Commentary

by Richard Fuchs

"IN A BOOKLESS SOCIETY, WHY START WITH BOOKS ?"

The USAID officer, committed and caring fellow, said to me: "Richard, computers in schools? Uganda is still a bookless society. They need books, not computers!" I had to think about this before replying: "In a bookless society, why start with books?"—a digital variant of Wayne Gretsky's injunction to "skate to where the puck is gonna be!"

Uganda has come a long way. And this country made an indelible impression on my life.

In 1997, when I first visited Uganda, I went to see a memorial building in rural Nakaseke. 1,300 skulls stared at me. The people of Nakaseke, in Uganda's infamous Lowero Triangle, had been loyal to the current President, then known as General Museveni. He had led the liberation forces against the genocide of Idi Amin Dada and later Milton Obote (or Obote II, as Ugandans refer to it). Nakaseke residents had been butchered mercilessly for their loyalty in the 1980s. The survivors I met — their gait, the look on their faces, how they gazed down at the ground when walking — all bespoke the horrors they endured, horrors which remain unimaginable to me. Their trauma was palpable. I could see it everywhere I looked.

Nakaseke is the unlikely location of the first rural telecentre in Africa. Beginning in 1997, this small town, where the phone lines had been down for more than a decade, was selected by international development

agencies to pilot this new approach to development assistance.

By the time I returned to Nakaseke in 1998, change was starting to happen. The telecentre building was being renovated and the computers were soon to arrive. Christopher Senono, a young man who had lost his seven brothers and sisters in the genocide, wanted to know how these computers could help his business. A digital camera, a portable colour printer — and the first "sign" was produced in Nakaseke. Christopher had put his lumber and concrete blocks on sale and used the proceeds to pay for the production of the poster.

Three years later, Nakaseke is a very different place than it was. There are now public telephones outside the telecentre. A private-sector cellular company has emerged in the country. The telecentre with eight work stations is filled almost every working hour. Nurses prepare patient records. Teachers design lesson plans. Students write papers. Businesspeople produce signs for their stores. And Christopher Senono no longer has to make the 16-km return trip down the narrow country road on his bicycle to make a phone call for his business.

Uganda and, increasingly, all of Africa are entering their very own "Information Revolution". More and more international development assistance is coming to understand that wealth, both the social and economic varieties, have something to do with information and communications. Information because it improves decision making. Communications because it accelerates decision making. Together they help to build networks that serve as channels of social and economic opportunity.

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But questions remain to be answered. The industrial revolution all but bypassed Africa, just as it did many rural parts of North America. Will the Information Economy bypass the developing world, too? Will they be locked out of the jobs, the incomes and the social benefits that the Information Economy has brought to so many of us? Will their health, education and governance be enabled by the use of ICTs, as ours has been?

The telecentre in rural Nakaseke has been put together by the local library

committee, the schools, the district council and the regional hospital. Not the government. Not the private sector! But rather by what international development jargon refers to as the "civil society": organizations preoccupied with social wealth and social dividends. 'Turns out they're the digital innovators! 'Turns out, as well, that their innovation is building new business opportunities locally. It also encouraged the national government to create more reasonable, pro-poor and pro-rural telecoms policies.

In many developing countries, it is this sector of society that has the greatest access to the poor. That creates the greatest reach of social investment. That, in fact, innovates and creates eventual markets, and that builds the experience and skill base for entrepreneurs to be incubated.

Beginning in January 2002, the eyes of the world will be on Canada. Our Prime Minister, Jean Chrétien, will be the President of the G8 for 12 months. There's much more at stake here than what the demonstrators will do with the rural venue in K-country.

The G8 has received and adopted a report produced by the Digital Opportunities Task Force, also known as the DotForce. DotForce was created in July 2000 by the leaders of the G8 who wanted to focus considerable attention on the impact of information technologies and the growing risks of a global "digital divide".

This first DotForce report calls upon the G8 leaders to refashion and expand their notion of what "development" means to include digital capacity and information technology literacy. Incidentally, civil society organizations are members of the DotForce. They include members from the public, private and not-for-profit sectors and participants from developed and developing countries. Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC), where I now work, is a Canadian Co-Chair of the DotForce.

Canada's history in bringing digital and information literacy to bear on the challenges of economic development has been rather successful, maybe the most successful in the world. While all of our regions have had huge adjustment problems (including where I come from in Newfoundland), we

have all, more or less, made the transition from a resource to a knowledge economy. A large country with a small dispersed population has to be good at this. We Canadians now are!

Richard Fuchs is currently Director of the Information and Communication Technologies for Development Program at IDRC and member of the Canadian Delegation to the DotForce. He served as the Executive Director, and later as a Commissioner, of the Newfoundland Economic Recovery Commission. He was also the founder and CEO of the Enterprise Network, a Crown Corporation and Canada's first rural online service. In 1996, he set up Futureworks, a firm specializing in the development of distance technology systems and services. It won the Newfoundland and Labrador EXPORT award in 2000.

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Last updated 2001-09-10

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