

Bridging the digital divide

How digital technology can transform young people's communities

By Doug Ragan

Young people in Nairobi, Dar es Salaam and Kampala are using digital technologies such as Global Positioning System (GPS) technology combined with photography and video to provide a new insight into their community projects.

"One GPS unit, with a digital camera, or a video and audio enabled iPod, can allow a youth group of 30 people to map their community" says Jane Bisanju, Community Mapping Trainer. "For example, the Mathare Youth Talent Organization has been able to create a map of over 30 community programs and the small businesses they support. This interactive and paper-based map is easily shared with community members, local government, funders, and others interested in what their organization is doing."

Often, many of the communities have never been mapped before. As the technology becomes cheaper through mobile phones, youth in regions such as Africa, which has the fastest growing cell phone market in the world, will have the ability to improve their lives through access to services and to information on health and jobs.

There has been much debate on whether the digital divide is a prohibitive barrier to development. While there is no doubt there is much to be done, marginalized communities such as those operated by the One Stop Youth Centres in Nairobi, Dar es Salaam and Kampala are challenging and overcoming those barriers.

Digital technologies, once prohibitively expensive and only usable by experts, are now more readily accessible. For example, UN-HABITAT working with groups such as Openstreetmaps and the International Centre for Sustainable Cities (ICSC) has been able to provide cheap and affordable access to these technologies to youth-led groups in the three East African cities where the community mapping project is being piloted.

And it is not only in Africa where this digital revolution is underway. In Latin America, Brazil's Ministry of Cities has partnered with the University of British Columbia (UBC) in Canada to develop a Youth Asset Atlas. The Atlas was developed by young people from five urban regions, who identified and mapped strengths and weaknesses in their communities. In many cases, workshop participants did not realize the extent of the resources already available to them and their engagement with governmental and institutional partners allowed for better articulation of these services. The Asset Atlas was distributed to youth and local government in the five urban regions, with one of the regions winning the Millennium Development Goals Award.

Sharing the Knowledge

The International Centre for Sustainable Cities has worked with UN-HABITAT to ensure that these new resources on youth and cities can be disseminated as widely as possible. Research on engaging urban youth was referenced in the Youth in Cities: World Urban Forum Dialogue Series, launched at this World Urban Forum. This dialogue series has articles written by research agencies, such as the University of Colorado Children, Youth and Environments Centre, on issues such as the engagement of youth in the Middle East and North Africa. This series compliments the launch of the *State of the Urban Youth Report* launched last Friday at the World Urban Youth Assembly, which will be supported by the planned Urban Youth Research Network to be launched later this year.



GPS allows communities to be mapped for the first time

Photo © D. Ragan

ICSC will also be publishing a training manual on community mapping in the coming year. This manual, written in consultation with youth from the One Stop Centres, is part of a larger manual series that focuses on other key youth issues such as entrepreneurship, peacebuilding and participatory evaluation.

Youth are in the vanguard in bridging the digital divide, taking up new technologies, and developing new uses for them. Programmes such as the UN-HABITAT Urban Youth Fund are an excellent example of how youth can be supported in this work. Young people can also work with governments and use these new technologies to assist in post-disaster management in areas such as Haiti by utilizing mapping to plan new communities.

"Youth want to be positive agents of change in their communities," says Bisanju, "We wish to partner with local and national governments and NGOs, and international agencies such as UN-HABITAT can make this happen. It is not only money we are looking for, but acceptance and respect for our capabilities, ingenuity and passion."



The author in Nairobi

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Mapping can assist in post-disaster planning to build new communities

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