

One Problem: Poverty

One Wish: Money

One Solution: Information

In August 2009, three master students from Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands – Marc, Roland and Job arrived in Uganda to participate in the Community Outreach Project (COP) together with eight Ugandan students from the Faculty of Computing and IT, Makerere University - Charles, Richard, Yunusu, Dennis, Stephen, Racheal, Barbara and Catherine.

COP is a fruitful cooperation between Makerere University and Radboud University. The project started in February 2009 as part of the existing successful cooperation between Dutch and Ugandan public universities in the context of the Nuffic Project "Strengthening ICT Training and Research Capacity in the Four Public Universities in Uganda". Nuffic is a large Dutch governmental organization supporting development projects worldwide.

The slogan which gave a title to this article was encountered in one of the rural Community Information Centres where the project took place. It was the very essence of this project: empowering the rural areas of Uganda with Information, enabling their inhabitants to improve their position on the labour market. In this project Dutch and Ugandan students joined forces to make their ICT expertise profitable.

Together with the Rwenzori Information Centre Network (RIC-NET) a plan was created to help assess and improve the quality of their information centres. RIC-NET is an umbrella organization dedicated to empowering farmers in the rural areas with information.

In the preparation phase, of the project, the cooperation between RIC-NET and the students, both in The Netherlands and in Uganda, took place using the modern communication technologies especially Internet. The contact person was Nynke Boersma, a Dutch volunteer cooperater of RIC-NET.

During this preparation period the students together developed an ICT training method adapted to the local context and tailored to their specific information need. For example, one of the exercises in the course is about using the Internet looking for the best price of matooke, so a farmer will not be cheated by intermediaries.

Results

Supported by Nynke Boersma from RIC-NET, the team of Makerere and Radboud students was deployed over five rural information centres located in western Uganda, namely Kyaka, Kabarole, Kyenjojo, Kasese and Kamwenge. For two weeks, students taught local residents – farmers and school teachers - how to use a computer. Depending on the level of the centre, various topics were taught, including computer basics, office applications but most important of all – how to access the useful information on the Internet.



Mak & Radboud Students posing for a picture in front of the center

To make sure that the local IT trainers will be able to continue the training after the students left, they were involved in the teaching and left with the training material created by the students. Where possible, changes to the infrastructure were made to optimize the use of resources of each center. For example, enabling printer sharing, that allows multiple computers to print a document to one printer through the use of a computer network. Also bandwidth management software was installed, preventing precious bandwidth from being wasted by re-using as much data as possible. The students also took care of simple but important physical changes, like rewiring the computers in the classroom, to make the room more accessible. The students also trained the maintenance cooperators of the centers how to do this themselves.

Experiences

Some personal experiences:

Rachael:

"My time at Bwera was memorable, I made real friends among my students. The majority had never had contact with the computer, but by the end of the two weeks, a young man by name Hassan could teach prominent businessmen of the area, who would come to the centre for photocopying, typing and printing services, how to sign up for an email account and how to use it. That was the biggest reward I could expect. The beauty of this community outreach project was that we were working with expectant and eager people, willing and yearning to learn. It is like they had suddenly woken up, realized that the whole world had gotten up and left them behind in this technology journey and they had to catch up in the shortest time possible."