. Yet, the rapid development and proliferation of information technologies among government and industry coupled with the explosion of data challenge Community Development advocates to come to terms with the potential positive role that these technologies can play in their efforts to empower citizens. Although some authors such as Rheingold (1993), Agre & Schuler (1997) and Schön, Sanyal, & Mitchell (1999) are beginning to examine the potential role of information technologies to foster Community Development, they pay only cursory attention to the powerful mediating role of community-based institutions such as CBOs.

Despite these tensions, there are some points of convergence between and among the theories and practices of the four domains. Each of these points of convergence assist in explaining a CBOs decision to adopt information technologies and that organization's ability to integrate these technologies with its own mission and goals. These linkages have been articulated in a conceptual model represented graphically in Figure 1 and are discussed below. IT-based decision-making in CBOs can be better understood when these intervening factors are examined. These are:

Organizational Attitudes towards adoption and use of IT

Both IT theoreticians and IT practitioners are ultimately concerned with the spread of technology (adoption and diffusion). While the theorists are concerned about the eventual impacts of IT on society, irrespective of their world views, researchers in the practice end of the theory-practice continuum are more concerned about managing IT adoption and diffusion to ensure outcomes consistent with organizational goals. While theoreticians are concerned about the macro-level factors, (e.g. the information economy) that influence IT adoption processes, researchers studying IT adoption in a variety of organizational settings are concerned primarily with micro-level factors that influence IT adoption (e.g. role played by technology advocates within the organization). Therefore, a CBO's attitude towards IT and their ability to manage its spread within the organization will influence how these technologies are ultimately used.

Participatory Research

Participatory research (a process that combines research, education, and action) provides the conceptual and methodological link between Community Development theories and Community Development practice. In this context, participatory research is instrumental in the development of critical knowledge, i.e. knowledge that emerges from reflection and action makes it possible

for an organization to address questions that challenge the status quo, thereby becoming a catalyst to create social change (Park et.al, 1993). Therefore, the extent to which an organization already supports participatory processes will determine how IT and IT-based decisions are diffused through the organization.

Organizational/Institutional Context

A review of literature on Community Development practice and IT practice reveals that while Community Development practice typically involves place-based strategies — at a small geographic scale (e.g., a neighborhood or a group of neighborhoods), IT practice focuses on specified user-oriented strategies in different organizational settings. For example, when citizens come together to address quality of life issues, ranging from basic community clean-ups to creating new economic opportunities, their strategies are circumscribed within socially constructed or physical boundaries. However, institutions such as CBOs and community development corporations (CDCs) are the real architects of sustainable community development strategies. At the same time, although IT practice can occur within non-institutional settings, it is more common to find IT use at quasi-public or institutional settings, particularly in communities with limited financial resources. These settings include: community-based organizations, service organizations, schools, libraries, and neighborhood technology centers. It is risky to assume that all group settings operate under similar circumstances. Any effort that seeks to understand why some CBOs are successful in harnessing the potential of IT must pay special attention to the organizational and institutional characteristics.

Advocacy for Social Change

It has been observed earlier that IT theorists and Community Development theorists are both passionate advocates for social change. While this is a clear conceptual link, it must be

acknowledged that advocates of information technologies attribute power to the technologies to influence change, while advocates of community development attribute power to the users of technologies who make decisions regarding appropriate uses of information technologies. This researcher proposes that advocacy requires individuals or organizations to take a stand or identify their own positions regarding issues affecting their social or physical environment before advocating for that position or cause among a larger audience. Therefore, it may be useful to examine how organizations determine and modify and refine their advocacy positions.

Summary of Research Findings³

The findings from this study revealed that CBOs used data and information for advocacy/organizing; planning; and marketing. In this context, information technologies were used to: reframe problems from the community organization's/community's perspective; verify the accuracy of their perceptions about the physical and social changes occurring in their neighborhood or jurisdiction; facilitate analyses to support community organizing initiatives; raise newer and more complex questions that could not be asked before (may allow a problem to be reframed); develop innovative programs and policies based on new information or understanding of a pre-existing situation; reinforce the identity of a CBO as a competent professional; facilitate the working of group processes; mediate situations within and among CBOs in the absence of trust (may generate and nurture trust); and influence negotiations. When information technologies were integrated into participatory processes, they were critical in creating and sustaining a community memory that highlighted past successes and strategies that worked effectively. Information technologies played a significant role in the development of an organization's knowledge base about its constituents, physical environment, the resources

³ Details of research methodology, descriptions of case study organizations can be found in my dissertation, Ramasubramanian, L 1998. *Knowledge production and use in community-based organizations: Examining the impacts and influence of information technologies*. University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee: Available through UMI.

present in the community, and the national and local policies that may affect its work in the community. In addition, the technologies facilitated access to repositories of publicly available data and information.

