Kylie Davies, 11/05/1999
The Computerbank Project – Is it Community Development?

The Computerbank Project
The Computerbank project is a coalition of people getting together through the use of internet technology (networked computing services including email, mailing lists, information dissemination, and chat). we are committed to addressing the inequality of access to information technologies as experienced by disadvantaged individuals, schools and community groups. The Computerbank project is fundamentally about equipping disadvantaged individuals, community groups and schools with information technology resources and skills so that they can participate in the benefits of information technology and networked computing.

Community Characteristics
At the present moment the project entails the involvement of people who would normally regard themselves to be part of the global "free software community" or the GNU/Linux community. This community is best described as a "functional" community who shares a "common element" that "provides a sense of identity." (Ife, p92, 1995).The common element being commitment to open collaborative computing through the promotion and continued development of the GNU/Linux operating system.

It is truly global – in that the operating system itself is used in all the developed nations and several developing nations. Mexico has adopted the GNU/Linux system for the schooling system, and the United Nations are handing out Linux CD's to Latin American community, education and science projects. (Yee, 1999, at
http://www.anatomy.usyd.edu.au/danny/freedom/ip/aidfs.html#action)

The GNU/Linux operating system is best described as a freely distributable, independent Unix-like operating system for the x86 and various other machines. It is an implementation of the POSIX specification with which all true versions of Unix comply. It is used for software development, networking, and as an end user platform. GNU/Linux is a multi-user multitasking operating system. The Linux kernel was developed originally by Linux Torvalds and was distributed under the GNU General Public License (GPL). The GPL ensures that the general public owns the software, in that they are able to copy, redistribute and modify it for any purpose. (GNU.org, 1999, at http://www.gnu.org). In essence the users of the operating system contribute (or can contribute) to its further development.

The GNU/Linux operating system is a major threat to those who subscribe to the more traditional forms of software development and copyright, its emergence and popularity is forcing many companies to re-evaluate their software development strategies and practices. The Halloween document leaked by a Microsoft employee concedes that developments like those achieved by the GNU/Linux free software community "pose a direct, short term revenue and platform threat to Microsoft, particularly in server space. Additionally, the intrinsic parallelism and free idea exchange in OSS (open source software) has benefits that are not replicable with our current licensing model and therefore present a long term developer mindshare threat." (Halloween Document, 1999, at
http://www.opensource.org/halloween1.html).

Wider Implications of the Community – Social Movement?
The 'free software community' is particularly of interest to a community development worker

in that this group of people appears to have created a successful social movement strategy – one that undermines the monopoly practices of software suppliers such as Microsoft.

Sargent has noted that "social movements consist of groups of people who seek by their activities to influence social change in some particular direction" and they "have been seen variously as activities of the masses (Arendt), of the intelligentsia (Gouldner),of the highly educated (Burklin), of youth or others concerned with lifestyle matters (Turner)." (Sargent, p379-380, 1994). Consistent with this claim Microsoft acknowledges that "the ability of the OSS process to collect and harness the collective IQ of thousands of individuals across the internet is simply amazing. More importantly OSS evangelization scales with the size of the internet much faster than our own evangelization effort appears to scale." (Halloween Document, 1999, at http://www.opensource.org/halloween1.html).

The Berkman Centre for the Internet and Society has referred to this particular movement as being "A new software movement based chiefly on free, open access to the source code of software, [that] is showing its tremendous power to fortify user sovereignty in the computing/internet marketplace. This movement represents one of the most novel, potentially powerful expressions of the consumer movement in a generation." (Berkman Centre for Internet and Society, 1999, at http://www.opencode.org/h2o/).

The free software community is concerned with the control and direction that big corporate enterprise such as Microsoft exerts over the development of software, this power is seen as destructive to self determination and choice. Monopolies such as Microsoft are able to define standards and user expectations, they are able to direct the development of technology at a pace that suits them – consequently their ability to do this has enabled them to become one of the worlds most 'successful' companies. The free software community is committed to the development of a publicly owned operating system based on open standards rather than proprietary standards – it is committed to 'freeing the software' from monopolistic control.

The Berkman Centre for Internet and Society acknowledge that "today, at the dawn of the Internet as a popular medium, as major corporations vie for hegemony over the new communications infrastructure and standards,open code software holds great promise to forge a new, more socially constructive path. It offers the chance to empower consumers, non-profits, education and various civic segments of American Society. It allows for more open, flexible architectural designs for markets, communities and cultures. It enables the construction of cheaper, more durable new media platforms which can accommodate scalability and innovation with great ease." (Berkman Centre for Internet and Society, 1999, op cit).

