

Harambee: Reinforcing African voices through collaborative processes and technologies

Riff Fullan, Allison Hewlitt and Jacqueline Nnam

Background

The Harambee Project was conceived by the Association for Progressive Communications (APC), Bellanet and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), and is funded by Connectivity Africa hosted by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and Hivos. The Project is designed to support increased capacity among both the project's initiators, and a range of Africa-based networks and communities, to coordinate and facilitate the interactions of their respective constituencies.

The rationale for this focus rests on several observations. First, it is recognized that a networked approach to confronting many of the complex challenges faced in development today is one that offers greater chances for effective impact.¹ Second, such an approach is geared toward creating the conditions for participation by a broader variety of partners with differing perspectives and differing contributions to make. It is the combination of these diversities that promises robust and sustainable outcomes as well as a high degree of shared learning.² Finally, it is through collaboration and networking that Africans have the greatest potential to effectively participate in their own development as it unfolds in a globalized environment.³

The implementation of Harambee is coordinated by the Uganda-based Bellanet Africa and includes a variety of partners:

- Harambee Coordination Committee made up of representatives APC, Bellanet and UNECA;
- Focus Network Coordinators from APC Africa Women (AAW), Academia Research Network (ARN), African Youth Information Network (AYIN), Constitution & Reform Education Consortium CRECO, and Women of Uganda Network (WOUGNET);
- Small grant recipient networks in Africa (to be determined).

The Harambee 'niche'

Within the overall objective of strengthening existing networks and communities in Africa, there are three main areas of intervention upon which the project is based:

- Supporting network coordinators in the design and implementation of network strengthening activities (i.e., providing access to resources, including people, funds and materials) and coaching/mentoring;

- Developing capacities related to network coordination (e.g., offering training workshops, creating safe and comfortable online spaces for shared learning, incorporating action and reflection);
- Identifying and filling gaps in existing training and research-oriented resources on knowledge and information and communication technologies (ICTs).

The road to 2006

From the beginning, there has been a conscious effort to design and implement Harambee in a collaborative fashion. This was evident from the earliest discussions of the seeds of the Harambee idea in a meeting of the Partnership for Information and Communication Technologies in Africa (PICTA) which took place in Tunis in late 2003; here a number of key players working in ICTs and Knowledge for Development (K4D) discussed the creation of a knowledge sharing consortium to further collaborative development in Africa. This led to subsequent dialogues among three of the principal partners, APC, Bellanet and UNECA with the support of Connectivity Africa, and eventually to the creation of Harambee in September 2005.

The formation of what is the Harambee Project today did not stop there, however. The project was ‘pre-launched’ in conjunction with two back-to-back workshops held in Addis Ababa in September 2005. The term ‘pre-launched’ is used because, although a significant portion of funding for the project was in the pipeline, it had not been made immediately available. The intent was to use what had been allocated for the inaugural workshop as a vehicle for promoting the rapid and direct engagement of Focus Network (FN) Coordinators in Harambee Project design and implementation, with a view to promoting a broadly shared ownership in Harambee among Coordination Committee (CC) members and FN Coordinators.

The first workshop was designed for FN Coordinators to:

- Learn more about each others’ networks and communities;
- Learn more about, discuss their engagement with, and provide input into specific elements of the Harambee Project;
- Create the foundations for the production of their respective Action Plans (the latter to be submitted to the CC for funding).⁴

The second workshop was the first concrete capacity development activity of Harambee and focused on training the FN Coordinators on face-to-face network facilitation techniques. The opportunity was taken to rather uniquely combine this training with the development of the FN Action Plans. In other words, the content side of the training workshop was the Action Plans each FN needed to produce to submit to Harambee for funding, and they began to produce these through dialogues they facilitated for each other in applied practice of the facilitation techniques they were learning.