Over a period of time, certain individuals and organizations developed the ability to harness the power of information technologies and also transcend their shortcomings. I propose that a common theme, I define and describe as *empowerment*, links the individuals and organizations that demonstrated this capacity. Empowerment, the process and outcome of critical reflective practice is not a fixed resource. Empowering instances, moments, and/or outcomes emerge when community organizations comprehend the interconnected triad of psychological, social and political power as they negotiate the dialectic continuum between action (activism) and reflection (research and analysis). This linkage of action and reflection, i.e. praxis, (Freire, 1989) integrated with the concepts of power and radical practice (Friedmann, 1987, 1992), is referred to as critical reflective practice (expanding on Schön's (1983) discussions of reflective practice).

Empowerment is a process that constantly evolves and changes. For example, an individual who is able to examine her actions and reflect upon them while taking into account the larger social and political context in one instant or situation may be unable or unwilling to engage in the same process at another time for a variety of reasons. Therefore, the same individual or organization can act in an empowered manner in one situation while appearing disempowered in another. Finally, empowerment is not an end in itself (or a static state to be attained by the creation of certain favorable conditions) but a guiding principle that should form the basis of problem solving and decision-making throughout the life of an individual or

organization. Interpreting my research data I argue that empowerment, defined as the process and outcome of critical reflective practice, facilitates an organization's advocacy agenda.

What is so unique about information technologies? Based on findings from the four case study organizations, I suggest that their most unique contribution, hence their comparative advantage over conventional means of research and analysis, lies in their ability to assist community organizations in integrating formal, technical, data and empirical evidence with the every day life experiences and concerns of citizens in a tangible manner, thereby supporting participatory research and organizational learning, embedding the ideas of *reflection in practice* firmly within the mission and activities of the organization.

I will use the metaphor of story telling to further clarify my argument. There are many ways of telling a story. Each story offers a different view of reality and “represents a special way of seeing” (Schön & Rein, 1994; 26). Each story selects and names different features and relationships that become the “things” in the story which are woven together to create a compelling tale. Each story uses the features it has selected in a particular context, for example in the case of urban renewal, as the removal of urban blight or as the dissolution of naturally occurring, thriving communities. If we substitute the word “data” for “things”, then we can begin to observe how community-based organizations selectively use data and information to better support the normative action frames embedded in their policy arguments. Reframing requires the support of ancillary evidence that in turn depends of data and analyses. In the 21st century, such data collection, analysis and display are reliant on, supported by, and enriched because of information technologies.

References

- Agre P E, Schuler D Eds, 1997, *Reinventing technology, rediscovering community: Critical explorations of computing as a social practice* (Ablex Publishing Corporation, Greenwich, CT)
- Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 1999. *Use of the Internet by Householders, Australia*, A8147.0 (<http://www.abs.gov.au/Ausstats\ABS@.nsf/Lookup/NT0000B252>).
- Benton Foundation 1998, *Losing ground bit by bit: Low income communities in the information age*, report available at: <http://www.benton.org/Library/Low-Income/>
- European Institute for the Media, 1998, *The current barriers for older people in accessing the information society*, September 1998 available at <http://www.eim.de/old/>
- Freire P, 1989, *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (Continuum Press, New York)
- Friedmann J, 1987, *Planning in the public domain: Two centuries of planning theory* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey)
- Friedmann J, 1992, *Empowerment: The politics of alternative development*. (Blackwell, Cambridge, Massachusetts)
- HUD 1997, *Mapping your community: Using geographic information to strengthen community initiatives* HUD-1092-CPD, October 1997 (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Community Planning and Development)
- HUD 1998, *College and Communities: Partners in urban revitalization: A report on the Community Outreach Partnerships Centers Program, March 1998* (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Policy Development and Research)
- King M H, 1981, *Chain of change: Struggles in Black community development* (South End Press, Boston)
- Kraemer K, King J, Dunkle D, Lane J, 1989, *Managing information systems: Change and control in organizational computing* (Jossey-Bass, Inc., San Francisco)
- Krieg R, 1995, "Information technology and low-income inner-city communities" *Journal of Urban Technology* **3**, 1 1-17
- Levine M., Perkins D, 1997, *Principles of community psychology: perspectives and applications* second edition (Oxford University Press, New York)
- Medoff P, Sklar H, 1994, *Streets of hope: The fall and rise of an urban neighborhood* (South End Press, Boston)
- Mitchell A, 1997, *Zeroing in: Geographic Information Systems at work in the community* (Environmental Systems Research Institute Redlands, California)

