



Towards understanding digital divide in rural partnerships and development: A framework and evidence from rural Australia



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ABSTRACT

Despite increasing recognition that the world's social and environmental problems cannot be addressed solely by business, government or society in isolation, the role of partnerships in rural development has only recently started to attract the interest of rural studies scholars. The study adds to the growing stream of research by investigating how the information age's emerging social challenge – the digital divide – influences rural partnerships and development. Burgeoning literature evidences that the digital divide encompasses not one but many discontinuities. This paper reconceptualises the digital divide concept and explores exactly how its shocks and tensions impact rural partnerships and development. Results of this research indicate that the digital divide is a threat to the performance of rural partnerships, which consequently renders rural development outcomes unsustainable, lopsided and non-participatory. This paper recommends the need for a more responsive and localised approach to rural development partnerships that can enable disadvantaged groups to participate in today's digitally connected economy and society.

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1. Introduction

The impact of information and communications technology (ICT) on rural development is a much-contested issue. In most developed countries, many communities are able to reap benefits from using these valuable resources. However, less technologically advanced communities are still unable to take full advantage of the information and technology resources that could very well help to improve their socio-economic status (Alam and Imran, 2015). As the concept of endogenous or grassroots development continues to attract increasing interest from academics and policymakers (Faikowski, 2013; Moseley, 2003; Ray, 2000), the issue of rural-partnerships has emerged as a common theme (Derksen et al., 2008; Furmankiewicz et al., 2010). In this research, a rural partnership is understood to be the act of bringing diverse public and private resources together into innovative collaborations to strengthen communities and improve life in rural settings (see

Furmankiewicz et al., 2014).

Traditionally, as corporate–community partnerships are frequently expected to provide benefits and opportunities, businesses have therefore become more willing to recognise their role as development actors (Kemp, 2010). These roles are frequently executed via their partnership mechanisms, reflected in their engagement, communication, negotiation, conflict resolution and development programming strategies. Queensland, as a state in Australia with huge coal seam gas (CSG) deposits, has on occasions seen regions and communities experience a significant boom in their local economies as a result of interactions between operating firms and host communities. The Surat Resource Region in Queensland, for example, has a long history in corporate–community partnership initiatives. This has involved local community groups – including property holders' groups, social clubs and workers' unions – interacting with operating firms to address community needs, including irrigational projects with farmers, rehabilitation of roads and airports, educational scholarships, skills apprenticeship opportunities, affordable housing projects, environmental projects and sponsorship of community social events (CSIRO, 2012). Thus, there is little doubt that

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corporate–community partnerships as a rural development mechanism, is promising.

However, more recently, despite the extensive adoption of partnerships and claims of their benefits to businesses and rural societies, the reality is that the ability of rural partnerships to foster development remains a fragile field (Erdiaw-Kwasie et al., 2014a). Data presented in this paper was gathered as part of a broader, three-year study that aims to develop and test a model describing relational issues confronting partnerships between resource communities and energy firms, and the implications of such issues for corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices. The broader study employed a multi-method and multi-phased research design. This incorporates a content analysis of sustainability reports of five leading mining companies in the Surat Resource Region in Australia, and in-community case studies comprising surveys, interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs), which were undertaken in four resource towns in the study region. Preliminary literature findings prior to developing the study model revealed that corporate–community partnerships are undermined by diverse gaps ranging from power inequities (Bice, 2013; Jenkins and Obara, 2006), the digital divide (Muthuri and Mwaura, 2006; Erdiaw-Kwasie et al., 2014a), through to conflicts (Davis and Franks, 2014; Kemp et al., 2011). This paper focuses on the digital divide, and explores how it influences rural partnerships and development.

