PI External Reviews: Summary of Report
Pan Asia Networking (PAN)

Report to IDRC Board of Governors
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PI Aims

1. PAN Asia Networking Program Initiative, which started in 1994 as IDRC's longest-standing ICT4D program, helps Asian organizations and institutions adopt and use ICTs as a means to address development problems and to strengthen their own research and development capacities. PAN aims to use ICTs to solve problems faced in society in new ways and to offer communities opportunities to improve their quality of life.

2. The specific objectives of the PI include the following:
    2.1. To pilot demonstration, proof-of-concept, experimental and applied research ICT projects in disadvantaged communities within target countries in Asia.
    2.2. To strengthen research and development capacity to apply ICTs in education, health, and employment at the community level.
    2.3. To encourage the advanced technology countries in Asia to engage in capacity-building and in the coaching of slower adopting countries, through the promotion of research collaboration and networking.
    2.4. To network digital pioneers in the region and foster broad research partnerships for sharing and learning from each other and for articulating regional concerns at international fora.
    2.5. To encourage governments in their ICT policy formulation and related research to give priority to enabling the spread of ICTs to remote communities.

3. PAN has approved over 30 research projects, support projects and 50 small grants in 14 countries on the Asian continent.

Review Methodology

4. For this External Review of the Program Initiative (PI) PAN Asia, the reviewers visited five countries and interviewed over fifty PI staff, partners and others associated with PAN and its portfolio of supported projects. Field visits were also undertaken to PAN projects which were selected in consultation with the PAN team using a purposeful sampling process to ensure that they represent PAN in terms of country coverage, project characteristics, and thematic subjects.

Review Findings

5. Overall, the reviewers were impressed with the pioneering work of PAN and with the practical & concrete contributions made by a substantial number of projects within the Pan portfolio. The review found that the program appears to adequately meet its five objectives as laid out in its Prospectus. Despite changes in staff and the lack of a gender/policy specialist on the team, PAN has successfully promoted the spread of ICTs in disadvantaged segments of the region and played a key role both as a seeding agency and as an enabling agent.

6. Partners and project recipients generally have very high praise for the PAN team for its style of work, dedication and team effort. PAN's participatory approach with project partners

combined with intellectual input and ongoing support for capacity building was highly appreciated. PAN has managed to balance a need for efficiency and timeliness with care for the appropriateness of its work in communities. However, as projects are scaled-up to regional levels from country levels, the challenge will be to identify the right partners and to continue to build relationships of trust and flexibility that have resulted in PAN's successes so far. Large-scale projects with longer timelines pose their own set of problems and in moving in this direction these concerns need to be addressed directly by PAN.

7. PAN has contributed to networking, piloting technology (especially in rural areas and smaller countries of the region), enabled policy development and Southern capacity building, as well as promoting new thinking and innovative approaches within ICT use.

8. PAN has built a geographically balanced portfolio with special emphasis on less developed countries and areas that do not regularly receive the attention of large corporations or organizations. As an example, PAN has been a pioneer in Mongolia by working in partnership with Mongolian researchers and communities since 1994, assisting in setting up Mongolia's earliest ISP and web development services. This work has been recognized by the President of Mongolia who awarded to IDRC the "Friendship Medal" in October 2004. PAN continues to support ICT4D initiatives in this region on a range of issues from health care to policy.

9. PAN has played a lead role in Asia with its pioneering work & persistence in encouraging the spread of ICTs. In countries such as Bhutan, which have some cultural restrictions on the widespread use of media, IDRC's role as a catalyst for change has been remarkable. Just as in Mongolia, the first ISP setup was accomplished with substantial assistance from IDRC. This work has become a key building block for subsequent projects focused on Distance Education and Localization of Languages in Bhutan and is being used to inform similar projects in countries like Afghanistan which joined the Localization of Languages project at a later date. Due to cross-support, this multi-platform, regional initiative is doing well and significant outputs are being generated and disseminated widely through the Internet.

10. The review found that PAN has attentively focused on its theme of digital inclusion piloting ICT technologies both from the "hard" and "soft" components into various communities in rural areas (Laos, Afghanistan) and mountainous regions (Bhutan, Northern Pakistan). The review recognized the need to be involved in connectivity pilot studies for successful applied research projects on digital inclusion in disadvantaged communities. Often connectivity in disadvantaged communities does not have a commercial business model, so initially social investment may be the only mechanism to ensure digital inclusion. These are areas where but for IDRC funding many of these communities would have been "left behind". Also, these pilots gather valuable data on how to introduce ICTs into these communities and how they can best be used to improve people's lives. For instance, the M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF) models of "knowledge centres" are being developed for the "Mission 2007: Every Village a Knowledge Centre - A Road Map" project with policy makers in India. MSSRF has very diligently collected data using the PRA (participatory rural appraisal) methodology and thereby successfully ensured true digital inclusion. The objective of this work is to extend the knowledge revolution through ICTs to more than 600,000 villages. The successful MSSRF model is currently being used by IDRC in other locations such as the Sri Lanka Virtual Village project and is being develop as a model toolkit for use by other partners.

