

Global Partnerships: bridging the digital divide  
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Online partnerships have great potential to narrow the information and communication gap that impedes access of the world's poor to knowledge, funding, technology, partnerships and other development drivers. How can we strengthen ICT as a force for bringing people together and as a vehicle of development, rather than one that further divides people into ICT haves and have-nots?

Experience at the UN Fund for International Partnerships (UNFIP) ([www.unfip.org](http://www.unfip.org)) shows that today's complex global problems can be addressed through cooperation, mutual respect, and partnerships between different stakeholders. Online partnerships can save precious time and resources provided that transparency and trust can be achieved. The United Nations and other agencies already have started using online partnerships and ICT as levers for development. What is needed now is to build on existing innovations and success stories to make the benefits accessible and meaningful for those who need them most.

Several notable online portals already exist that are rich in development information. In order to capture all relevant information in one place, what might be considered is a type of 'Google for development'. But even as this concept is fully developed, one can begin by collecting and posting linkages to relevant portals and search websites that provide the kind of specific information that different development partners are seeking. There are numerous ways to thread these resources together, and perhaps one of the existing international websites could be an appropriate place for posting such linkages and a description of what they offer. Key challenges will be to make this repository of links comprehensive, relevant, neutral, and easily navigable.

#### The value of online partnerships

Increasingly, partnerships are being forged between the United Nations, foundations, multi/bilateral donors, the private sector, governments and civil society in response to development challenges. Significant efforts are already underway to harness the revolutionary power of the Internet for development. Facilitating access through user-friendly, timely, cost-effective and innovative ICT solutions will help to address the needs of the underprivileged and excluded by providing them with crucial information and knowledge.

Online collaborations have the potential to catalyse and sustain partnerships for development across national borders. They can create an enabling environment for those who need it most and help to mobilise resources to maximize development impact. Generally, the Internet has matured more within the technology, business and education sectors than in certain governments or civil society organisations. Just as ICT has become a key business driver, it also needs to become a key development driver.

There are several examples of online partnerships between different sectors: government and business; donors and NGOs; and business, government and civil society. They come

in the form of government investor relations websites, search engines for donors or recipients, and various information gateways and virtual networks.

The United Nations has been working to build online partnerships for development to bridge gaps between stakeholders. UNFIP facilitates partnerships between UN agencies, the private sector and foundations. The UN ICT Task Force ([www.unicttaskforce.org](http://www.unicttaskforce.org)) is forging a strategic partnership between the UN system, the private sector, foundations, governments and other stakeholders to formulate strategies to put ICT at the service of development. As Sarbuland Khan, Executive Co-ordinator of the UN ICT Task Force, has put it: “The revolution in information and communication technologies has transformed each and every society on the planet and the ways in which people and communities imagine themselves and their place within the world.”

#### Key stakeholder needs

Different stakeholders – governments, the private sector and civil society – have different information needs. Recognising this, a number of clearinghouses, portals and websites have emerged.

#### Grantseeker needs

Many civil society organisations face the daunting task of finding donors to obtain funding and technical assistance to achieve their development missions. An enormous amount of information is available online today. A well-informed person can locate online donors, information on global development issues, NGO networks in specific areas, and a wealth of other relevant information. However, even an experienced NGO will face great difficulty in extracting focused, relevant and reliable information from the masses of disorganised and dispersed information available on the Internet.

This information would be even more inaccessible, for example, to a grassroots organisation in a village in remote Peru, searching for donors who fund ecological preservation. In fact, the same would hold true for most organisations in developing countries. The challenge is to make digital partnerships and tools for development accessible for those who need them most.

Various sites and search engines specifically assist grant seekers in their search for development partners. These tools address the challenge of establishing a mechanism to screen foundations, private sector partners and others listed on their sites in order to ensure accountability and transparency. They enable organisations to identify donor guidelines as well as track donor contributions and interest areas.

For example, the US-based Foundation Center ([www.fdncenter.org](http://www.fdncenter.org)) offers an online search engine to locate US donors awarding grants on a wide range of global development issues.

This and other search engines enable organisations to conduct searches by name, funding area, topic, geographic area, and other categories.

Grant seekers must often submit multiple proposals for the same project, geared to each donor’s guidelines. Funding.org ([www.funding.org](http://www.funding.org)) connects those looking for funds

with those who have them, requiring them to submit only a standardised two-page synopsis online. Funding.org then forwards it to a list of prospective public and private sector donors.