Virtual Communities Versus Real Locality Based Communities
The 'evangelistic' efforts of the free software community are strengthened, and will be strengthened, when more people know about it. The efforts of the free software community are constrained by the 'virtual' nature of their interactions. If the operating system can not be promoted to the wider public in a way that rivals the Microsoft marketing machine, this effort may be in vain. Many people from this community often join local user groups in their hometowns and in doing so promote their activities in the real world. Some of them are joining Computerbank

With the beginning of the Computerbank project it is hoped that the promotion of free software will assist struggling individuals and communities to participate and take advantage

of information technology. Our foundation has been aided by the 'virtual' however our practice will be very much grounded in real everyday activity.

Think Globally Acting Locally
Computerbank Victoria is one such organisation that has formed out of the Computerbank project. Computerbank organisations are being established in other states and other parts of the globe. This development is consistent with the green dictum "think globally, act locally" where the potential for this to become a worldwide activity that takes place at the local level is high.(Ife, p89, `1995). It is an activity grounded in social justice.

Computerbank Victoria – Community Organisation
Computerbank Victoria is a "community organisation." In this sense we are a "not for profit" organisation that is "autonomous from government" and we are "constructed around an issue relevant to communities", namely, equitable access to information technologies for all. (Kenny, p137, 1994). Our purpose is to provide information technology resources that have the potential to empower people both at the individual level and at the local community level.

A dilemma is evident in the operation of Computerbank Victoria – not only do we provide computers to community groups, we also provide them to individuals. We could be accused of fostering the individualist mentality consistent with current economic rationalistic principals. Indeed this was a criticism put forward by a worker from VCOSS during a telephone conversation I had with him about Computerbank Victoria. The worker thought that the emphasis should be on community ownership of information technology rather than individual ownership.

Jackson has noted that community development work occurs across a "community development continuum." It can include "developmental casework" where the onus is on helping the individual with their daily struggle. "It is based on a belief that low income people have the right, here and now, to support in the face of difficulties and rejects the view that it is only through continued suffering that oppressed people become motivated to work for change themselves and others." (Jackson, p4, 1988).

Resources and Recycling
Even as McArdle notes one tool of community development is "service provision", that is, "seeking to gain the communities participation in meeting their own needs, it is often necessary (and quite legitmate) to initially provide an immediate outcome or to tackle the presenting problem before individuals may be willing (or able) to undertake social and personal change." (McArdle, p51, 1989). I believe that Computerbank Victoria is meeting the need of individuals and community groups, which is, to have access to information and networking opportunities afforded by information technologies.

Within the premise of the Computerbank project is the assumption that computer technology is beneficial for those that have access and opportunities to use it. Indeed some theorists ave argued that "technological development is unsustainable when it does not occur for socially or environmentally determined reasons" and needs to be "constrained to develop sustainable rather than unsustainable technologies." (Ife, p46, 1995).

In ecological terms sustainability means "that systems must be maintained in the long term, that resources should be used only at a rate at which they can be replenished, that the renewable energy sources should be utilised, that output to the environment be limited to the

level which it can be adequately absorbed, and that consumption should be minimised rather than maximised." (Ife, p45, 1995).

Our activities might be considered as sustainable in that we are making use of computers that would normally be considered redundant. Much of this equipment goes to waste, never to be used again. Even software applications produced by the software monopolies are unsustainable, as they require greater resources to run. GNU/Linux runs very efficiently and reliably on older hardware, enabling hardware to be used for longer periods of time.

Empowerment and Networking

The social potentials of the internet and networked computing are only just being realised. I do believe, like many others, that the information superhighway does hold 'social' benefits for people and communities who are able to utilise it to its greatest potential – that is as an information dissemmenation, communication and networking tool. "A community window on to the internet opens new doors for people , and offers them the opportunities to learn new skills. As an interactive medium, the internet allows community networks to talk to those with power and resources in decision making, including parliamentarians, the beuracracy and other sectors of the community." (CIVIC, undated at http://www.civic.org.au/cn99/prev.htm)

Dale Spender has raised access to online services for all as a fundamental human right in the next millennium. She claims that "in man ways the internet is less like a superhighway, and more like a village square, where every one can have their own soap box. It provides a place where people can meet, learn, work, play, chat and do business. Where communities come and go, in relation to their interests." (Spender, 1998, at http://www.vicnet.net.au/acna/spender.htm).

By providing information technology resources (recycled hardware, a publicly owned operating system and training) we are providing opportunities that will enable disadvantaged communities and individuals to decide whether or not the internet is to be used for the "building up" or "dumbing down" the communities in which they live and participate. (Spender, 1998, op cit). The potential for communities to effect social change through the use of information technologies is evident with the example of the 'free software community.'

So is it Community Development?

I believe that even though Computerbank itself may not actually be doing community development within communities (at the present time) other than our own, we are providing resources that have the potential to contribute to the overall community development strategy. We are doing what we can with the resources already available and we are using them to foster the growth of "villages" on the information superhighway. I believe that we are giving people tools that could potentially "give people greater power and control over their lives." (Ernst, p3, 1998).

The example of the 'free software community' from whom Computerbank's draw its members, shows the ability of information technology to contribute to social change on a global scale. Microsoft's threatened position is evidence of this.

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