



**Information and
Communications Technology,
Social Capital and the
Community Sector**

**Submission to the Department
of Communications and
Information Technology and
the Arts**

March 2005

INTRODUCTION

ACTCOSS acknowledges that modern day Canberra has been built on the traditional lands of the Ngunnawal people. We pay our respects to their elders and recognise the displacement and disadvantage they have suffered since European settlement. ACTCOSS celebrates the Ngunnawal's living culture and valuable contribution to the ACT community.

The ACT Council of Social Service Inc. (ACTCOSS) is the peak representative body for not-for-profit community organisations, people living with disadvantage, and low-income citizens of the Territory. ACTCOSS is a member of the nationwide COSS network, made up of each of the state Councils and the national body, the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS).

ACTCOSS's objectives are representation of people living with disadvantage, the promotion of equitable social policy, and the development of a professional, cohesive and effective community sector.

The membership of the Council includes the majority of community based service providers in the social welfare area, a range of community associations and networks, self-help and consumer groups and interested individuals.

ACTCOSS receives funding from the Community Services Program (CSP) which is funded by the ACT Government.

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ACTCOSS SUBMISSION

in response to the Discussion Papers "The Role of ICT in Building Communities and Social Capital" and "Information and Communications Technology transforming the Non-profit Sector" produced by the Department of Information and Communications Technology and the Arts.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACT	Australian Capital Territory
ACTCOSS	ACT Council of Social Services Inc.
ACTIM	ACT Information Management
DCITA	Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts
LOTE	Languages Other Than English
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
IT	Information Technology

PART 1: The Role of ICT in Building Communities and Social Capital

The Digital Divide

The increasing use and availability of Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) provides exciting opportunities for the transformation of how people in our society communicate with one another. However, the potential of the technology can only be realised if all Australians are able to understand and access it. There have been ongoing concerns raised about the “digital divide” – the gap between those who are able to access and understand ICT and those who are not. The first step to ensuring that any social capital dividends from the use of ICT are available to all Australians is that social capital is developed where it is most needed.

Thus, ACTCOSS strongly supports government intervention to ensure that access to and understanding of ICT is available to all. In particular, ACTCOSS notes that those who do not have access to ICT, in particular home computers and the internet, are often the same people who suffer other forms of socio-economic disadvantage. ACTCOSS believes that as ICT continues and develops, it is imperative that governments assist in ensuring that the technology is used to reduce social disadvantage and social exclusion, rather than contribute to it.

There has been empirical work on the usage of ICT among differing groups in the Australian population. For example, the ABS study *Australia Online: How Australians are using Computers and the Internet* found a number of asymmetries in the use of computers and the internet between different groups in the Australian population. In particular, they found that certain groups were significantly less likely to use ICT, including:

- women, particularly older women;
- people living on low incomes;
- people with low levels of education;
- blue-collar workers;
- indigenous Australians;
- people born overseas, particularly those born in southern and eastern Europe, north Africa and the Middle East;
- people who speak English poorly;
- people living in rural and regional Australia, and;
- unemployed Australians.

In other words, the demographics of ICT use overlap with other forms of social and economic disadvantage. These groups are also likely to have relatively low stocks of social capital, and would receive the greatest benefits from any additional social capital that could be built from using ICT.

However, it is clear from the statistics that the people who would benefit most from these new technologies are not the people who have the greatest access. This essential asymmetry in the provision of ICT services presents a potential problem for Australia, in that those who already have high stocks of social capital are using ICT to further build their social networks, while those with lower levels appear to be missing out on many of these opportunities. The Productivity Commission (2003) notes, one of the negative effects of (bonding) social capital can be the exclusion of outsiders, and in the ICT context, this could potentially mean the exclusion from social networks of those without ICT access, thus further eroding their already low levels of social inclusion and social capital. Maximising ICT connectivity is essential to prevent an outsider group of the 'technology poor' does not develop.

