The Lebanese Center for Policy Studies (LCPS)

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1 - BACKGROUND

In many ways, the year 2000 has come to be known as the “year of the digital divide”.

From the Secretary General of the United Nations at the UN Millenium Assembly to the President of the United States at a White House Global Leaders Conference, from Davos January 2000 to Davos January 2001, and from the G8 Okinawa summit to the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum in Brunei, the world suddenly started to realize that some of it, five to ten percent, was going digital fast and the rest was being left out in the pre-digital cold.

This recently discovered gap was quickly superimposed on all the previous structural gaps, such as the power gap, the resource gap, the knowledge gap, the education gap, the governance gap and others. It was invested with high-level visibility and sense of urgency. Each week, somewhere in the world, representative of different actors, mostly from the North, met to try to define it, assess it and discuss ways of partnering to resolve it. The motto, “bridging the digital divide”, entered the international vernacular and became a “legitimate” part of the development discourse. A crowd of conferences, web-sites and new programs were competing to appropriate the new banner or some its variants.

The protagonists of this new global conversation would generally agree on the broad terms of the divide: A heavy concentration in few countries; an access along the fault lines of national societies, including wealth, education, gender, age, urbanity, and minority status; a large deficit in the three dimensions of connectivity, capacity and content; a dualistic world society with a minority of connected, having plentiful information at high speed and low cost and the unconnected majority, locked out by high barriers of capacity, cost, uncertainty and outdated information.

International reports and media review articles highlighted some spectacular indicators of the divide: The Internet links over a hundred million computers, but that represents no more than two percent of the world population; the monthly connection cost for the Internet in Africa exceeds the monthly income of a si

2 - INTERNATIONAL INITIATIVES AND PROGRAMMES

and can potentially create significant social benefits. Predicated on the idea that bridging the digital divide is good for business, and what is really sustainable is profitable enterprise, the WRI project is another attempt at mobilization, dialogue and advocacy among the major IT corporations and other business leaders around the word.

In the last few years, almost all major development agencies within the UN system, as well as major multilateral and bilateral donor agencies, international NGOs, international professional associations, international business associations and multinational corporations launched and promoted their programs. All have been working to position themselves and create their own niches in this emerging developmental field (or should we say m

development decision makers and community leaders, and the purpose was to share “cutting-edge development related knowledge and experience across boundaries in real time”.

Through a combination of courses, seminars, and global dialogues, GDLN set out to provide cost effective learning activities to the development community, to improve decision making through learning based on real-life experience, and to facilitate regular exchanges among practitioners and experts. WBI was hoping to establish by 2002 a network of around fifty Distance Learning Centers, housed, owned and operated by local training and educational institutions.

Although the initiative was officially targeting to set out an independently operated network and to provide courses, seminars and discussion opportunities from a variety of sources and partners facilities around the world, it remains to be seen how much GDLN will really become a self sustaining, multilaterally fed, and jointly owned international network. The alternative outcome is that GDLN could become a sort of WBI - online and a powerful outreach instrument for a centrally generated and managed development learning production.

At the same time, the Education Group established "a Task Force on Bridging the Digital Divide through Education". It focuses on how to help countries make decisions regarding technology to improve access, quality and equity of education and will develop tools and assist in pilot interventions based on country specific needs and approaches. The Task Force started developing a *Global Distance Education Network* as a knowledge guide to current information about distance education and training from around the world. Focusing primarily on the design and implem

The *Global Development Gateway* (GDG), launched in July 2001, is based on the premise of the need for a macro-portal, a one-stop super-site to access, in a systematic and vetted way, a selection of the wealth of information, resources and products available on the World Wide Web. This super-site is proposing to filter and catalogue material from all perspectives on development, divided into 30 major topics and 130 sub-topics. Features include a comprehensive aid projects database, a set of guided pages to development information available on-line, resources for e-government and e-business and information about funding, commercial opportunities, product review, jobs and directories. In addition, a roll out of 50 Country Gateways, within three years, will replicate the feature of the Global Gateway at the national level, building a large share of the content from the contribution of local partners.

Several NGO's and development practitioners raised a number of questions: About the Gateway privileging the perspective of global development professionals and large institutions; about top-down editorial policies and structure; about a donor's taxonomy in the definition of topics; about filtering the material on the basis of a selective definition of "quality"; about the emphasis on English content and a strategy of translation; about country Gateways representing an unfair competition to existing country - oriented portals; about the governance structure and the institutional design (the setting up of an "independent" Gateway Foundation to manage the initiative) where a number of seats on the Board will be allocated on the basis of financial contribution. Many observers recognized however that the Gateway initiative could become a very useful repository of data with numerous links to people, organizations, projects and documents and that it could contribute to better information and equipment for development workers and professionals.

