



Knowledge Society, Knowledge Management and ICT

Editorial contribution by W. Fust, Director SDC, to a publication ed. by the Community Development Library Dhaka/Bangladesh. January 23, 2003.

1. The “knowledge path”

The global society is challenged by a variety of “divides”, of inequalities. The overall welfare is declining, ecological as well as political and social costs of economic development exceeds the profits of economic growth. The global development is not sustainable, resources are wasted, allocated inefficiently, a fertile ground for conflicts even on larger scale. The “knowledge-path” is a promising one. It strives at giving value to people’s experiences and knowledge that have been neglected for decades by the modern world as key assets of the global society and its development. ICTs have the potential of assuming a strategic role in making most efficient use of these assets, in bringing information where it is needed to be productive in creating knowledge that guides sustainability-pathways. However, the knowledge paradigm and its prominent tool are confronted by ever growing divides. Turning the digital divide into a digital dividend should be the guiding principle of society’s future development.

2. Access to information and empowerment to make use of it

Information is a basic need. With growing interdependence of human life, access to information becomes crucial for people who have to adapt their livelihood strategies to continuously changing conditions. Access to information is a prerequisite for survival in the modern world that is characterised by global economic and political dynamics relevant for each and everybody. Access alone is, however, not sufficient. Making adequate use of information, transforming it and creating knowledge out of it requires competence and opportunity. Being empowered includes being capacitated to making meaningful use of information in view of improving and sustaining ones livelihoods. Empowerment, therefore, is

a second prerequisite for survival and for sustainable development as the fundamental paradigm for a surviving global society.

Information and knowledge are crucial assets of the global society. Knowledge is increasingly produced within the private sectors. With the growing tendency of privatised media, knowledge and information are being transformed into a private good for exclusive use. The losers are those that do not promise market gains. The „digital divide“ is the manifestation of this dynamism. It reflects the persistent inequalities between the “haves” and the “have nots”. This divide stands for the constrained access to knowledge and information sources for the poorer segments of the global society.

The vision of a global knowledge society includes the democratisation of knowledge and its access. This concurs with the general societal change in the direction of participation of the individual subjects in the definition and design of their respective communities and societies. New initiatives and networks across traditional borders and beyond the classic public sector demonstrate the potential and approaches towards sharing of knowledge and experience. Professionals communicate over the internet, farmers from different corners of the world exchange emails on their achievements and local radio emissions translate scientific internet information into local and practical language. The promotion of such emerging structures of a global society is at the wake of a global knowledge society, where knowledge contributes to advancement of every citizen.

In this sense, the Johannesburg-Plan urges to improve the accessibility for developing countries to technologies and knowledge through inter alia “improving the interaction and collaboration, stakeholder relationships and networks between and among universities, government agencies and the private sector, creating partnerships to assist developing countries in sharing best practices and supporting existing mechanisms and establishing new mechanisms for the development, transfer and diffusion of technologies.”

3. Knowledge Management – a megatrend in two different perspectives

„The cheapest way to learn is to learn from the experiences of others.“ And, in the words of David Snowden, the head of IBM-Research: *„Knowledge sharing cannot be conscripted, it can only be volunteered.“*

Sharing of knowledge and experiences, changing on how the surrounding reality is understood and, hence, adapting practices are the major elements of „knowledge

management“ or, in more accurate terms, of managing knowledgeable people. „Knowledge management“, a megatrend in business administration, emphasises the asset-character of knowledge and, thus, of the new perception of human beings as being knowledgeable. This insight coincides with a second megatrend, originating in the development world: the acknowledgement of the crucial role of knowledge and experience – in particular of local knowledge – for securing sustainable livelihoods.

Whereas in its first generation knowledge management concentrated on the organisations and analysis of data and information, on storing documents and making them available through search and retrieval, second generation knowledge management focuses on people. Skills of using information purposefully, storing information as knowledge in human brains and making knowledge available in human interactions are key aspects of the largely shared present-day view of knowledge management.

Learning is the essence of knowledge management, changing and adapting the way of doing things to new challenges is its result. A learning organisation is aware of its assets in terms of experiences, organises its work around its experiences – bringing together the right people with the right knowledge at the right time – to make good use of good practices, and cares about developing its competence through looking for innovations. Main deficiencies are well known: management of information and documents gets more importance than the way how people meet, pool their knowledge and learn mutually and from one another; experts leaving means knowledge leaving; critical knowledge is not available when decisions are taken. Whereas ICTs may facilitate the communication among the collaborators, in particular when they work at distant places, exchange and sharing is a question of mutual trust and confidence, essentially a cultural issue.