A number of agencies have enquired into the issue of the "digital divide" – the gap between those who have high ICT connectivity and those who do not. In December 2000 ACTCOSS published *Community IT Access: A Discussion Paper on Information Technology Inaccessibility in the ACT*, which identified a number of benefits, implications, sources of disadvantage, barriers, and possible policy responses to ICT in the Canberra community. The ACT Government subsequently commissioned the Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics to produce the study *Bridging the Digital Divide: A study into connectivity issues for disadvantaged people*, which then informed the ACT Digital Divide Program. In particular, the study found that "connectivity" was more than simply access to hardware, software and computer networks. Connectivity also includes the *ability* and skills to utilise ICT effectively, as well as *affordability*, which refers to the capability of someone to access ICT without incurring a substantial cost given her income. Within these parameters, the study noted that:

"True equity involves providing different components of connectivity (including training and confidence support) to different groups"
(ACTIM 2002, p2)

ACTCOSS believes that ICT has the potential to increase the connectivity of the Australian community, and not only generate additional social capital, but reduce social exclusion and build human capital within the population. However, current evidence suggests that those who would benefit most from the technology continue to face barriers to connectivity, thus preventing the technology from maximising its social potential.

Trust

The Social Capital Discussion Paper identifies trust as a component of social capital. However, when discussing trust in ICT, there may be multiple components of trust that may stem from different sources and entail different policy responses in order to facilitate greater trust. By illustration, we could divide trust in this context into:

- Technological trust (Will the technology work the way it is supposed to?);
- User confidence (Am I using the technology properly?), and;
- Recipient trust (Will the receiver of my information use it correctly?)

Note that this categorisation makes a division between a users different beliefs about: the technology; themselves; and other people. For people to gain a generalised trust in the use of ICT, all three types of trust must be present. Note also that the different types of trust may different policy responses.

Technological trust is likely to be improved by increased connectivity to ensure that people have a correct understanding of the potential and limitations of ICT, and develop accurate expectations of the capability of the technology. Improved quality control where there are real failures in applications would also be useful. Making ICT technologies more available, particularly to groups who do not have access would also be beneficial.

Improving user confidence requires additional training and acquisition of human capital to ensure that ICT users have sufficient confidence in their abilities to be able to explore and utilise the various applications and uses without fear of exposing themselves to risk due to human error. Extending government programs that target people with few ICT skills would improve this type of trust.

Finally, improving recipient trust is akin to building generalised social trust. In this specific instance, it may also be able to be improved by strengthening legal responsibilities of ICT users as well as making security protocols more available.

The above analysis underlines the fact that a major strategy of building trust in ICT is access to and familiarity with the technology. It is very difficult to place trust in technology that you do not understand and have no experience with.

The DCITA Discussion Paper *The Role of ICT in Building Communities and Social Capital* (the Social Capital Discussion Paper) briefly touches upon these issues on page 16. However, ACTCOSS cautions against framing the lower participation of disadvantaged groups in ICT as resulting from "communities and individuals whose experiences make them wary of other individuals". A broader conception of social disadvantage would acknowledge that disadvantaged groups have had fewer opportunities to develop the skills necessary to utilise the technology, and face greater cost barriers to acquiring the technology, and so have had less opportunity to build trust in it. In addition, as the ACTIM study states:

“For, whatever is believed about the benefits to *society* of full connectivity (eg lower costs for service delivery, greater integration, more effective communication or whatever), it remains a fact that for many people who are poor, or have low educational qualifications, the perceived benefits of connectivity *to them* are outweighed by the perceived costs *to them*. And most of them are probably right, given the current costs of connectivity. Given the current purchase and maintenance costs of computers, phone-calls, and ISP charges, and the low budget of many of these people, most people on low incomes are probably better off, in the short term at least, spending their money on clothing, housing, food and health and other necessities.”

(ACTIM 2002, p12)

The primary method of building trust in ICT should be continued and expanded investment in ensuring that all Australians have the opportunity to access and become familiar with the technology, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Without this initial exposure to ICT, many Australians will continue to remain unconnected, untrusting and unable to participate in the online community.

