

➔ SOLOMON ISLANDS: CONNECTIVITY IS THE OPTION FOR REMOTE ISLANDERS

In a Nutshell

The People First Network, or PFnet, is an initiative providing email access through innovative, low-cost technology. Remote locations across the Solomon Islands connect to the Internet using a simple computer, short-wave radio and solar power. The network helps communities keep in touch, participate in governance, find educational opportunities and generate new sources of income.

This case illustrates how IT innovations can build on available local resources, making technology work for less privileged communities and bridging the digital divide.

The Story

The Solomon Islands consists of roughly 850 islands, mostly underdeveloped and flung out over several thousand square miles of the Pacific Ocean. The country has come through a period of ethnic unrest that left the economy near collapse and the nation in danger of further fragmentation.

Until recently, the only means of communication with the outside world for most remote islands were short-wave radios and satellite telephones. Short-waves often require hours of patient queuing and repeated connection attempts, at a cost that is still too high for rural people living in a no-cash, subsistence economy. Urgent messages are sent through word of mouth. Otherwise, with the postal system being very slow, the principal medium of communication has been letters carried by inter-island travellers. Satellite telephones, where available, are far beyond the reach of the local population, costing between \$5 to \$10 per minute, regardless of the location being called.

The Solomon Islands People First Network Initiative, an NGO, set out to address these problems with basic email services. It sought to improve connectivity while dramatically reducing the prices of communication, making it affordable for low-income users as well as sustainable over time.

PFnet has two components. One is the People First Internet Café in Honiara, which allows residents of the capital city to send emails or browse the Web. It also serves as a training facility for rural development stakeholders and the broader public. Opening in February 2001 with 12 workstations, it is already financially self-sufficient. A recent survey of customers revealed that most users are students and nearly 40 per cent are women.

The second part of PFnet is a network of email stations located on remote islands. The stations are usually hosted in provincial clinics, schools, or other accessible and secure public facilities, where operators assist customers in sending

and receiving emails at a nominal cost. Each station is set up through consultation and an agreement with a village committee that drives the process, raises awareness and inspires a sense of ownership. Used to short-wave radio systems, residents feel comfortable with the technology and are able to do their own troubleshooting.

Typically, rural villagers use the stations to send text emails, which take about ten seconds to transmit. Routine sending of attachments is discouraged. Non-text files such as JPEG images can also be sent, although the user must compress them first. This facility has proven to be useful for NGOs working among rural communities: one group, for example, turns to PFnet to help rural crafts-people market their works with digital photographs, while another assists farmers on identifying pests through pictures.

Several times a day, each remote email station connects to the hub station in Honiara and transfers outgoing emails, which the hub then sends on to the Internet. At the base station, seven different modems operate simultaneously.

After the first remote station was opened in October 2001, seven more were set up by January 2003, and another two have received funds for deployment. With the system in place, it is very simple to add any number of stations on a modular basis; PFnet plans to deploy as many as 25 remote email centres across the nine provinces of the country. All of the selected locations target the most remote areas, where access and telephone service are not already available. The PFnet programme also includes training and capacity development to build the network and facilitate sharing between development stakeholders.

PFnet was set up with funding and technical support from the Solomon Islands Development Administration and Participatory Planning Programme (SIDAPP), a project of UNDP and the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS). The diplomatic missions of China, Great Britain and Japan have also donated directly, while a number of other donors provided funding for the start-up and initial deployment, and continue to support the network's expansion on a station-by-station basis.

Currently, the partners of PFnet include the University of the South Pacific for distance learning trials at a rural community school; Kastom Garden Association (KGA), a community farmer's advice network; the Ministry of Commerce Online Business Information Service, which provides online business information to entrepreneurs and small to medium enterprises, especially in rural areas; and the Solomon Islands Institutional Strengthening of Lands Administration Project (SIISLAP), among others.

PFnet has won international recognition for its achievements: it was a finalist at the 2002 InfoDev/Worldbank/IICD ICT stories competition, and a finalist at the 2002 Stockholm Challenge in Sweden. It has also generated interest among other UNDP country offices in the Asia Pacific region for possible replication.

Results and Critical Factors

As an affordable telecommunications network, PFnet assists low-income groups in taking charge of their own development through improved information and knowledge. It gives rural people a voice in matters concerning their affairs and development, allowing direct contact with decision makers and the media. Other results include:

- In a country fragmented by ethnic strife, a fast and inexpensive communication system plays a role in peace-keeping by dispelling rumours and keeping the channels open between social groups.
- The network facilitates the exchange of information between NGOs, government offices, the media, businesses and other development stakeholders. PFnet is also helping people find new livelihoods, and improving agriculture and land administration.
- PFnet provides distance and vocational education, as well as training in basic information technology skills.

Some factors critical to the success of PFnet have been the adoption of appropriate technology, strong community involvement, the presence of a champion NGO and the demonstration of tangible benefits to the community. Designing the project so it generates its own revenue has been a major contributing factor towards sustainability and future growth.

Further information

ABC Radio Australia-Pacific Beat. n.d. "E-mail Expanding into Villages." A broadcast (<http://abc.net.au/ra/pacbeat/stories/s778556.htm>).

People First Network. Brochure (www.peoplefirst.net.sb/downloads/PFnet_Brochure.doc).

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