Community in Tension (CiT)

M.B.Parker
Faculty of Informatics and Design
Cape Peninsula University of Technology
Cape Town
South Africa
parkerm@cput.ac.za

G.B. Wills
School of Electronics and Computer Science
University of Southampton
United Kingdom
gbw@ecs.soton. ac.uk

J. Wills
School of Electronics and Computer Science
University of Southampton
United Kingdom
jw@ecs.soton. ac.uk

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Abstract

The development and availability of Information Communication Technology (ICT) impacts many sectors; yet a digital divide is still present in nations and communities.. Not only is there a digital divide evident in South Africa but also many other factors that causes tension in communities. This paper identifies a Community in Tension (CiT) as a community where the wellbeing of its citizens is being threatened. It describes Community Informatics' theory and provides an opportunity to use technology to empower a community.

Keywords: communities; digital divide; community informatics; empowerment, Community in Tension (CiT), Information Communication Technology (ICT): South Africa

1. Introduction

The availability of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) has led to large distribution channels of information and knowledge. ICT impacts a number of sectors and these include education, government, business, entertainment and development. The development of ICTs has led to a digital divide not only between rich and poor nations but also within communities according to Arunachalam (2002). This has also contributed to a lack of ICT reach within communities that are economically and socially disadvantaged

and where there are socio-economic inequalities. Norris (2001) names these the Global divide and Social divide. South Africa suffers not so much of the global divide but the social divide is large.

According to Butler (2004), South Africa is a middle income developing country, if measured by income per head. However, due to the structural economic inequalities that have been generated from colonial times, particularly under apartheid, the United Nations have classed it very low on its HDR (Human Development Resource index) . The HDR index is designed to measure not income but resources that people have so that they may live healthy lives with knowledge and have a basic standard of living. South Africa's position in the UN HDR index for 2007/8 had decreased from 107 to 121. This is due mainly because levels of unemployment are high and there is a division between the income in 'white 'suburbs and the experience of most South Africans. There is also a digital divide, when access to technology is restricted to those with access to modern technology. With such social inequalities, it is not surprising that many social researchers interested in how technology can bridge such inequalities, are looking at social projects in South Africa.

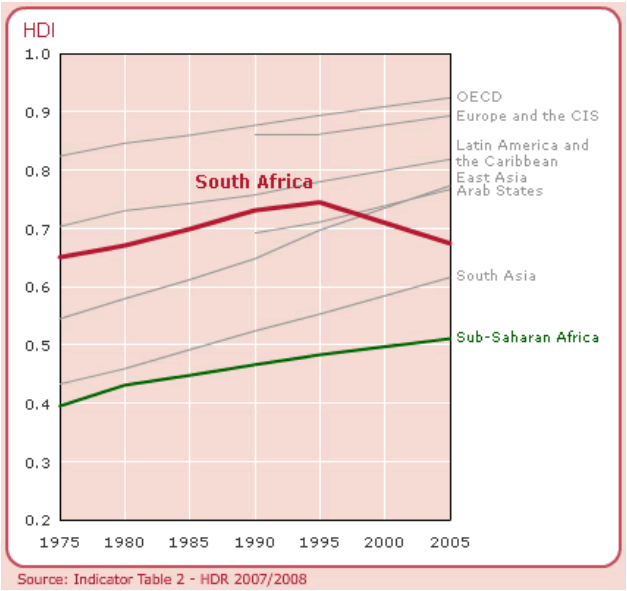

Figure 1 South African Inequalities; United Nations: The Human Development Index - 2007/2008 Report **Http://hdr/und.org/en/statistics/**

Braga (1998) takes an optimistic view of ICT as a vehicle to create new economic, social, political and educational opportunities for developing nations and should be crucial for empowerment and development of communities, Research into such projects has been undertaken by the Community Informatics discipline.