In its rationale, the Global Knowledge Partnership states: *“Mutual prosperity gained through effective use of information and knowledge would contribute to a more stable and equitable world.”*

In international co-operation, the vision has to go beyond the border of the individual organisation, be they Civil Society organisations, professional centres of competence, private enterprises, public administration units, research and training centres or international donors. Matching the knowledge and experiences of many is of strategic importance in view of solving problems of an increasingly globalised society. Collaboration means linking competence across organisations and providing access to it across stakeholder groups. Professional and scientific knowledge depends on local experiences of individual farmers, traders, fishing people, mining workers, the poor in particular. The promotion of corresponding communities is in the limelight. Modern world institutions are confronted with

the challenge to reach these experiences, to match different knowledges and to provide access to those who are disconnected so far. Knowledge management on global level is, as said before, closely linked to empowering the poor, this with the aim to valorise their competencies and to allow them to build on this knowledge base to overcome poverty and social injustice. Civil Society organisations assume a central role. Mostly they act at the very interface of the global world on one side, characterised by global access through the internet and similar technologies, and, on the other side of the digital divide, the local world seldom connected and often ignored.

For that matter, everybody is to develop its particular competencies, to link up with partners, to network in order to create alliances and communities, to participate in platforms and to promote multi-stakeholder initiatives. The problems the global society faces require working in changing constellations - "variable geometries" – and providing access. At the base of this, again, is the strive for a culture of sharing, even in a world that is built on competition.

4. ICTs – the challenge of bridging the digital divide

The digital revolution has made the world a much smaller place due to the interactive communication possibilities and the tremendously increased speed at which we can exchange information across borders and continents – sending signals for text, sound and pictures at the very same time. However, this digital evolution is not beneficial to all and has created multiple digital divides, not only between the north and the south but also in almost all societies, for example between the men and women, between old and young or between cities and rural areas.

The challenge is one of turning these digital divides into digital dividends. There is wide consensus that the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) – if properly harnessed – have the potential to be a powerful tool for sustainable development and poverty alleviation and that they can contribute towards achieving development aims such as the UN Millennium Development Goals.

But what are the concrete challenges and potentials for ICT to be successful in furthering the development agenda and in helping to bridge the existing global and in-country digital divides ?

ICT are mostly used as a "short formula" behind which a multitude of different aspects is hidden. Questions ranging from infrastructure to sociological, cultural, legal and economic

aspects as well as multiple applications in areas such as health, education or public administration are just some of the dimensions of “ICT for development”. In order to bring light into the concrete potential of ICT for development, all these different dimensions need to be looked at separately, in the light of experiences from concrete projects on the ground to-date.

Especially, it is vital to not only concentrate on the primary question of infrastructure. It is obvious, that without infrastructure, appropriate technology and without addressing the costs, the digital dividends cannot be realised. But connectivity alone is not enough. It needs to be accompanied by capacity building and institutional strengthening. It is crucial to also address the “soft” factors pertaining to information, communication and knowledge: For example, the quality and relevance of information, the recognition and protection of indigenous knowledge, the establishment of communication rules and rights, the protection of cultural diversity in general, the ability to use ICT or the ability to make use of the information provided. Otherwise, technical access will only translate into accrued imbalances, as the south simply becomes a consumer of information produced and owned by the north. It is imperative to promote the creation and exchange of local content, based on local cultures and languages.

There also needs to be a debate on the vision for the use of ICT in a given society – can and should the current information societies of the developed countries serve as a role model for developing countries ? There is a need to formulate country-specific visions of an information society, taking into account the particularities of their regions and societies.

From a development perspective it is particularly important, that there be a clear pro-poor focus in all activities related to ICT for development. Only if active steps for the inclusion of the most disadvantaged layers of society are taken, will ICT be able to effectively contribute towards poverty alleviation and widespread development. Otherwise it risks broadening in-country digital divides.

Secondly, experience has shown that the success of efforts to bridge the digital divide in a particular country depends highly on the existing political will to do so. Governments, therefore, have a major role to play in creating enabling regulatory and policy environments and formulating appropriate ICT policies. Efforts are necessary also on the international level, as some questions of global ICT governance need to be addressed in international fora. Equally, certain infrastructure projects and cost considerations may warrant regional or sub-regional co-operation.

To realise the full potential of ICT, it is vital that a wide range of different stakeholders be involved. The task of creating digital dividends cannot be left to governments, donor agencies and international organisations alone but must extend to civil society, the private sector, academia, the media and/ or ICT professionals; youth and women may play important multiplier roles. An in-depth discussion of the respective roles and contributions of the different stakeholders still needs to take place.

5. SDC's initiatives

5.1 Knowledge Management

In its Strategy 2010, the Swiss Agency for Development and Co-operation (SDC) formulates: „For the countries and partners of the South and East, knowledge is a central prerequisite for development. SDC promotes learning processes that are based on knowledge, ability and behaviour, and that extend the possibilities of action. To this end, it incorporates the use of local knowledge, and bases its co-operation with partners on mutual respect.”