In any case, the WBG seems determined to continue investing significantly in this new line of work, seen as essential for its transformation into a "Knowledge Bank".

The **United Nations Development Programe (UNDP)** is the other major player in the ICT for Development field.

UNDP was an early adopter and initiator of ICT for networking, awareness raising and solutions for sustainable development in a large number of developing countries, quite before the current hype.

Through the *Sustainable Development Networking Program (SDNP)* that started in 1993, as a program to implement some of the Rio conference recommendations, UNDP progressively developed a large network of country-owned, non-profit, thematic networks, including each a diversity of stakeholders, with a primary focus on environmental and gender issues.

SDNP, over the next seven years, contributed to connecting more than 15 countries to the Internet for the first time, to deploying the first internet networks in more than 40 countries, to creating more than 5000 websites for government units and civil society organizations and to providing ICT basic training for over 25,000 organizations.

Today, as this initiator role has been overtaken in most places by the development of national markets, national ISP providers and hundreds of local initiatives, SDNP, which still operates in 45 countries, has largely shifted to piloting telecenters and to developing initiatives on e-governance and e-commerce for development.

In 1997, UNDP started its *ICT for Development Program* with a focus on generating ICT strategies at the national levels, deploying Technical Access Community Center in pilot locations (UNDP's name for telecentres) and managing a portal site on ICT and development.

In 1998, through its Special Unit for Technical Cooperation among Developing Countries (TCDC), UNDP launched the *Web of Information for Development (WIDE),* as a global data-base of institutions, capacity, expertise, knowledge and innovative experiences in development.

The two last initiatives seem to have suffered, the first from a heterogeneity of objectives and lack of sustained funding and the second from a rising competition from more powerful portals, the last but not least of course being the Global Development Gateway of the Bank.

In search of a new role for the coming decade and in the face of somehow diminishing core and trust funding, UNDP decided to move boldly in the direction of building partnerships with resourceful allies at the global level and of becoming more of an intermediary and a technical assistance provider at the country level.

In partnership with Cisco, UNDP helped establish the *NetAid. Org Foundation* as a one stop e-Action site to facilitate aid through on line donation to specific poverty alleviation programs, on line volunteering with non-profits in developing countries and on-line purchase of fair trade arts, crafts and food from around the work.

In partnership also with Cisco, UNDP contributed to a *Least Developed Countries Initiative* to extend the Cisco Networking Academy Program to 27 of the world's 49 least developed countries. The program has until now trained over a hundred instructors, mostly from LDC's and launched Networking Academy programs in cooperation with over 15 learning institutions in LDC's.

In partnership with the Markle Foundation, IBM and the Center for International Development, at Harvard University, UNDP is working on a *Global Network Readiness and Resource Initiative.* Through this partnership, UNDP aims at acting as a lead agency for a network readiness initiative worldwide, offering country level assistance to build national information strategies, community initiatives, local entrepreneurship, regulatory environment and rural connectivity.

In partnership with the Markle Foundation and Accenture, UNDP established *the Digital Opportunity Initiative (DOI).* Its ma400 0.09

3. THE NEED FOR A NEW AGENCY

While acknowledging the possible relevance and usefulness of many of the above mentioned approaches, the present project and this workshop are predicated on the uncovered need for an international agency focusing entirely on the best ideas, ways, means and partnership to foster the most cost-effective, efficient and scalable uses of ICT for sustainable development.

In the context of the appare

- Conducting **empirical researches and comparative studies** in the field of ICT for development.
  The last two years have seen an accumulation of global assessments, general overviews, and review articles that repetitively make the case for ICT as a potentially powerful tool for development. Many of these have been a mix of analytical assumptions about the field, illustrations with a num

2) Promotion of ICT for Learning

An international development agency could have a broad mandate, a narrow mandate or a wide enough but delimited and manageable mandate. It is recommended here that a DID agency should mainly focus on the field of ICT for learning, leaving to other specialized international agencies the support of areas such as ICT for health care, environmental management, agricultural development or E-commerce.

It is in the application of ICTs to enable more widespread and more creative learning and to develop productive linkages between new technologies and renewed pedagogy that a DID agency could hope to have the most effective impact on bridging the divide.

DID could coordinate a developing countries oriented international effort to develop ICTs as powerful tools for better initial learning, renewable learning and life long learning and for easier access to a worldwide basis of knowledge. The adapted set of ICT tools could be applied to all possible sites of learning: formal educational sites, distance learning sites, workplaces, community centers and homes. They could be harnessed to improve the efficiency, accessibility and quality of the learning process in developing countries.