Online Threats

It needs to be remembered that building and promoting trust should only be done in instances where that trust is actually warranted. ICT is not without its problems and dangers, and people should not be encouraged to place blind faith in technology when there are occasions where that trust will be abused. There is a need to promote information, skill development, accessibility, caution, data protection, privacy, and precautions to use ICT safely, particularly among those who are only beginning to use the technology. Simply promoting trust without the necessary qualifications and precautions may cause more harm than good.

While there are occasional media reports about online threats such as the “Love Bug” virus, many people are still unaware of the potential for computer crime and nuisance programs, and other threats mentioned in the Social Capital Discussion Paper. ACTCOSS would add the potential threats to unwary users, particularly children and young people, through an incautious use of internet chat rooms and other social software.

In particular, ACTCOSS notes that people who have less familiarity and contact with ICT are more likely to be ignorant of possible security threats associated with their use of ICT, and therefore more susceptible to phishing and internet fraud. When a person becomes a victim to this type of deception, any trust in the technology is quickly eroded, and the user is likely to diminish their ICT usage, and rarely expand their interaction with the technology.

There is a role for government, as well as software producers and retailers, to be involved in educating users, and particularly new users, in ensuring that their privacy is not compromised when using information technologies. This type of education could be built into community education programs, and particularly targeted at groups who have less knowledge or experience with ICT.

Social Networks

Information and Communications Technology has the potential to improve social connectedness for a number of disadvantaged groups in the community. The use of e-mail, bulletin boards, internet chat rooms and information websites can all be effectively utilised by people who may otherwise face barriers to interacting with the community. In particular, people with a disability, carers, parents with young children, people living in rural and remote areas, people from a non-English-speaking background and individuals who may not wish to disclose their group status may particularly be able to benefit from increased access to ICT.

People with a disability: Many people with a disability face barriers to social participation. They may face mobility barriers, and be unable to leave home or have difficulty entering traditional social venues. They may also be reliant on income support, meaning they do not have the financial resources to engage in social activities with the same frequency or variety as people with greater financial resources. ICT, particularly the internet and associated social software, provides an additional avenue for people to communicate with others (although this should not be pursued at the expense of addressing other participation barriers such as improved accessibility).

However, people with a disability often require special hardware and software needs to enable them to use the technology. This often places an additional cost impost on technology that is already expensive. The equipment is also often difficult to obtain, and may require purpose-built equipment that further increases costs. Moreover, the extra hardware and software may require specialised training that may be difficult to obtain and also has a cost impost. In addition, many websites and other ICT tools are not designed for people with special needs. For example, government websites may use flashing graphics which may cause problems for the vision-impaired or people with epilepsy.

Thus, while the potential for social inclusion and greatly improved social networks that might be achieved by ICT for people with a disability may not be realised due to their special requirements. There is a role for government in assisting people with a disability acquire the necessary technology so they can maximise their social networks and be included in the building of social capital.

Carers and parents with young children: Both carers and parents with young children, particularly low income single parents, may have face barriers to building social networks as they must administer continuous care to their charges, and this makes engaging in social activities outside the home difficult. ICT may allow them to maintain and build social networks without having to leave their home and caring responsibilities. Government support and encouragement of these groups to improve uptake of ICT would be beneficial in expanding social networks and improving the scope of social capital development

People living in rural and remote areas: People living distant from major population centres have always had difficult maintaining large social networks, as well as accessing facilities. The provision of online services and use of social software allows those who have access to ICT services in rural and remote areas far greater ability to connect to social networks and improve their levels of social capital. However, the ability to gain access to these technologies is often limited, with internet and, in particular, broadband services often unavailable. Once again, the people who have most to gain from the new technologies are often those with limited access.

People from non-English-speaking backgrounds: New technologies are allowing greater communication between people who speak primarily in languages other than English (LOTE). The internet, in particular, allows access to a wide variety of information sources and allows those who do not speak English well to find and communicate with one another, and build larger social networks than they may otherwise be able to. It also allows maintenance of social contacts with family and friends in foreign countries at relatively low cost compared to telephony or international travel.