The training focused on encouraging participation through the use of ‘open’ facilitation techniques, such as having chairs arranged in a large circle for plenary discussions, making extensive use of breakout groups and having participants themselves engaged in constructing the agenda for the workshop. The idea behind

such techniques is to reinforce the equality of all participants, and encourage everyone to have a voice, rather than setting up an ‘experts speak-participants listen’ scenario.

Although the FNs and CC continued to interact after the two back-to-back workshops, the expected further funding for Harambee was not secured until several months later (in the December 2005 - January 2006) period. Thus, the conditions for funding Action Plans began with the 2006 calendar year.

Notable features of Harambee and its implementation

Before reflecting on some of the learning we have experienced so far and looking at expectations of the future of this two-year project, it is worth considering a few of the distinguishing features of Harambee. These include:

- **‘Nested network of networks’:** The attempt to create a ‘nested network of networks’ insofar as the project is assisting a small number of discrete Focus Networks to improve their effectiveness in their respective areas of work, while at the same time promoting the FN Coordinators to network with each other and share their experiences as coordinators. The hope is that through this strategy, the conditions will arise for an Africa-based community of experts on the ICT and knowledge-related aspects of facilitating networks to grow out of this seedbed.
- **The openness of the Harambee project:** This is manifest in the striving to avoid specifying all project activities, for example, what kinds of training would be provided to FNs, what kinds of resource materials would be developed, what specific research topics would be pursued, and which activities of the FNs themselves (i.e., those specified in their Action Plans) would be supported by Harambee in advance of bringing the FNs and CC together for the launch and training workshops. The idea behind this was to maximize both the influence and the sense of ownership of all practitioners involved with the project on its implementation and evolution.
- **The ‘inter-networking’ approach:** This refers to the readiness to seize opportunities to broaden the benefit of Harambee’s existence beyond the FNs or other direct recipients of the project. So far there is only one example of this, but it is a powerful one: when the Network Facilitation Training Workshop was organized, it coincided with the timing of the initial meeting of the Global Knowledge Partnership Africa (GKP Africa) at UNECA in Addis Abeba. Recognizing that as a network-in-formation GKP Africa could benefit from such training, the CC invited GKP Africa members to participate and it turned out to be a pivotal meeting for that network to hit the ground running (see The Sustainability Aspect below for further detail).

What are we learning?

The Harambee Coordination Committee has been recently reflecting on what we have learned so far, on what has worked well in the project, on what has not worked so well, and on what we can do to incorporate our learning into ongoing and future

implementation. In addition to what we have gained from our recent dialogues, another mechanism we are using is a Learning and Evaluation Framework aimed at providing, at both the Focus Network and the Coordination Committee levels, the foundation for Harambee project

What has worked for Harambee?

In terms of the positive, we have found that integrating the capacity development aspect of the project with concrete activity planning of the Focus Networks created a high level of enthusiasm and energy. This was achieved through the abovementioned linking of FN Coordinator training with the production of FN Action Plans.

Although it sounds rather mundane, this delivery of the more generic skills-building training by having FN Coordinators practice their newly acquired network facilitation techniques in the act of creating their respective Action Plans had a dramatic reinforcement effect. It served to immediately bring the training alive for the participants because they were not merely going through a series of abstract exercises to acquire new skills, but instead were engaging in dialogues on issues of central importance to them. In other words, what concrete strategies should they employ to strengthen their networks in the course of learning new facilitation skills?

In addition to this ‘training-through-action’, a further successful element of Harambee implementation so far has been the creation of time and space for FN Coordinators to define their respective challenges and opportunities themselves. This was made possible through the combination of two things: first, not specifying which concrete activities the project would support for each network until each had created and submitted an Action Plan. Second, providing the opportunity and encouragement for FN Coordinators to put serious thought into the network strengthening aspects of their work, as opposed to the issues with which their networks are concerned. This encouraged them to step back from the content preoccupations of the networks and look at processes and tools, in the areas of knowledge and ICTs, that they could put into place to enhance network functioning and thereby enhance network effectiveness.