11. It is evident that supporting small grants for proposals in the region has led to better identification of projects for PAN. Many large projects have started their relationship with IDRC through participation in the R&D small grants program. The R&D small grants have also helped PAN test relationships with partner organizations and evaluate their strength and weaknesses.

12. PAN proactively makes changes based on feedback from earlier evaluations. This is one of the key strengths of PAN. For instance, as a result of the recommendation from the PAN Asia R&D Grants Program Evaluation, the administration of the R&D grants program was passed over to the Asian Media, Information and Communications Centre (AMIC) in Singapore from the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (CCOHS). The devolution of the role of coordinator of the R&D small grants has given AMIC more resources and ability to strengthen its own research and development capacity, allowing it to support the larger Asian community through the R&D Small grants program. Likewise, the PAN e-Commerce Mall evaluation suggested that it was important that the mall be administered by a regional organization that buyers and sellers were familiar with and trusted; this led to the devolution of the Collaboratory to the ASEAN Foundation. This devolution has strengthened the resources of the ASEAN Foundation and its research and development capacity. The ASEAN Foundation now has much better access to the Internet and has hired more experts to help them through this process of being a collaboratory for the region.

13. The review noted that during the recent tsunami tragedy in Asia, the utility of the PAN Knowledge Centres in Pondicherry, India stood out. Documented in national and international media, it was clear that despite the magnitude of devastation there was no loss of life in any of the project sites in Pondicherry. What is noteworthy is that while there were chaotic scenes in the neighboring villages & fishing hamlets, the distribution of relief was very organized as the project site had precise land and ownership records and other relevant data.

14. The review found no ethical issues in any of the projects.

Outputs, Outcomes and Reach

15. PAN has supported the networking of digital pioneers in the region promoting South-South exchange on ICT issues. A good example of this networking agenda can be seen with "The International Open Source Network" project, which serves as a regional centre of excellence for Free/Open Source Software and offers an online portal for training, collaborative authoring, knowledge management and event participation. This project is undertaken in collaboration with the UNDP/APDIP (Asia-Pacific Development Information Programme). Another example can be seen in the PAN-IFAD collaboration of ENRAP (Knowledge Networking for Rural Development in Asia region). Both are good examples of PAN leveraging their regional partners and experience, to influence the international fora. A further example was the PAN All Partners Conference in Vientienne, Laos in March 2003. This is an excellent example of wide scale sharing of experiences, strengthening of relationships, as well as providing a forum through which PAN was able to monitor current regional issues and critical topics deemed important by project partners working in the field. An outstanding result of this process has been the PAN "Localization and Distance Learning" initiative that emerged from the conference in Vientienne and has a large geographical spread and regional impact.

16. Strengthened information sharing and communication. PAN has effectively used electronic tools such as the web in the dissemination of information. Many of PAN supported projects have their own websities that provide access to and are a good source of updated information relevant to the region. While PAN focuses on the electronic medium, it has also produced written materials like the Digital Review of Asia Pacific (DirAP) that has been critical in terms of networking digital pioneers and establishing linkages with other organizations. DirAP started out as an IDRC initiative that today is a collaborative effort of IDRC, Asia-Pacific Development Information Programme (APDIP) of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the network of UNESCO Chairs in Communications (ORBICOM). This publication is an extension of the innovative editorial concept for the Pan Asia

Networking Yearbook published in the early years of the digital revolution by IDRC. PAN also produced a series on e-commerce in cooperation with ISEAS (Institute for South East Asian Studies). PAN commissioned this series of four studies to investigate the issues related to economic, social, methodological, and security in e-commerce. The four studies are titled: "Pan Asia E-Commerce: Action Research on E-Commerce for Small Artisans and Development Organizations" (2002); "Impact of Policy Environment Factors on the Electronic Commerce Development in Vietnam (2001-2003)"; "Direct Marketing of Artisan Products through Internet" (2001); and "E-Marketers: An Innovative Approach to E-Commerce" (2001).

17. The review found that substantive results are seen in PAN publications. DirAP or the "Digital Review of the Asia Pacific" was published in the early part of 2004 and the 2005/2006 edition is due for release shortly. This book, written by digital pioneers in the region gives a platform to share expertise between writers from advanced-technology countries and slower adopting countries. Extensively covering the region, the roots of this publication lie in IDRC's "PAN Asia Survey" conducted in1994 when little was known about the status of ICTs in the region. What started out ten years ago as a survey, morphed into a highly respectable publication that now addresses thematic issues apart from country specific information. Today the publication continues to be regarded as one of the best resources and reference for the region. Being a peer-reviewed publication which goes through extensive editing and validity check, it serves as an authoritative publication and almost an encyclopedia on ICT.