Within that larger context, a DID led internati

Satellites and the Internet have the potential to transform the world into a borderless educational arena. The scope of distance education could be dramatically expanded and contribute to addressing the huge unmet demand of learners in developing countries. The AVU experiment in Africa is a good example of the possibilities (and limitations) of the newer technologies in distance education.

The DID agency could help developing countries and school systems explore the potential of the newer approaches in terms of educational quality and effectiveness, affordability, sustainability and the availability of efficient delivery modes. DID could extend support to the countries that have determined a need to build their capacity to conduct distance education in various formats and models.

-**Telecenter Development Initiative**:

For over a decade now, numerous multilateral and bilateral development agencies and international NGO's have supported the establishment of community based ICT access centers in a variety of forms, models, sites and names (Technical Access Community Centers, Multipurpose Community Centers, Telecentres…..). UNDP, ITU, UNESCO, IDRC, USAID, InfoDev, to name a few, have engaged in piloting, funding, assisting, networking or evaluating telecenters.
Telecentres were promoted as primary facilities or entry points to provide local access to a variety of ICT based information and social, educational and governmental services at affordable costs. Low income communities, local organizations, rural poor, geographically marginal regions and other underserved groups were seen as the major potential beneficiaries of the expanding telecenter movement in the developing countries.

The DID agency could lead an international level learning and development effort to assess more rigorously this much touted formula. DID could ascertain the additional need and effective demand for supplementary international assistance from developing countries.
Should governments of developing countries determine that telecenter implementation is a national priority for a wider and more equitable access to ICTs, DID could help them set up country-wide telecenters programs. The Agency could help mobilize start up and revolving funds, and provide technical assistance, knowledge transfer, linkages to similar programs and monitoring systems. DID could also selectively extend support to large-scale NGO-based networks of telecenters.

Building on pioneering projects such as the Commonwealth of Learning Media Empowerment initiative on community radios, DID could help disseminate and scale up media models and technologies that stress local participation, provide real opportunities for disadvantaged groups and fu

4) Facilitation of Surplus Recycling and Exchange Programs.

Despite a significant decrease in prices of hardware, the purchase and maintenance of a computer, the necessary software and the Internet connection costs remain prohibitive for low-income families, most organizations with limited budgets and the overwhelming majority of the poor in developing countries. Even for the sectors and organizations that can afford the technology, real and efficient usage remain low; because of wide spread computer illiteracy and little mastery of basic ICT know-how.

DID could spearhead a comprehensive international effort and sustained campaigns to contribute to addressing this basic lack of hardware and ICT skills.

In that perspective DID could promote, support and expand international regional and national initiatives to **recycle surplus hardware and software** from governments, corporations and agencies to developing countries, institutions or sectors of societies in need.

It has been estimated that in the United States alone, the number of discarded computers between 1998 and 2000 may have reached over 70 million. Millions of computers in industrialized countries are dumped each year. Recycling even one percent of them for a new life in developing countries sites could make a significant contribution to reducing the digital gap.

In the past few years, in the USA, Canada, the UK, Australia and some other industrial countries, a number of not for profit organizations have focused on the tasks of collecting, refinishing and finding new homes for old computers. Several corporations have also been involved in recycling projects and in countries like the USA and Canada, governments have taken leadership roles in transferring federal surplus in computers and related equipment to schools and not-for-profit organizations. These efforts have gone a long way in addressing the internal digital divide within several of the nternal digital divide we9 301.7998 390.022998 390.022998 390a

DID could also set up its own global operation,

2. The GEF Model – A "New Agency" reporting jointly to the World Bank and the UN agencies most directly concerned.
3. The UNDP Netaid Model.
4. The Innovative Model – Something analogous to a partnership of four consortia with equal votes – including: i) a consortium of international organization; ii) a consortium of national governments; iii) a consortium of NGOs; and iv) one or more private multi-national enterprises.

The support for any new Agency will be increased to the extent that it incorporates progressive, state-of-the-art **governance features**. Whatever the eventual determination of its function and mandate, enhancing participation, transparency and accountability are worthy objectives. Obviously, the governance mechanisms or approaches adopted must be appropriate for tasks set for the agency. Recommended features would vary with possible functions - researcher, service provider or advocate.

There are many governance best practices in the international system that may be applicable. Focusing on the goal of participation, the UN's NGO Liaison Service is a model of a dedicated unit to promote partnerships with NGOs. The UNAids Program Coordinating Board exemplifies how an inclusive committee of representatives of co-sponsoring organizations can provide for a diverse array of inputs into strategy. Internet Working Groups, based on the example of "UN Women Watch/Beijing +5 Global Forum," can expand and diversify the discussion of key issues and mobilize support. Web pages constructed by the Agency officials and governing board members, can provide a focal point for information exchanges about the Agency activities and allow for more informal

adapt the WTO’s peer review process by constructively examining the policies and