What else have we found to be useful in Harambee? The establishment of a coordinating team (i.e., the CC) that is both committed and highly collaborative has helped us confront what have been much greater challenges associated with getting the project off the ground than we had originally expected. Part of the challenge has been the engagement from the start of a number of different players with different perspectives: this has necessitated a lot of dialogue around goals, strategies and practice, but it has also helped to create a sense of shared purpose. Without a well-functioning CC this diversity would have been unmanageable.

The CC also keeps in touch, through a combination of an online discussion space (a Dgroup) and frequent teleconference meetings. This is another critical element in renewing the momentum for pursuing a wide variety of ongoing tasks, from the earlier necessity of working through dialogues with and different requirements of different funders, through the articulation of learning and evaluation frameworks, the creation of a Small Grants Fund, the liaison with various FNs, etc.

What has not worked as well for Harambee?

Despite the tremendous amount of enthusiasm displayed and ownership taken by the FN Coordinators and the CC in the formative stages of the project, it has proven difficult to regain momentum generated in our first face-to-face events where project participants first got to know each other, developed a sense of common purpose, and began to work out their own network-strengthening strategies.

In addition to the CC discussion list, which exists as a space for discussions on project governance and administration, there is a Dgroup to support ongoing dialogues among FN Coordinators, CC members and project funders. The goal is for the lists to maintain strong linkages and dialogues during the relatively long periods between face-to-face meetings of Harambee participants. This has worked reasonably well in the CC case, although it is largely due to the regular teleconferences the CC members have as project governors. It has been more difficult to keep the energy up on FN dialogues due in part to unforeseen delays in getting project implementation off the ground, a factor that has taken much of wind out of Harambee sails since the original face-to-face meetings.

How can we learn from our experiences?

The CC has taken a few lessons on board in the course of looking at our experiences so far. These include:

- Build regular reflection exercises into project plans. Although there is a shared feeling that we could be doing more, it is also true that we have been able to make several early course corrections as a result of examining progress on an ongoing basis;
- Develop strategies to maintain momentum. It is crucial that collaborative activities are implemented in transparent and proactive ways. For example, people need to be updated and informed about delays and the reasons for them. Planning joint activities to ensure several project partners can work together on concrete things can also help sustain enthusiasm and mutual respect;
- If you do not know how to plan an event that is truly empowering and engaging, find out how. Sometimes we know the result we want, but we may not be confident that we know just how to set the stage for participation and collective ownership. It is natural to shy away from uncertainty and to go with what is familiar, but very often only a small amount of research and asking around will help in the creation of a truly dynamic and network-building event;
- Invest time and energy in regular communication – this may sound easy, but can be quite difficult when various participants have varying situations related to connectivity, time zones and other responsibilities outside of the project in question. However, there is truly no substitute for frequent communication to support sustained activity.

What challenges does the Harambee Coordination Committee see ahead?

The ICT aspect

Although Harambee is not solely about technology, a key type of capacity development it tries to support is concerned with the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) to enhance network effectiveness. As mentioned, project participants use online dialogues to keep in touch, discuss strategies, exchange information, etc. We will also launch the Harambee project website soon, developed using the open source Drupal application. The website will include: descriptive information about the project and the core partners involved in its implementation; access to resources generated in the form of documents, podcasts, etc. through Harambee-sponsored activity; and spaces for collaborative authoring (e.g. wiki) and personal reflection (e.g. blog).⁵

The CC has also experimented with combinations of technologies for synchronous communication. For example, in our meetings, which rely mostly on telephone, we have also used technologies such as Skype voice and chat. The Harambee Coordination wiki is used to capture the minutes of these meetings and to support co-creation of project documentation. So far we have had mixed results using Skype voice because of difficulties with some CC members' Internet connections, so we rely mostly on telephone and occasional chat sessions. We share the active facilitation of both telephone and chat meetings on a rotating basis.

We are also exploring the use of more recent technologies such as podcasting and blogging to share information and to provide access to dialogues for people who may not be able to attend face-to-face events. Although they may not be able to interact with people with specific expertise, people can listen to podcasts that capture key conversations during these events.