18. The review noted that while PAN has an exhaustive website which is well laid out and structured, more work needs to be done in terms of use of audio, video and possibly chat facilities. PAN's major projects, however, also have their own websites. The PAN Localization project portal (www.panl10n.net) contains content in local languages (Bangla, Dzongkha, Khmer, Lao, Nepali, Pashto, Sinhalese, and Urdu). The site lists the outputs, and is a good reference for anyone working in the same space. Due to the nature & lead time for Digital Review of Asia Pacific the web site (www.digital-review.org/) acts as a good source of updated information on the region. Link to (www.panaseanemall.org) allows for purchase of chapters/countries in PDF format from the online bookstore. ENRAP's web site (www.enrap.org) is a good source for documents listing development themes, articles and progress report. There is also a video & image section containing relevant data. The PAN-DLT portal (www.pan-dora.org/) has project related information. Listing all participating members, this site is expected to grow as the project progresses. The ICT4D Collaboratory web site (www.ict4dasean.org) located in Indonesia, provides web hosting, video hosting, e-commerce and shortly, discussion board facilities. The Collaboratory conducts workshops & onsite training that is supported by web services.

Policy

19. The review found that in the early phases of many PAN projects, the policy component was not directly addressed. However, as these projects reached different stages of development and this need arose, PAN successfully engaged in ICT policy formation. Pan has played a catalytic role in policy formation as demonstrated by the MSSRF Information Villages Research Project (IVRP) that lead to a Policy Makers Workshop promoting interactions among state & national government officials to develop policy recommendations. Another example was the input into the "Strategy for National ICT Policy" in Mongolia. PAN played a crucial role in strengthening & supporting MIDAS, Mongolia that organized a policy discussion that resulted in the shaping of Mongolian ICT Policy. More recently, PAN has provided financial support to the ASEAN-TELSOM forums to assist countries to exchange ideas and experiences amongst policy advocates and decision makers. The review noted, however, that instead of attempting to cover the broad gamut of policy issues, PAN needs to focus on pro-poor, pro-rural, digitally inclusive policy issues.

Capacity Building and Gender Mainstreaming

20. PAN's portfolio consists of projects that are responsive to local needs. With a good network of partners, PAN has been able to tap into local talent and existing ICT capacity. A clear sign of this is seen in the growth of partners' capabilities and their ability over a period of time to take on new projects addressing local needs. At the same time, however, the review notes that the weakness of this approach is that potential new partners may feel excluded due to a perception of an already existing and close-knit network that is difficult to break into.

21. The review found that PAN has actively ensured that gender considerations are a part of its digital inclusion projects. Some projects have demonstrated a direct gender impact, e.g. the "Homepreneurs" project in Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia; and the "Most Effective ICT Tools used by NGOs to Reach Grassroot Women in Asia and the Pacific" project. Other PAN support of gender mainstreaming can be seen in their support of the "Forum on ICTs and Gender" which helped prepare women organizations in the region for the World Summit on Information Society (WSIS) meeting in Geneva in December, 2003. However, a more systematic approach to gender inclusion and gender mainstreaming would be beneficial in future projects. Awareness building exercises undertaken in the region could result in greater efficacy.

22. PAN has provided encouragement and practical support to digital pioneers giving them a platform to voice their opinion. In 2003, and for the first time, PAN hosted an ICT4D sabbaticant from Asia - Dr. Onno Purbo, who has spent a large part of his life in the promotion and dissemination of knowledge through ICTs.

Issues for Consideration

23. The review found that PAN's objectives in the prospectus are too broad. This has led to a project portfolio which contains a wide variation of projects. While this may have been necessary at the initial stages in an emerging area, now there is a need to streamline the number of objectives so as to have more focused projects. The reviewers support the shift to regionally networked projects from the earlier focus on country-specific projects.

24. The review found that with IDRC there was some expression of a need for PAN to have greater systematic research outcomes related to their work. This could take the form of focusing on existing projects and scaling-up to the next level. There are many research outcomes from Pan's early pilot projects that could be used to assist others in future implementation or continued research in these identified areas.

25. The review noted that for different reasons there have been numerous staff changes over the recent life of the PI. It is suggested that planning for consistency of staffing within PAN, at least for every program cycle, could help the team be more effective in its programming work. Other than the Team Leader based in Ottawa (a position that has just recently changed), and one Senior Program Specialist located in ASRO office, most of the team members are new to PAN. Locating a program officer in the SARO office in Delhi has been a very positive step and is already bearing fruits, however, more still needs to be done and other skills sets added to the team, (such as a field-based gender specialist, and policy specialist).

26. The review found that PAN nurtures recipients as partners and often remains in the background. The downside of this approach, however, is that often IDRC supported projects do not become known regionally as IDRC/PAN projects. Identification is with the recipient or other donor organizations that have provided support. Therefore, PAN should work with partners to ensure that they diligently publicize their projects as PAN funded projects.