- Mitchell W, 1995, *City of bits. Space, place, and the Infobahn* (MIT Press, Cambridge, MA)
- Naisbitt J, 1994, *The global paradox: The bigger the world economy, the more powerful its smallest players* (Avon Books, New York)
- Negroponte, N, 1995, *Being digital* (Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., New York)
- NTIA 1999, *Falling through the Net: Defining the Digital Divide*, July 1999; the full report is available through the National Telecommunications and Information Administration's web site at www.ntia.doc.gov or from the NTIA's Office of Public Affairs
- Nyden P, Figert A, Shibley M, Burrows D, 1997, *Building community: Social science in action* (Pine Forge Press, Thousand Oaks, California)
- Park P, Brydon-Miller M, Hall B, Jackson T, Eds, 1993, *Voices of Change: Participatory Research in the United States and Canada* (Bergin & Garvey, Westport, Connecticut)
- Rheingold H, 1993, *The virtual community: Homesteading on the electronic frontier* (Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Reading, Massachusetts)
- Rivera F, Erlich J, 1992, *Community organizing in a diverse society* (Allyn and Bacon, Boston)
- Schön D, Rein M, 1994, *Frame reflection: Toward the resolution of intractable policy controversies* (Basic Books New York)
- Schön D, Sanyal B, Mitchell W, Eds, 1999, *High technology and low-income communities: Prospects for the positive use of advanced information technology* (MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts)
- Shaw A, and Shaw M, 1999, "Social empowerment through community networks" in *High technology and low-income communities: Prospects for the positive use of advanced information technology* Eds D Schon, B Sanyal, W. Mitchell (MIT Press, Cambridge, MA) pp 315 - 336
- Wresch W, 1996, *Disconnected: Haves and have-nots in the information age* (Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, New Jersey)

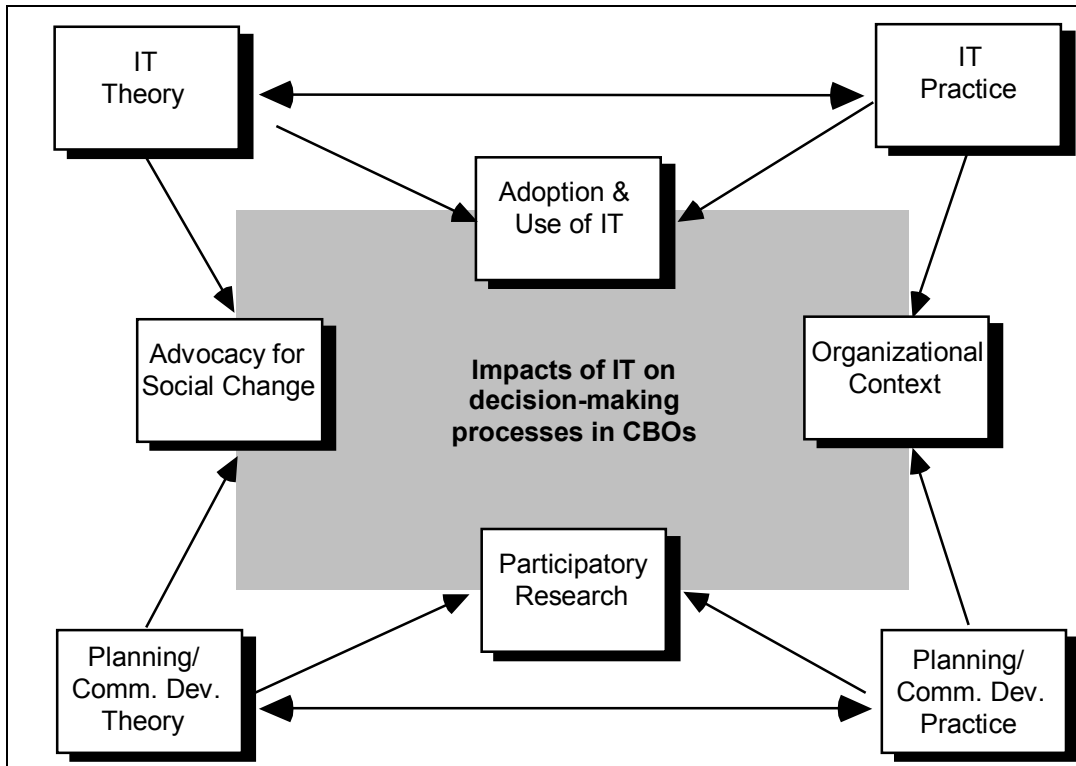


Figure 1: Conceptual Model Linking IT and Community Development Literature