The biggest challenge for all of us is developing a strategy to ensure we will deploy technologies that both speak to real needs of Harambee constituencies and can be used without a substantial investment of time, money or energy. The key is to find a combination of technologies that will maximize support for collaboration, both within and between networks.

The resource aspect

Another significant area of challenge for Harambee, and this is related partly to the fact that we are still in the early stages of implementation, is the development of a sound plan for creating resource materials. This is a significant and complementary component to the provision of direct capacity development support through training exercises and through funding of network-strengthening activities. Such resources are intended for Harambee participants and others in Africa and beyond, to find appropriate resources, be it training materials, research papers or other documents, which can assist in strengthening knowledge management or sharing and/or technology appropriation aspects of network capacity.

A central element of a successful strategy, in our view, is finding a way to tap into the collective expertise our existing network of practitioners represents and coupling that with a sound framework for the identification of, and linking with, the myriad other relevant resources available on the Internet. We need to develop a Harambee-specific portal that will help our constituencies access existing expertise and knowledge in ways that do not demand substantial amounts of time, something that in most cases is persistently in short supply.

The learning and evaluation aspect

Another significant challenge with which we are currently grappling is associated with monitoring and evaluating the project, as well as ensuring there is a lasting learning element to it. To assist with this, and in addition to the various mechanisms for communication and sharing information which have already been described, we have developed a Learning and Evaluation Framework with two components, the first to be used primarily by the FN Coordinators, the second by the CC members.

The idea behind both is to have a processes that will guide learning and evaluation without imposing an onerous burden of additional work for project implementers. To the extent that these processes are relatively light and provide direct benefits to those implementers, they will not only be more thoroughly applied, but they will also contribute to deeper and more shared learning among project participants.

Learning with the Focus Networks

An Action Review Cycle is proposed, to learn with and from the activities of the focus networks.

... plan → act → review → theorise → plan ...⁶

As part of the 'plan' cycle, the FN coordinator is invited to share his/her thoughts on three aspects of the work being undertaken – the situation, the outcomes and the actions:

1. The salient features of the situation faced by the coordinator (and why they are salient);
2. The outcomes that are desirable (and why they are desirable);
3. The actions that are expected to lead to the outcomes in the situation (and why they will lead to those outcomes).

FN coordinators are encouraged to develop a core set of indicators in consultation with their members. The set of indicators are intended to help them to see how they are doing with respect to their anticipated outcomes but also to report out to others on progress.

The review stage will take place on a pre-arranged date and will focus on the development of a detailed reconstruction of what happened allowing for the emergence of local theories.

Information gathered in the action review cycle will be captured in a wiki that has been set up for each FN Coordinator and viewable by all coordinators. The responsibility for learning and reflection lies jointly in the hands of both the network coordinator and the CC member liaising with the network.

The proposed approach serves many purposes. It will help to:

- Identify what can be, and is being, learned from the implementation of the focus networks' activities by the focus networks themselves;
- Support the development of local theories related to network strengthening;
- Contribute information and resources in the development of network related;
- Identify areas in which additional support is needed and can be provided by the Harambee initiative;
- Strengthen the relationship between members of the coordination committee and the focus network coordinators.

In addition, this approach is expected to:

- Facilitate the process of documentation and evaluation on the part of the focus networks;
- Demonstrate the use and effectiveness of ICTs in support of learning .

Learning with the Coordination Committee

The Action Review Cycle is also being used by the CC to learn and reflect on the Harambee Initiative as a whole. The cycle began at the 'plan' stage when the CC members convened to reflect on the most important features of the Harambee Initiative, the desirable outcomes and the actions that would lead to the outcomes. The committee has also identified a set of indicators to be used to demonstrate progress towards the expected outcomes.