Community Informatics, can be defined as:

"*concerned with carving out a sphere and developing strategies for precisely those communities {disadvantaged} to take advantage of some of the opportunities which the technology is providing.*"(Gurstein, 2000:2)

There would be a role for local communities to become empowered and engage with technology and access information which would increase their life changes. Gurstein (2000) and Bradley (2006) notes that the mobile (wireless technology) is especially useful – as the connecting costs are low. An added feature to Community Informatics is that the community dictates the agenda of the information and what is required. (Bell *et al* 2004) Looking ahead, Bradley (2006) notes that the future direction of Community Informatics

can be used for promoting peace and the quality of life for all. Therefore there is an agenda to Community Informatics, that it improves the life of the poor.

The Community in Tension Project fits into the emerging Community Informatics field for the following reasons:

- It is using wireless and community based technology from a local centre; This decreases installation and running costs
- It is there for a socially excluded group, who have no resources of their own
- The Mxit language used is cheaper to use than other texting formats
- The group manage the project – questions come in and are answered by the peers

2. Communities

Communities can be described as "coherent areas of social existence identified by a sense of locality and community sentiment" according to Day (1999:10). The evolution of the World Wide Web (WWW) and mobile technologies has led to the increase of virtual communities. Parker and Pereira (2008) therefore took it further by describing a "community as a social existence that shares a common thread". Communities in this paper refer to both physical and virtual communities. Within communities there are various factors that influence the stability of a community. These factors could include technology (Gigler, 2004), social empowerment (Minani & Parker, 2008), education (Peterson et al., 1993) and economics (Aruchamalam, 2002).

2.1 Community in Tension (CiT)

Tension is caused in communities where the wellbeing of the citizens is being threatened according to Parker and Pereira (2008). Factors for the grounds of tension could include:

- Lack of economical development (e.g. unemployment, inflation)
- Social inequality (e.g. lack of social services, social issues such as drug abuse)
- Lack of education
- Lack of appropriateness and use of technology (e.g. technology not being utilised fully within communities for its intended use)

The tension caused by these factors can be described as a common thread within a community (See Figure 2 below). A Community in Tension (CiT) therefore emerges and tension would be the underlying aspect holding a community together. For example a community plagued with drug and gang activities would appear to have tension amongst its citizens. This could be due to these activities having a negative impact on the community and leaving a sense of helplessness in combating drug and gang activities amongst youth. In this instance the social inequality causes tension and leads to the wellbeing of citizens being at risk.

