BRIDGING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

University of Brighton research on digital technologies and inclusion has had an impact on sustainable community development in the south-east and beyond and has helped promote peace following post-election violence in Kenya.

The University of Brighton puts community engagement at the very heart of its mission. This is apparent in its pioneering research on digital communities. Gillian Youngs, Professor of Digital Economy, said: “Brighton is one of the leading universities in innovative community engagement based on a distinctive cross-disciplinary ethos of working with communities.” The College of Arts and Humanities research on digital technologies in rural communities extends from Brighton to Kenya to help create democratic and inclusive spaces for people to interact.

The University of Brighton’s work in this area has always placed user needs at the centre of its mission. This approach creates in specific locations. This approach creates a rich tapestry, showing how the university is working in creative and multi-faceted ways with communities.

We have used the materials made by Dr Peter Day and his teams in our work on reconciliation and peace-building in relation to inter-tribal relations. It has been most valuable in helping us give a voice to victims and those previously disenfranchised from public debate.

Krispus Kimani,
Focus Youth Initiative, Kenya

Through the provision of audiovisual filming technology, training and enhanced access to ICT in the community – over 200 centres in rural Kenya received 20,000 computers, potentially reaching two million people. Dr Day then extended the university’s research in Kenya as part of a peace and reconciliation process following inter-tribal tensions in the wake of the 2007 election.

The researchers worked with the Focus Youth Initiative and as a result young Kenyans from across ethnic groups created videos that reflected on post-election violence. The process helped to build a sense of political empowerment. Together with a number of groups and organisations from Kenyan civil society these researchers have formed a partnership network called Community21 (Digital Toolbox for Sustainable Communities), which brings together a range of digital interfaces, participation and content management methods to enable communities to utilise smart technologies in the co-design of their futures.

The project has opened greater involvement and inclusivity in community planning and design and has enabled local people to adopt roles as the ‘architects and planners’ of their own community futures and neighbourhoods under localism legislation. Uniquely, this has included the collaborative design of new, freely available technologies or ‘dig-tools’ developed for children and old people who have taken part in digital citizenship and envisioning workshops.

Action in rural Sussex (AirS) adopted the research in its Business Plan and its CEO, Jeremy Leggett, said: “The principle of neighbourhood and community planning is now vital to our policy implementation phases.”

Research on digital communities has also had international applications. Dr Day worked with ITSkills4RuralKenya, a charity that focuses on removing barriers to digital literacy. The researchers worked with the Focus Youth Initiative and as a result young Kenyans from across ethnic groups created videos that reflected on post-election violence. The process helped to build a sense of political empowerment. Together with a number of groups and organisations from Kenyan civil society these researchers have formed a partnership network called Community21 (Digital Toolbox for Sustainable Communities), which brings together a range of digital interfaces, participation and content management methods to enable communities to utilise smart technologies in the co-design of their futures.

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