Rural studies literature has generated ever-increasing interest in the potential impacts of digital connectivity on quality of life in rural settings (Philip et al., 2015; Wallace, 2012). For example, recent rural studies have focused on how digital connectivity can impact the health and social care system in rural communities (Townsend et al., 2015). According to Koutsouris (2006), the challenge of assisting farmers and other rural populations to develop requires new technologies, new skills, changed attitudes and practices, and new ways to collaborate. This, in turn, requires that rural populations have access to relevant information knowledge and technology. Alexopoulos et al. (2010) also repositioned the divide argument within the rural context and argued that digital connectivity can stimulate community participation and revitalise civil societies. However, although much of the literature favours such a 'techno-optimist' approach to rural development, this ignores the fact that on a worldwide scale, rural areas lack the resources and the skills needed to take advantage of the benefits of digital initiatives (Malecki, 2003; Townsend et al., 2013). Erdiaw-Kwasie et al.'s (2014b) study further confirmed that rural communities lack the resources required to derive the purported benefits from digital connectivity. Drawing on the recognition that the digital divide is a complex concept of interacting physical, technological, human, and social resources, this study aims to empirically investigate the digital divide within the frameworks of rural partnerships and development. Findings presented in this paper are drawn from the in-community case studies.

To address these research questions, this paper is structured beginning with the introductory section. The second section presents a clear understanding of the concept of rural development and insights into rural partnerships. The third section focuses on defining and redefining the digital divide concept and supplements these definitions with discussions on some rural cases from Australia. The fourth part of the paper documents the research methodology, with details of the research approach, sampling technique, data collection and analysis techniques, as well as descriptions of case communities. Section five presents the results of the study, and the sixth section discusses these results. The last section documents the conclusion and implications of the findings of this research.

2. Rural development and partnerships

2.1. Understanding rural development

There is a long history of advocacy for participation among rural residents, primarily for needs assessment and implementation in development initiatives championed by local government institutions, businesses, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or international development organisations (Kolawole and Ajila, 2015). Rural participatory appraisal methods have gained increasing popularity over the last decade as a means through which locals play significant roles in rural livelihood improvement interventions (Chambers, 2008; Zulaikha and Brereton, 2013).

According to Moseley (2003), rural development generally refers to the process of improving the quality of life and economic well-being of people living in relatively isolated and sparsely populated areas. Rural development has traditionally focused on the exploitation of land-intensive natural resources such as agriculture and forestry; other economic activities relate to the primary sector, production of foodstuffs and raw materials. The term is not limited to issues of developing countries; in fact, many developed countries have very active rural development programs to advance undeveloped rural regions (Furmankiewicz et al., 2010).

More recently, there has been a major shift in attitudes to community involvement within the rural development process (Shaxon, 2011). Approaches that saw rural communities primarily as passive recipients of development initiatives have given way to those which seek to utilise the potential that more active community participation might offer for enhanced accountability and improved responsiveness of services (Cornwall et al., 2000). With this shift, there has emerged a greater emphasis on issues of governance and, within that, on the institutional dimensions of rural development. Rural development basically aims at finding ways to improve the lives of rural communities through the participation of local people themselves to meet the required needs of such areas. Rather than passive recipients, communities have in many contexts been anticipated to become active makers and shapers of decisions that affect their own livelihoods (Chigbu, 2013; Ertuna and Kirbas, 2012). According to Ismail (2009), an outsider may not understand the setting, culture, language and other things prevalent in the local area, and as such, it is more effective for local people themselves to participate in their sustainable rural development. Cornwall et al. (2000) indicated that engaging rural communities in decisions that affect them helps to ensure the appropriateness of service provision, and to enhance project efficiency.

In rural areas, it is typical that development initiatives are faced with many challenges, as practitioners have to find the path for development that suits the particular local conditions. In this process, the type and nature of relationships between local communities and governments, civil organisations, enterprises or international development agencies is considered imperative for sustaining a desirable environment; it is also necessary for creating a vital social system that fosters collaboration and development (Ismail, 2009; Kotey and Rolfe, 2014).

2.2. Rural partnerships: an insight

'Rural formations are woven from the disparate beings, processes and materialities of the world, and the forces that shape them include differing forms of agency that can be variously described as non-human agency, relational agency or collective agency' (Jones, 2006: p.185).

Woods (2007) further emphasised that the constitution and reconstitution of rural places is therefore not in the control of

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