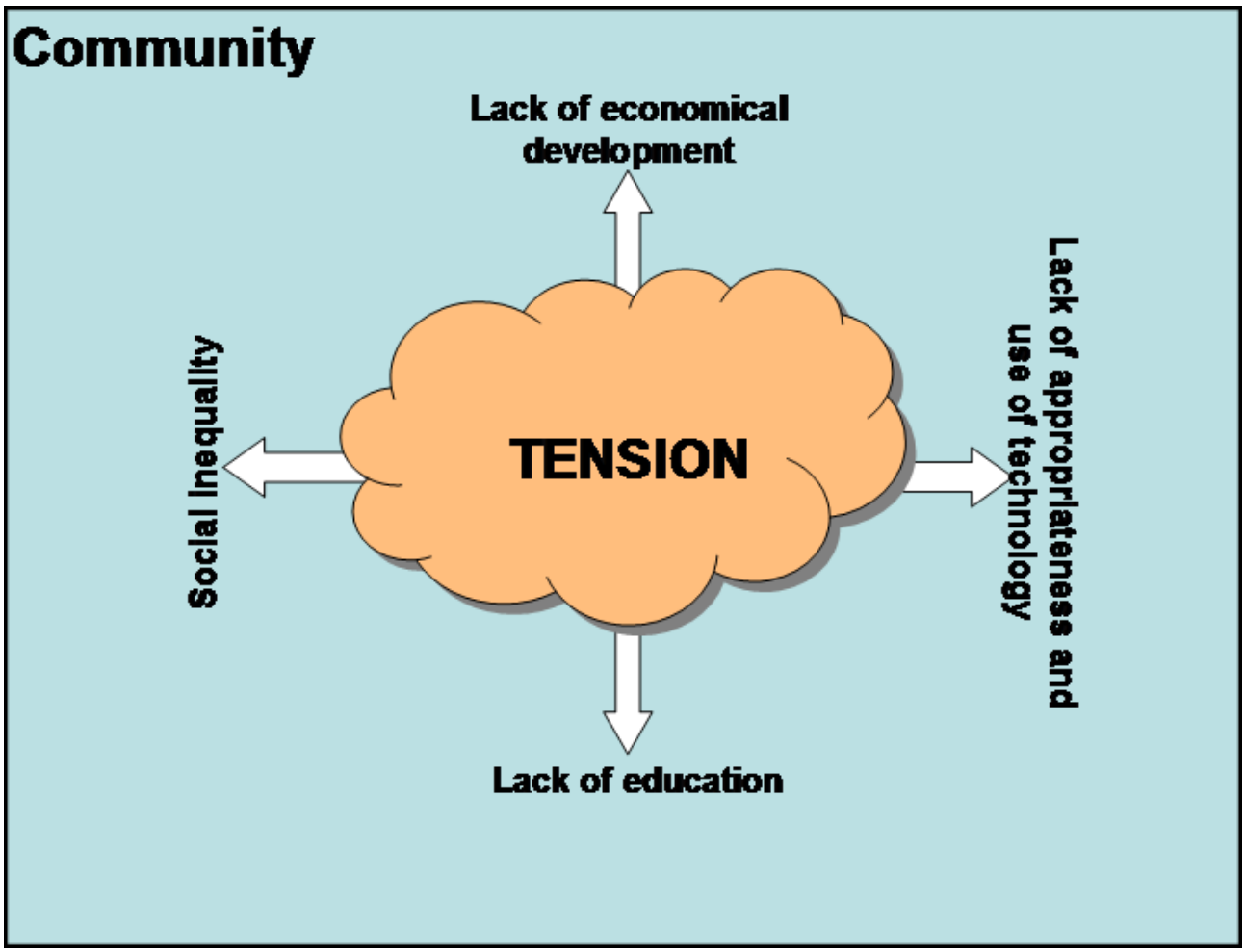

Figure 2: Community in Tension (CiT)

2.2 Stable communities or Community of Stability (CoS)

Technology should be beneficial to the whole community. It should not exclude citizens and it should strengthen relationships according to Gigler (2004). To decrease tension within a CiT could be the starting point to stabilising a CiT. To do this would require social empowerment, economical development, education and appropriating the use of technology.(See Figure 3). A Community of Stability would ensure the sense of belonging of locality and community sentiment as suggested by Day (1999:10). The use and appropriateness of available technology could be used to increase stability in such communities. A good example of this is the Mission 2007: 'Every Village a Knowledge Centre - A Road Map'. Based in Southern India, the mission is to utilise technology to each village, through the use of key local agents to increase education and control of the agriculture community at a local level... M. S. S. R (2004)