As an example, one salient feature of the CC's situation is the diversity – in terms of the areas of expertise and focus – within the set of FNs. This is an important feature to consider because of the constraints that it creates: their lack of commonality requires additional energy and new thinking in order to create the conditions necessary for them to work together more closely and provide mutual support. As a result, one of the initiative's outcomes is a platform or space for mutual learning among, but not limited to, the CC and FN coordinators. The CC expects a number of actions to lead to those outcomes including active facilitation on behalf of the CC, documentation that captures what the networks are doing, and learning and creating value.

As part of the Action Review Cycle, a review by the members of the CC is planned for the next face-to-face event schedule for October 2006. The review is also geared towards learning utilisation. The CC will explicitly address what has been learned based on the situation faced, the outcomes pursued and the actions that were planned. Opportunities and approaches to make use of new insights will be pursued.

The sustainability aspect

A third kind of challenge, and this is perhaps the greatest for us, is to find effective ways of promoting the organic development of network strengthening activities that

transcend the project itself. In other words, how can we implement Harambee in a way that supports a continuation of the kind of capacity development the project is trying to foster? Harambee is only a two-year project, but the challenge is to put in place the necessary foundation for Harambee-like capacity development to be continuously available to networks in Africa, and furthermore to a broader constituency than the immediate project partners.

One way in which we hope to see this occur is through the development of a network of people and organizations with expertise and interest in the kind of knowledge or ICT-related capacity development work with which Harambee is concerned. Where would such a network come from? The seeds might be sown through the CC members, FNs, donors and Small Grant recipients of the project interacting with - and learning from - each other in various ways. This in turn would lead to the existence of a core group to keep such interactions going.

A second thread to be followed in the development of this network is the identification of other potential partners on the African continent and beyond through the research Harambee will directly support.

Further, in the course of participation in various events – and inviting others to participate in Harambee-related events – representatives of Harambee are likely to create new linkages that will come to fruition over the next few years. This is the ‘inter-networking’ approach we referred to earlier. In the example of the training Harambee provided to members of the emergent GKP Africa network, it was by chance that their inaugural meeting was happening around the same time and in the same place as the Network Facilitation Training Workshop for Harambee FNs. The CC members felt that, even though GKP Africa was not at all involved with Harambee, they should be invited to participate. There was room to accommodate additional participants in the training and we recognized that here was an African network that could benefit from this training,

Two unforeseen and positive outcomes resulted from this openness to having others benefit directly from our work, even when this occurred in such a manner that did not require any additional resources. First, a substantial amount of enthusiasm was generated among GKP Africa members, and a shared commitment developed among them to begin concrete planning for joint activities within their own network. Second, the idea of GKP Africa and Harambee having further contact of mutual benefit was sparked on both sides.

Thus, a potential additional contributor to the pool of expertise Harambee hopes to foster was identified almost as a side-effect of our open approach to looking for linkages outside the circle of direct project partners. We believe this is not only in the spirit of Harambee (i.e, the promotion of broadly shared ownership wherever possible), but it is a growing trend of networking initiatives. Early examples of this includes the coming together of diverse anti-globalization groups, where organizations that did not work together on an ongoing basis previously, chose to collaborate and develop a common agenda around a specific set of issues, and were highly effective in doing so. Could this be a trend we will see in the development community as well?

Conclusion

As this case study illustrates, the Harambee project is an ambitious one, and one that takes a somewhat risky approach to encouraging the development of a sustainable pool of expertise on knowledge and ICTs for development. It does this by taking its own advice to heart: a powerful way for Africans to have greater control over and a greater impact on the development challenges confronting them is to work in a networked fashion. Thus, Harambee is trying to do this by linking the support for individual African networks whilst promoting networking amongst its coordinators, who in turn play a facilitating role within their respective networks and who want to increase their capacities to do so.

Whether or not we reach our lofty goal of having a network of African knowledge and ICT practitioners who carry on beyond the project itself, we are actively using a variety of technologies and processes to ensure that a significant value added of implementing Harambee is the ongoing shared learning among individual and institutional participants. This, in itself, should have a lasting effect on participating networks. Similarly, through what we have called 'inter-networking', we can benefit from and provide benefit to African networks that are not part of the immediate Harambee family. We are looking forward to the road ahead.