The digital divide poses many obstacles to forging online partnerships for grassroots organisations, but notable efforts have been made, including the UN Foundation/UNFIP programme ‘Empowering Women and Girls in Poor Communities through Information Delivery and Dialogue’, and PRODEM FFP’s smart ATM initiative in Bolivia. These types of grassroots empowerment projects should be further promoted and replicated.

Providing access to grassroots organisations seeking online partnerships presents problems beyond the digital divide. End-users have to develop business acumen to use the portal to its full capacity. They need to view it not only as a trading mechanism to facilitate the transfer of funds, but also as a means of building networks, sharing information, transferring knowledge, and leveraging resources. The best way to facilitate ICT capacity-building is to develop simple portals that provide links to those selected sites that clearly present all relevant information pertaining to different kinds of partnership opportunities.

#### Grantmaker needs

Grantmakers/donors can be governments, foundations, individuals, public charities, banks, multi-national companies or national private sector companies, each of which are driven by different considerations and capacities. Different donors, therefore, need tailored information solutions. Examples of constructive effort in these areas can be seen in the projects below.

The Global Information Clearinghouse Initiative ([www.globalclearinghouse.org/gch](http://www.globalclearinghouse.org/gch)), launched at the Monterrey Financing for Development conference, is designed to foster government-private sector partnerships by providing low-cost access to relevant, timely and reliable information and analysis on emerging market trends and opportunities, political risk assessments, crisis prevention policies, financing mechanisms and access to expertise and partnerships for policy makers, investors and civil society. This model seeks to bridge costly gaps in information sharing and trust between private sector investors and developing country governments in areas critical to effectively mobilising private sector capital for development. By providing comprehensive and neutral coverage of economic risks and opportunities in developing countries, it acts as a one-stop platform for (i) these countries’ investment promotion efforts, (ii) their major creditors and investors’ due diligence and monitoring functions, and (iii) third parties’ access to the full range of information and analysis on macroeconomic, financial, and political indicators.

While the Global Clearinghouse is focused on increasing private capital flows to developing countries, there are several comprehensive information gateways that target the non-profit sector. Donors need search engines and investment portals to find information and to identify capable, credible organisations and projects. This enhances their capacity to make quality, efficient decisions, and to minimise the risk of misguided

grant-making. Donors face a due diligence and research task that can be greatly facilitated through online partnerships. In addition, many foundations face resource constraints mandating efficient research and vetting strategies. Foundations seek partners to match funds, share lessons learned and best practices, discuss policy issues, and stay current on global development issues.

In addition to efficiency, there is also a welcome focus on accountability. An electronic trail of registered organisations and projects generates greater transparency in the process of giving, and hence creates greater accountability.

The most well known example of an online partnership between donors and recipients is the UN-World Bank supported Development Gateway ([www.developmentgateway.org](http://www.developmentgateway.org)). This portal contains one of the largest online sources of information on development projects around the world. This interactive site also offers a procurement market that provides e-tendering solutions, information on development projects and links to a network of country-level initiatives.

Another initiative, Digital Dividend ([www.digitaldividend.org](http://www.digitaldividend.org)), provides research tools and information services to governments, entrepreneurs, NGOs and members of the development community in order to identify and promote sustainable solutions for bridging the global digital divide.

Global Giving ([www.globalgiving.com](http://www.globalgiving.com)) offers a search engine that enables donors to find and fund social and economic development projects worldwide.

A key challenge in providing a project clearinghouse is to screen organisations for legitimacy and effectiveness. There has been a need for a rating agency that rates NGOs according to an index using indicators such as legitimacy, accountability and effectiveness. This process not only provides reliable information to donors, but it also renders NGOs more open and transparent. Such a rating model is provided by ForeignAid Ratings ([www.foreignaid.com](http://www.foreignaid.com)), which seeks to offer foundations, governments, the media, lay people and NGOs themselves with objective criteria for evaluating NGOs. It rates NGOs worldwide according to relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, impact, accountability, transparency, integrity and sustainability.