However, the predominance of English on the internet and the often poor quality of information in LOTE often means that these opportunities are not maximised. Equally, the ability to buy technology and obtain skills without English fluency remains rare. There are opportunities for government to improve ICT literacy among people from a non-English-speaking background, not only by improving English language training and translation services, but by providing a wider range of information in other languages, for instance, in health and access to government services.

People who do not wish to disclose their group status: The anonymity that can be provided by ICT technologies such as the internet allows people to make new social connections and find information in situations where they may not feel able to do so publicly. For example, people suffering from mental health problems or with certain medical conditions may use the internet to make contacts with others who share their problems and can provide peer support and create new networks. Equally, groups such as gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people can use the internet to make social connections and find community support. While these groups may be harder to target for direct provision of support, the provision of relevant online information as well as using ICT to consult and conduct research for such groups are avenues of which government should be aware.

Social Capital

ICT allows the fast and efficient transfer of large amounts of information between people, and allows people to maintain a large number of social contacts with lower transport and transaction costs. These features of ICT mean that it has potential for assisting people to engage in social contact, especially those who have a limited ability to do so by other means.

The ability of ICT to move information at low transmission cost allows greater networking between groups and allows people to maintain contact within and between a wider variety of groups. The use of websites and bulletin boards by groups allows greater access to the norms and opinions of different groups, particularly if these sites are freely accessible. This permits information to permeate between groups, and thereby assist in developing a shared understanding of one another.

The lower cost barriers to establish an online presence mean a wider variety of groups can be formed that cater to a spectrum of social differences. This wider diversity of social groupings can enhance an individual's ability to participate socially, and develop a broader range of social interactions, and thus contributing to the development of social capital.

However, ICT is not a magic wand for social inclusion. There remains the possibility, particularly among the young or socially isolated, that ICT, particularly the internet, may contribute to social isolation if it becomes a complete substitution for normal social interaction. Further research may be required to determine the extent of social isolation that may be caused by over-reliance on ICT, and what government strategies may be useful to combat this.

In addition, ACTCOSS is concerned that ICT may come to be seen as a substitute, rather than a complement, for the delivery of social services. ACTCOSS would caution against replacing face-to-face services, and notes the many difficulties with electronic service delivery: for example, as discussed previously by ACTCOSS:

In crisis situations the provision of services via the Internet will not be sufficient as human interaction and intervention may be necessary; personal evaluation and care may be required to prevent further harm to the person. Dependency on Internet service provision may increase the risk of further harm to individuals in crisis situations as the Internet may diminish relationship building and human interaction.

(ACTCOSS 2000, p11)

The Social Capital Discussion Paper briefly mentions the concepts of e-democracy and e-governance. While these concepts are neither defined nor explored in any detail, ACTCOSS would add the question of who would actually participate in e-democracy or e-governance. With recent data showing nearly half of households do not have access to the internet (ABS 2004b); there is a real concern that broad scale adoption of an e-democracy or e-governance framework could potentially disenfranchise a large proportion of the population.

ACTCOSS believes that ICT has a great potential to improve social capital, but if all Australians are not able to access and use the technology it will be unable to maximise its potential and may entrench social disadvantage. ACTCOSS notes that this also means investing in human capital for the unconnected, as the ABS notes:

Human capital is related to social capital in that the interpersonal skills of individuals affect the size of their networks and individuals within networks bring their personal stock of human capital (skills and competencies) to the network.

(ABS 2004c, p15)

In addition, increased investment in human capital among disadvantage groups generates additional benefits in itself, such increased capacity for employment and productivity. Thus, ACTCOSS submits that additional government investment in providing greater connectivity to disadvantaged groups is essential to maximising the potential of ICT and its social, economic and environmental benefits.