References

- Conklin, J. (2006), *Dialogue Mapping: Building Shared Understanding of Wicked Problems*, Chichester: John Wiley and Sons.
- Hovland, I. (2003), 'Knowledge Management and Organisational Learning: An International Development Perspective - An Annotated Bibliography', *Working Paper 224*. London: Overseas Development Institute.
- Madon, S. (2000), 'International NGOs: Networking, Information Flows and Learning', *Development Informatics, Working Paper No. 8*, Manchester: Institute for Development Policy and Management, University of Manchester.
- Mansell, R. (2002), 'Constructing the knowledge base for knowledge-driven development', *Journal of Knowledge Management*, Vol. 6, No. 4: 317-329.
- Mansell, R., and Wehn, U., eds. (1998), *Knowledge Societies: Information Technology for Sustainable Development*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Straus, D. (2002), *How to make Collaboration Work: Powerful Ways to Build Consensus, Solve Problems and Make Decisions*, San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.
- Surowiecki, J. (2005), *The Wisdom of Crowds*, New York: Anchor.

Abstract

In the course of their various activities, the Harambee Project proponents recognized that processes supporting collaboration and partnership are critical to enhancing the participation of Africans in their own development. There is both an immediate and strong need in Africa for capacity development in the design of processes that assist in the creation, use and sharing of knowledge, and in the use of ICTs to support such engagement. Harambee assists its proponents and partners in supporting specific networks and communities in Africa by increasing their respective capacities to facilitate and coordinate such groups. Through the implementation of focus network pilot activities, provision of channels for knowledge sharing, a small grant facility and the development of research and training materials, Harambee is increasing the capacity of network coordinators and ultimately the effectiveness of the networks themselves.

This case study provides a brief background of Harambee and presents its approach to development through strengthening networks. It also presents some of the key lessons learned as well as what it sees as the major challenges that lie ahead.

About the Authors



Riff Fullan is Program Coordinator at Bellanet. Having been at Bellanet for close to ten years, he has been closely involved in its development from a 3-person team in Ottawa to a network of partners in the Africa, Asia and Latin America and Caribbean regions, in addition to the original operation in Canada (housed at IDRC). In recent years, Riff has become increasingly engaged in facilitation and in investigating, supporting and participating in collaborative processes. Riff's current interests are driven by a desire to better understand the dynamics that affect these complex and crucial relationships in a development context.

Email: rfullan@bellanet.org



Allison Hewlitt is a practitioner, facilitator and lifelong learner. As a Senior Program Officer at Bellanet, she devotes her energy to design and implement collaborative processes in support of knowledge workers and institutional change. Her interest in change management, organisational learning and knowledge sharing are fuelled by a thirst to better understand how both process and ICTs can contribute to greater information and knowledge sharing, more informed decision-making and empowerment.

Email: ahewlitt@bellanet.org



Jacqueline Nnam is a Program Officer at Bellanet Africa where she has worked since January 2006. She holds a Bachelors degree in Library and Information Science from Makerere University, Uganda. Three years after her university training she moved away from the conventional library profession and found a new passion in the field of knowledge management and ICTs for development.

Jacqueline Nnam E-mail: jnnam@bellanet.org

¹ A strong argument for this case is made by Conklin (2006). See also Mansell (2002).

² An interesting discussion of the potential benefits associated with employing inputs from a diversity of actors can be found in Surowiecki (2005).

³ As Mansell and Wehn (1998: 10) put it: “The generation and application of knowledge depends upon much more than access to a global information infrastructure. If developing countries are to experience ‘empowerment through knowledge’ they will need to build new partnerships and focus on capacity building.”

⁴ The Action Plans developed by each focus network will outline their respective strategies for developing network capacity in priority areas, with support from, the Harambee project.

⁵ See <http://www.harambeeafrica.net>

⁶ <http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/reflques.html>