"ICTs are not like a new water pump in village"

Richard Fuchs, Director, ICTD
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He is the man behind Canada's first rural online and telecentre services. He is an entrepreneur, sociologist, author, educator and a great personality full of zest and enthusiasm. Richard Fuchs, Director of the Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) for Development Program Division of International Development Research Centre (IDRC) is a man with a mission. He comes with a broad experience in academicia, private and public sector and joined IDRC in 2001. He believes, "rural people need smart networks" and ICTs have got lot of potential to bring accessibility to information needs and livelihood opportunities to improve lives of poor people.

The Canadian-funded IDRC supports research projects that address the challenges of sustainable and equitable development. Recently in Sri Lanka, Dr. Fuchs spoke to i4d's Anuradha Dhar on IDRC's initiatives to bring ICTs closer to rural people, its new alliance with Microsoft and his views on the kind of challenges ICT4D pose to developing nations. Excerpts:

What are the key lessons you have learnt in your tenure in ICT4D programme of IDRC which you would like to share with the readers of i4d?

I have been involved with ICTs for Development since 1988, and for the last 4 years this has been at IDRC. I guess the most important lessons I have learned are the ones I repeat as often as I can.

First, ICTs for Development take time to have their effect. ICTs are not like a new water pump in the village. It took the post-industrial world almost a quarter-century to develop a business case for the Internet. The developing world needs their iterative learning phase too. It need not take 25 years, but it is not a light switch.

Second, women's participation in ICTs for Development is a pre-requisite for success. If women are not involved, and in leadership roles, the social and economic changes that are necessary for ICTs to affect development outcomes will get truncated. The post-industrial knowledge economies of North America, Europe and Australia all succedded through accelerated participation by women in science, technology, business and the labour market. Without women being demonstrably involved in the information economy, success is not possible.

Third, ICTs for Development are still very young. The entire approach isn't even 2 decades old. We still need to focus on learning, sharing what we know and listening to others. This last element can be difficult when we're all in a hurry to succeed.

What are the different programmes of IDRC in ICT4D? Can you briefly tell about each one?

ICT4D@IDRC has programmes, which are all regional in nature, strategic direction, budget and decision-making. We believe that, of all development programming, ICT for development needs to reflect regional priorities, context and capacity. In Africa we host both Acacia and Connectivity Africa, which have been integrated in their management and delivery. In the Americas, it is the Institute for Connectivity in the Americas and PAN Americas and in Asia it is Pacific Asia Networking or PAN.

To this we have added new programming with the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) in Asia Pacific with ENRAP II and in North Afric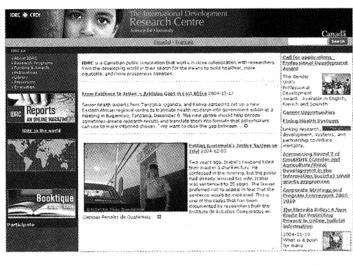a/Middle East with Karianet. Most recently we have agreed to be host to a new Telecentre Support Network, soon to known as *telecentre.org* that has been underwritten in the initial instance by Microsoft Community Affairs.

We annually spend roughly $25 million (CDN) on direct social investments in our programming along with additional resources to support 35 staff worldwide to work with our developing world partners. In *ICT4D@IDRC* we do not consider ourselves a "donor" but rather as a social investor similar to the role played to initially finance the early Internet.

In what other directions do you see IDRC's programme heading?

A much greater focus on how developing world communities can build income, jobs and local economies using ICTs. As well, we see a need to help our regional programming and partners become more globally connected through networks and alliances.

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We think WSIS is important, in both its Geneva and Tunis episodes. But this entire ICT4D undertaking is really a relay race, not a World Summit sprint. It is useful to recall that the WSIS was preceded by the Information Society and Development Conference in Midrand, South Africa (1996), the Global Knowledge for Development conferences in 1997 and 2000, the DotForce and the UN ICT Task Force in 2000, to name but a few. As much as we have been involved with the World Summit, we are just as interested in what comes after it in the years that follow. WSIS has helped to engage many new participants, especially in the developing world, in the consideration of how ICTs affect development. This is all for the good.