PART 2: ICT and the Community Sector

The Non-profit Sector Discussion Paper uses a broad definition of non-profit organisation. This submission addresses the particular problems of the community services sector, that is, by non-profit organisations “that provide services to people who are socially and economically disadvantaged or who have special needs for care and support” (ACTCOSS 2003, p4). These are a smaller segment of the non-profit sector than is canvassed by the Non-profit Sector discussion paper, and while the community services sector shares many of the barriers faced by the broader non-profit sector, it has particular issues of its own: as the Discussion Paper *Information and Communications Technology Transforming The Non-profit Sector* (the Non-profit Sector Discussion Paper) notes: “health and community services had lower than average Internet access and website adoption rates” (DCITA 2005b, p15).

Determining ICT Capacity in the Sector

ACTCOSS is not aware of any comprehensive study of the needs of the community sector in relation to ICT. ACTCOSS agrees that there is a need for greater research on the specialist needs of the community sector so that government or other assistance can be targeted effectively at addressing the most urgent needs of the sector. The paucity of information available also makes effective communication between community organisations and with government and business difficult.

The research should identify the current holdings of computer hardware and software by representative community organisations, as well as the availability of technical support, training, and staff knowledge and familiarity with ICT. In particular, it should compare these levels with government and business standards to enable some insight into the level of the information gap that the community sector suffers, and where the most significant gaps in technology and knowledge lie.

Any further studies should be able to compare industries of operation within the non-profit sector, so that any programs to promote non-profit adoption of ICT focus on those suffering the largest ICT disadvantages.

The Barriers to accessing ICT for the Community Sector

Financial Constraints: Primarily, community services have not developed their ICT capacity to the same level as business or other non-profit sectors due to financial and resource constraints. Many community sector organisations rely heavily on government funding sources, which may be poorly funded, and organisations rarely generate large surpluses or retain large financial reserves. Many community sector organisations run using an extremely low cost structure in order to meet government contracts and client and stakeholder expectations, meaning there are few resources remaining for expenditures that are not seen as ‘core’ operations, and this frequently includes purchasing, maintaining or upgrading ICT technologies, or investing in addition ICT skills training or ICT-skilled staff.

Due to their low funding base, and a philosophy of operating services at close to cost (and frequently below cost), community sector organisations face a borrowing constraint which prevents them from investing in ICT technologies. Even where cost efficiencies are known and observable (which they regularly are not), the capital requirements of implementing the new systems are rarely able to be met. Small organisations, in particular, will be unable to finance large variations in capital investment.

Poor equipment: Because of their limited financial capacity, when community sector organisations do invest in ICT, they will often do so by purchasing poor quality equipment. Hardware in the community sector is often ex-government purchase, second hand older models, and may be poorly suited to the organisations' needs.

Similarly, software may not have been regularly upgraded, may not meet the organisations' requirements well, and may be incorrectly configured. This is of particular concern where data security is concerned, as many community organisations maintain highly confidential records, and need to be aware of the possibilities for data theft. In addition, computer systems may be generally poorly protected, leaving them open threats of viruses or other online threats.

Staff and skills: The community sector, due to financial constraints is often unable to offer the level of remuneration required to attract skilled ICT staff, who are often in demand across the workforce and able to command high salaries. This means that ICT issues are often referred to an existing staff member who may have inadequate (or no) training in ICT, meaning that ICT needs and capabilities are unable to be correctly assessed, and therefore the few resources committed to ICT are not maximised. Small organisations, in particular, rarely have the resources to employ a dedicated ICT manager. This means change management to ensure the organisation adapts successfully to new systems may be difficult to achieve, and the expense of appointing a dedicated project manager would be well beyond the organisations capacity.

Equally, the existing ICT skill base of community sector workers is often low, and particular sectors, including community care, have a higher than average workforce age. In addition, the community sector often relies on volunteer labour, who are also often older and have fewer ICT skills. Consequently, there is an additional burden in implementing new technologies into the workplace as this often requires intensive training of existing staff members. The fact that many staff may also be part-time, casual or volunteers adds to the training burden for organisations, and means that the training requirements for the adoption of ICT by the sector may be in excess of that required for business or government.