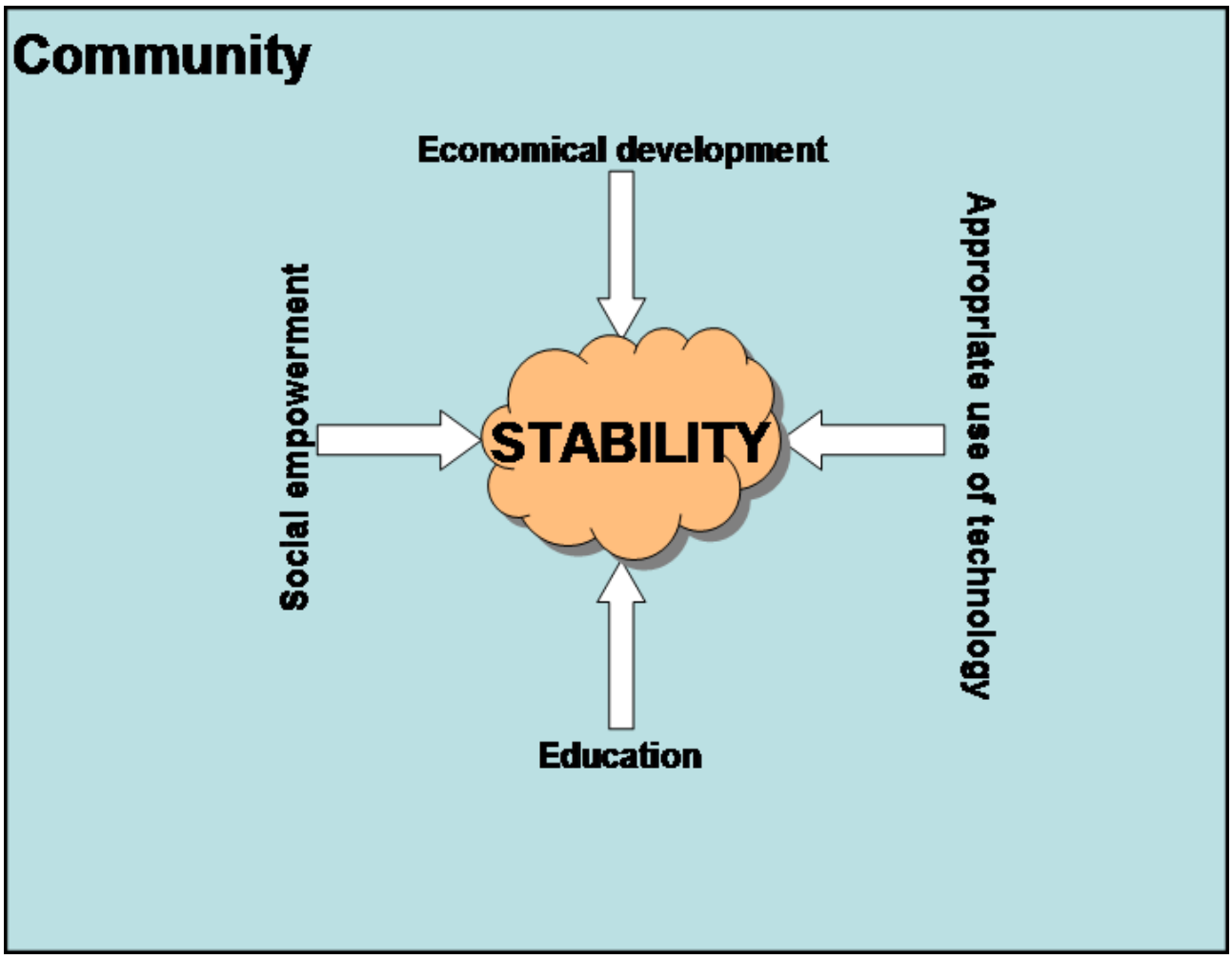

Figure 3: Community of Stability

3. Conclusion

Tension factors impact both physical and virtual communities. Being able to describe a CiT and its common tension thread could assist in identifying the factors that could be used to stabilise a community. The appropriation and use of technology to educate empower citizens, wealth creation or economic development in a CiT could contribute towards the stability of such communities.

However, West (2006) reports on a project to introduce a tele-center into marginalized groups in South Africa, through interviewing users in the three poorest parts of South Africa, West concludes that technology is not enough without basic utilities being provided as well. Therefore top-down technology will not be of use, in itself to change a community. Resources are also needed, and local empowerment.

A key question to be considered is who has control of the network? Is it being directed from the centre; that is the researcher and the community; or is the participators allowed to move the project, questions, in new directions? If the second is true, are there parameters in the project of what is allowed and how are they agreed.

However the question of whether groups connected by wireless technology, can be classified as a community is raised by Gurstein (2008). He argues that as there is no space in and contact it may be difficult for the group to have set long term goals and

therefore be classified as a group. He suggested that more research is needed. This project may have data that can answer that question.

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