Ten years from now, will ICT4D become a redundant subject?

It is funny, people asked me that same question almost 20 years ago!

There is a lot of talk on financing ICT4D. Has IDRC done anything for understanding the models in this?

We have thought about it but have not approached the issue systematically on the input side. Instead, we are trying to build outputs. We are developing more scalable approaches to help our developing world partners to solve ICT4D problems. These are based on a financially sustainable vision but require initial social investment. E-Link Americas and the Telecentre Support Network are clear examples of this.

Recently IDRC has signed a big agreement for the Telecentre Support Network project with Microsoft. Is this an example of Microsoft taking over?

The short answer is 'NO'. IDRC's Board of Governors, half of whom come from the developing world, along with our President and management are firmly in control of our ICT4D programming. There has been no sign of a 'take-over' at all. IDRC's ICT4D programming has always been technically diverse, embracing different software, operating systems and technologies. The new partnership with Microsoft Community Affairs is not changing any of that. I have to tell you that I am very impressed by how our new colleagues in Microsoft Community Affairs have entered into this new public-private partnership. We both want other civil society and private sector partners to join in this undertaking. But it does seem that Microsoft Community Affairs is becoming much more engaged in ICTs for Development all over the world. ■

What are the thrust areas of IDRC at present?

IDRC as an organisation is focused on pro-poor policy change that informs the process of development decision-making. We add to this the development of human and institutional capacities to sustain development and, in the case of ICT4D, the development and adoption of appropriate pro-poor technologies. Our other program areas in the environment and socio-economic policy address similar purposes in their respective sectors.

In your opinion, what are the challenges in ICT4D in developing countries?

The challenges include having the vision and patience to let ICTs "catch" within the development space-to ensure it is not just an activity undertaken by elites who can afford high prices and specialist services. We are trying to work with developing world partners in this. Our newest initiative in the Americas, e-Link Americas, is designed expressly to spread access and the benefits of connectivity to those that can least afford them. E-Link Americas will dramatically reduce the price of access to open standards, wireless connectivity for social development organisations, especially in rural areas.

As well, developing countries are challenged in how to identify and adopt pro-poor, market-friendly telecoms policies. While this is always context specific, much more south-south exchange and documentation is still needed in this area.

What is happening in the world for the preparation towards WSIS 2005 favourable for Civil Society Organisations and developing countries?

IDRC's programs in ICT4D

The Acacia Initiative
This initiative in Africa is an international program to empower sub-Saharan communities with the ability to apply ICTs to their own social and economic development.

http://web.idrc.ca/en/ev-8455-201-1 DO_TOPIC.html

Connectivity Africa
This initiative, which was announced at the G8 Kananaskis 2002 Summit aims to improve access to ICTs in Africa by applying Canadian expertise especially in relation to education, health and community development.

http://www.connectivityafrica.ca/

Pan Asia Networking (PAN)
PAN is a program in Asia that seeks to understand the positive and negative impacts of ICTs on people, culture, the economy, and society, so as to strengthen ICT uses that promote sustainable development on the Asian continent.

http://web.idrc.ca/en/ev-9608-201-1 DO_TOPIC.html

The PAN Americas
The PAN Americas corporate project at IDRC supports research on the social uses and impact of information and communication technologies (ICTs) for development in Latin America and the Caribbean.

http://web.idrc.ca/en/ev-6793-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html

Institute for Connectivity
The Institute for Connectivity in the Americas (ICA) emerged from the 2001 Summit of the Americas. It is the forum for hemispheric innovation in the application of ICTs to strengthen democracy, create prosperity, and realise human potential.

http://www.icamericas.net/index.php?newlang=eng

ENRAP
ENRAP (Electronic Networking for Asia/Pacific Projects), an IFAD-IDRC collaboration, leverages a growing body of useful information generated by development projects and made available on the Internet.

http://www.enrap.org