The relative absence of high quality expertise in the sector means that initial forays into utilising new technologies may be met with failure or few gains for the organisation. This occurrence may reinforce a view that adopting ICT should not be prioritised by organisations, as the benefits fail to materialise. For example, an organisation may put up a website, but then fail to link this into its organisational systems, and the site is not updated regularly nor used as a communications tool. The site is then deemed to be a waste of resources and removed.

A final concern is that many organisations are not even aware of the benefits that might be gained from adapting to the emerging technologies. While there is some use of standard ICT tools, such as word processing, e-mail and internet access, the possible uses and advantages of broadband technologies such as data-streaming and video-conferencing, or wireless technologies, has barely been considered. This is almost certainly because the cost of these technologies remains prohibitive and the training required relatively onerous that integrating these possibilities in workplaces seems to organisations to be beyond a reasonable possibility.

IT support: A major stumbling block for community organisations is the availability of IT and help-desk support. Suitable services are often not available commercially or have extremely high prices. As new technologies may have been implemented in a haphazard and sporadic manner in the workplace, as well as tending to be older and more prone to failure, the possibility of technology failures is increased. This is, in itself, a reason for organisations to wary of becoming reliant on new technologies. However, without IT support, the risks of data loss and lost productivity becomes multiplied exponentially, and could potentially wipe any potential gains from adopting the technology.

While computer-granting programs and similar initiatives designed to increase ICT uptake in the community sector are welcome, if they are not accompanied by training and ongoing support then they may be counter-productive, and certainly will not assist the organisation in maximising its use of ICT.

Client skills: A particular feature of the community sector is that they cater for clients who suffer disadvantage. As previously discussed, disadvantaged people are less likely to have good ICT skills and knowledge, and thus service delivery using ICT is less likely to be effective.

Aggregating Demand

A particular suggestion by the Non-profit Sector Discussion Paper is that the community sector could aggregate its demand for ICT services to create economies of scale that would assist with reducing costs and improving standards of service for ICT use in the sector.

ACTCOSS believes that there are potential benefits to be gained from such a strategy, but care must be taken to ensure that the independence and specific needs of organisations must be considered in moving towards this type of model. Furthermore, it appears unlikely that the sector would be able to both negotiate and provide the requisite capital investment for such a strategy without assistance.

One possibility to move towards this type of model would be to create regional community-owned IT providers. For example, an organisation could be created such that individual community organisations could become members, and hence exert influence over the direction of the management. The community sector places a high value on being non-profit and independent of pure commercial incentives, and so aggregating demand through a community-owned organisation is more likely to gain the confidence and support of the sector than a model that required a private, profit-seeking firm to be making decisions about ICT delivery and service levels.

This type of model would also reduce any concerns about the potential monopoly power that a commercial firm could exert if large numbers of small customers joined on long-term contracts, without any comparable competitor to provide a similar service. Equally, a community-based provider would be likely to attract more support than a service controlled by government, as organisations may be hesitant to link themselves so intimately with a government controlled entity.

In addition, by creating an organisation that was focussed on the needs of the community sector, expertise could be generated in how to best solve the sectors' particular needs. For example, by aggregating the needs of the disability sector, there is the potential to generate innovation and solutions to the needs of people with disabilities that are not currently available from commercial providers.

At first, aggregation could focus on a few necessary needs that were pertinent to the sector, for example, to the provision of basic IT support. However, the potential of such an organisation, if successful and trusted, is extremely large, with a host of services and training possible. Aggregated purchasing of hardware, software, broadband services, even bundling of telephony and office equipment could potentially be incorporated, as well as training of staff and volunteers, and development and management of ICT capabilities and capacity building programs for organisations.

Nevertheless, any such project will require considerable upfront investment, most likely from government sources. While it may be possible for such an organisation to be financially sustainable in the medium term, the setup costs would be large and unable to be met from existing resources within the sector. The potential for ICT to build capacity and produce more effective services is clearly present, but it will not be realised without government assistance.

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