Donors seek to network, collaborate, research and discuss policy issues world-wide in an easily accessible digital forum. They value the ability to share success stories and learn best practices, as well as stay current on philanthropy and development topics. Various foundation consortiums exist to offer these types of services. Examples include the Council on Foundations ([www.cof.org](http://www.cof.org)), the European Foundation Center (EFC) ([www.efc.be](http://www.efc.be)), and The Foundation Center based in the U.S. ([www.fdncenter.org](http://www.fdncenter.org)). The EFC's Network of European Foundations ([www.efc/be/nef](http://www.efc/be/nef)) offers Europe in the World ([www.europe-in-the-world.info/](http://www.europe-in-the-world.info/)), a portal for European foundations and their partners to seek further collaboration, engage in policy discussions, and research global development funding issues.

In addition to portals focused on private sector investors and donors/recipient search engines, there are several online communities or networks involved in knowledge sharing and development of partnerships and projects that increase development impact. These networks have the potential to encourage greater South-South cooperation among donors, as well as greater collaboration overall amongst the development community.

The Synergos Institute ([www.synergos.org](http://www.synergos.org)) is devoted to strengthening philanthropy in the South, including South-South cooperation among donors. Specifically, it seeks to strengthen capacities of grantmakers in Africa, Asia and Latin America to mobilise resources and to build collaboration in order to reduce poverty and increase equity in their countries.

Netaid ([www.netaid.org](http://www.netaid.org)) is a network that combines innovative programmes with new technologies to combat poverty, working in partnership with the private sector.

Global Knowledge Partnership ([www.globalknowledge.org](http://www.globalknowledge.org)) is a multi-stakeholder ICT for development partnership at the global level that seeks to harness the potential of ICT for sustainable development. Its members comprise governments, donor agencies, private sector companies, civil society, networks and international institutions.

#### Private sector needs

Going beyond private investment in developing countries and foreign aid and donor assistance, there is also a need to encourage multinational corporations and large businesses to contribute to sustainable development. These firms are a source of vital experience, expertise, information, technology, products and funding.

One approach is to facilitate businesses to support concrete projects. Although businesses have extensive resources available to conduct research, they also have a need for efficient and reliable search tools, networks and portals in the specialised areas of philanthropy and development. A significant effort in this area is the International Project Clearinghouse (IPCH), being developed to enable businesses to choose from a variety of projects worldwide and initiate partnerships for development with local NGOs across the world. IPCH's framework for corporate citizenship is intended to generate funds for the Millennium Development Goals by enabling effective grassroots organisations worldwide to compete for funding.

#### Challenges to building online partnerships

There are economic and technical challenges in deploying ICT for development, mentioned above. But the main "barriers to universal ICT deployment are cultural, meaning by that a lack of understanding on the part of decision-makers with respect to how ICT can turbo charge the cause of development," as José-María Figueres-Olsen, Senior Managing Director of the World Economic Forum and chair of the UN ICT Task Force, reflected at the ITU Telecom World 2003 Conference in October 2003. There is a need to work collectively to broaden understanding of the possibilities of ICT, and the leadership and commitment must be in place to do so.

Building on success stories: umbrella portal or a type of Google for development?  
This paper has brought attention to a number of initiatives that are currently underway to harness the power of ICT for development. They deserve greater support. We need to think creatively about how to build on these success stories to bring together key stakeholders who are mainly operating in parallel and occasionally come together online.

Key stakeholders must come together to leverage the existing online partnerships, and develop new ones, to increase cost-effective and efficient access to information and knowledge. Developing these models requires deep cooperation between international institutions, development agencies, foundations, foundation consortiums, and organisations representing the poor. To be meaningful for the poor, these models have to operate on the 'KISS' principle – keep it short and simple – and be clear and accessible.

One very simple step forward may be to create an umbrella portal that might provide links to knowledge networks, research portals, search engines, and online information clearinghouse portals that already exist. The value proposition would be to aggregate existing links in a simple and clear format that is as comprehensive as possible.

Is a type of 'Google for development' possible or realistic?  
Another possibility is to create a type of 'Google for development'. This would be more useful but entail a higher degree of investment and complexity, since it involves the development of a flexible yet effective search technology to sort through diverse sites and sources of information and data.

In either case, the main idea would be to create a one-stop portal to locate the range of development-oriented information and knowledge discussed in this concept paper. Simple to use, this one-stop portal might provide an efficient, focused and highly accessible approach to conducting global research.

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