SDC links its knowledge-focus with the vision that partners (and the people) in the South and the East have access to and can use knowledge to overcome poverty and injustice. To this end, SDC promotes learning within the organisation and among partners in programmes and projects.

SDC and its collaborators have always been “knowledge brokers”. They provide access to knowledge and assist others in doing so. Together with its partners, SDC has always translated experiences made into new and improved approaches in most efficient and pragmatic ways. In view of improving, SDC needs to focus its attention more on (1) remembering experiences made, (2) drawing general lessons and diffusing them across the organisation for replication elsewhere and (3) providing access to the lessons and experiences for outsiders. Moreover, (4) competencies have to be managed in a most efficient way, this through highly qualified staff, strong partnerships with centres of competence, as well as institutionalised core competencies.

SDC's knowledge management focuses on the key aspects of a “learning organisation”. For its practical work, SDC defines five main thrusts:

(1) *Placing the people - collaborators, partners - their knowledge and competencies at the centre*

(Time, space and incentives for development of individual competencies and knowledge sharing)

(2) *Valorising practice of knowledge development and learning*

(Key processes are knowledge processes; learning framework, including “communities of practice” and “learning partnerships”)

(3) *Opening-up access to knowledge and experience*

(Access to people, experiences, action, documents)

(4) *Caring for a learning culture*

(Internal communication; enhancing environment for learning internally and with partners)

(5) *Developing and securing organisational competencies related to key roles*

(Core competencies and division of roles and responsibilities; rendering tacit knowledge explicit; management of competencies, including securing knowledge of collaborators leaving)

A small unit within SDC facilitates the knowledge related activities within the five main thrusts. However, knowledge management is considered the task of everybody and every unit within the organisation, in their particular role and with their particular competencies. In addition, the SDC ICT4D Division enhances knowledge sharing platforms and networks especially through ICT4D multi-stakeholder initiatives.

5.2 ICT for Development and Multi-stakeholder Initiatives

SDC recognised the importance of ICT as a tool in development work early on and the growing involvement translated in 2001 into the creation of a separate unit “Multilateral Initiatives/Bridging the Digital Divide” that focused exclusively on ICT for development and multi-stakeholder partnerships and networks. Considering the growing importance of ICT4D and the increasing role of this unit, SDC upgraded in 2003 this unit into a “ICT for Development (ICT4D) Division”. The close cooperation of this division with ICT4D Focal Points in all SDC Coordination Offices is expected to facilitate mainstreaming ICT4D into operational programmes.

SDC follows a development centred approach to ICT4D. It considers ICT as a powerful tool, but not as an end in itself, recognising that ICT can play an crucial role if they are well embedded in a broader development approach. The role of relevant information, knowledge and communication in development is at the centre of attention. With regard to access to information, it appreciates the importance of access to the global information pool, but attaches equal importance to feeding local content from the developing world into the system, based on the right of social and cultural expression, diversity and communication.

SDC promotes ICT4D on the basis of the local development priorities and demand, complementing the commercial ICT infrastructure with appropriate measures to facilitate access and integration of disadvantaged areas and groups.

SDC is actively involved in a number of multi-stakeholder initiatives and partnerships aimed at bridging the digital divide. SDC currently chairs the Executive Committee of Global Knowledge Partnership (GKP) – a reflection of the belief that a multi-stakeholder approach is key to all efforts to bridge the digital divide. GKP is one of the first, if not the first independent, multi-stakeholder initiative in the area of Information and Communication Technology for Development. Members range from grass-roots to international organisations, from governments and government agencies to private sector and civil society organisations, and from least developed countries to industrialised nations, making the GKP a truly broad-based and world-wide initiative.

The GKP is a powerful channel for the disadvantaged to affect global policy dialogue with one of its areas of activity being advocacy for marginalised stakeholders. Also, the exchange of experiences and lessons learnt among the different active stakeholders enhances their effectiveness. In this respect, the south-south information exchange taking place within GKP is of particular importance.

The involvement in the preparatory process for the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), taking place in Geneva and Tunis in 2003 and 2005 respectively, is another priority in SDC's multilateral work. The Information Society is closely linked with the digital divide and SDC's efforts are aimed at giving voice to the concerns of the developing world and marginalised stakeholders in particular.

Other multi-stakeholder initiatives in which SDC participates are for instance the UN ICT Task Force and the BDO-Partnership (Building Digital Opportunities). Various collaborative links exist with other initiatives such as the Development Gateway Foundation, InfoDev and others.

An effort to mainstream ICT for development into all development activities of SDC, especially into country programmes and other relevant projects complement these multilateral activities.

6. Closing remark

At the end, turning the digital divide into digital dividends is a highly political question since diverging interests are involved. International co-operation may work on both the practical and political levels to render accessible the global information to the poor in particular and to link their practical experiences to global knowledge development.