Making maps work for communities

Maps are not only a matter of geographic record, they are also persuasive visual documents that can be used to improve local environments, as many communities are finding with the help of Mapping for Change.

Visualizing the problem
A map can tell you where you are. But it can also show how to get where you’d like to go – and not only in terms of geography. In 2005, Professor Muki Haklay, a senior lecturer at UCL department of Civil, Environmental and Geomatic Engineering, began work in collaboration with London 21 Sustainability Network, a charity set up in order to connect a range of voluntary activities in the capital. After improving the online London Green Map, they continued to collaborate and created ‘Community Maps’ to address a variety of concerns in ten different London communities, and in the process developed both a software system and a general methodology with the ability to represent important social or environmental issues in a compelling visual way.

Joined by Chris Church and Louise Francis, this became Mapping for Change (www.mappingforchange.org.uk), an independent social enterprise forged between London 21 and UCL. Using a business plan developed with the help of UCL Enterprise, Mapping for Change is now positioned to extend its range of work from communities to government organizations and blue-chip charities and voluntary organizations interested in new ways of strengthening links with their locality.

See the noise
The approach is straightforward, yet uniquely focuses on both online and off line activities. First, a dialogue is established with a community that has an issue of concern. Members of the community are then actively involved in gathering relevant data, for example taking sound-level readings for a noise map in the case of one neighbourhood in Deptford, where a scrap yard was felt to be a nuisance. Mapping for Change brings its expertise in geographical information science to plot these data points on a map.

‘When you complain about noise to a local authority, they view it as a subjective opinion,’ observes Haklay. ‘But when you come in with readings on a map, it’s evidence.’ Locals acknowledge the power of the method. ‘One of the critical things was the professionalization of the results,’ agrees Lewis Herlitz of the Pepys Community Forum in Deptford. Now this community is using the same technique to tackle local air pollution.’
Maps tell stories

Many different kinds of information can be presented in map form. In Hackney Wick, locals wished to record local landmarks that were due to disappear with the development of the London 2012 Olympic Games site. The project has an online platform, so people can add further sites and stories, while an SMS facility developed by a UCL research student with Mapping for Change means that local events can be advertised this way. Once they’ve taken place they are taken off the map, but the information is retained in an archive, saving a record of neighbourhood life.

Community Maps has recently been used to explore the potential for community asset development and social enterprise on the waterways network of the UK. The Waterways Project at CIVA aims to ensure that the new waterways trust, scheduled to replace British Waterways, maximizes the opportunities for civil society, local communities and other stakeholders to actively engage in the management of this network. “The mapping process has been positive in stimulating local debate and has got people thinking and engaging in hubs at the local level” explains Ben Metz, the CIVA project co-ordinator.

Are these maps the tool of the future for building community consensus and lobbying power? ‘The short answer is yes,’ says Herlitz.
About UCL

UCL (University College London) was established in 1826 and is ranked as one of the world’s top-ten universities. The university is a modern, outward-looking institution, with more than 4,000 academic and research staff committed to engaging with the major issues of our times. It has a global reach, with 34% of its students coming from outside the UK, from almost 140 countries.

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About UCL Enterprise

Enterprise is important to all universities, but resonates particularly with UCL. From our inception we were created as an enterprising institution, with a bold ambition to create a University dedicated to the greatest good for the greatest number. This principle has underpinned the evolution of modern-day UCL, a confident and enthusiastic community of enterprising researchers, educators, and scholars, working together for the immediate, medium and long-term benefit of society.

UCL Enterprise provides UCL’s structures for engaging with business for commercial and societal benefit. It includes three units: UCL Advances, UCL Business and UCL Consultants. Together, they provide access to the capabilities and resources of the UCL community to help businesses start, grow and develop.

www.ucl.ac.uk/enterprise

About Spin-outs

UCL Business (UCLB) has a long and successful track record in creating some of the most successful spin-out businesses in key new industries. From discovery disclosure to commercialisation strategy, business plan development, contractual advice and formalisation, and through to incubation support, including the recruitment of management teams and identification of investors, UCLB’s services cover the entire process.

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