

Chapter 10

Reducing Digital Divide: The Case of the ‘People First Network’ (PFNet) in the Solomon Islands

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the role of People First Network (PFnet) services in enhancing information and communication and contributing to sustainable rural development and poverty reduction in Solomon Islands. More specifically, it examines two main issues. First, it examines the uptake and appropriation of PFnet services by rural Solomon Islanders. Second, it examines the impact of PFnet services on sustainable rural development and poverty reduction in Solomon Islands. This chapter is based on a empirical research conducted in Solomon Islands between January-May 2004. The chapter is organised as follows: Section one provides an overview of PFnet Project. Section two states the main aims of the study. Section three outlines the methodology used for the research. The Section four reports the main research findings. Section five discusses some problems and finally section six provides the conclusion.

INTRODUCTION

In the South Pacific Region, deployment of ICT and its usage is still in an infant stage. Only Fiji and Solomon Islands has attempted to use ICT and these initiatives have come about as a result of encouragement and funding from overseas countries. In Fiji the ICT programme started in 1995 and is funded by Republic of China and Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA). In Solo-

mon Islands the ICT programme (PFnet) started in 2001. This chapter examines the role of PFnet services play in reducing digital divide between urban and rural people in Solomon Islands. More specifically, it examines two main issues. First, it reviews and examines the usage of PFnet services by rural Solomon Islanders. Second, it examines the benefits of PFnet services for rural people. The chapter is organised as follows: Section one provides an overview of PFnet Project. Section two states the main aims of the study. Section three outlines the methodology used for the research.

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Section four reports and analyses the main research findings. Section five discusses some problems and finally section six provides the conclusion.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON PFNET

The PFnet ICT System

The PFnet is basically an example of ICT ‘email system’. It was established as a joint venture between an NGO called the ‘Rural Development Volunteer Association’ (RDVA) and the Ministry for Rural Development in Solomon Islands. It has a Headquarters in Honiara (capital of Solomon Islands) and is connected to eleven sub-email centres in small remote islands. Each email centre was setup by officials of RDVA. Each sub-email centre is housed in a small room, usually in a provincial health clinic, community school, or some other publically accessible building. Out of the eleven email centres, six are ‘commercially oriented’ email centres because they were set up for commercial purposes, mainly fishing businesses. The remaining five are ‘community-based’ email centres to provide communication channel for people in remote islands.

Origin and Funding

The PFnet project was established in 2001 as part of a UNDP-UNOPS project. Between 2001 and 2005, major funding came from Japan, NZODA, Britain, the Republic of China, AusAID and the EU. Since 2006, the PFnet project has been self-sufficient and only the salary of the Manager is paid by the RDVA.

System Configuration / Type of Technology Used

In each rural email centre, there are four technical equipments: a computer laptop; a High Frequency

(HF) short-wave radio operating in 3-22 MHz range; a modem which connects the laptop to radio; a solar power panel on the roof of a building which provides power to laptop. At the PFnet Headquarters in Honiara, there is a large radio receiver and computers as part of internet café.

In each email centre, the laptop computer is linked via a modem to a High Frequency (HF) short-wave radio which transmits the email message to the main radio receiver in Honiara where operators receive and forward the emails to the relevant addresses. The main radio system receives, stores and forwards emails several times daily between each of the thirteen emails and PFnet Headquarters in Honiara.

The Operation of the PFnet System

Sasamunga is a small village in the island of Choiseul with around hundred people and is approximately 1,000 miles away from Honiara. The village does not have electricity nor is it connected via telephone line. Prior to PFnet, the only two means of communication from Sasamunga village to Honiara and overseas was through letters or by short wave radio. But since 2001, villages in Sasamunga have been able to communicate to their family members, friends, schools and government departments in Honiara via email. How this is possible without electricity and telephone connection? The PFnet email centre addresses this question.

The way an email message is sent and received at each email centre operates as follows:

- A villager brings in a handwritten note on a piece of paper (usually in *Pidgin* language) or verbally dictates the message to the centre operator;
- The centre operator types the message and then sends it to the main radio receiver at the Headquarters in Honiara. Since the operators perform the functions on behalf of the customers, literacy in English does

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