""ICTs for Development: Social Investment" Makes" the Market"

How can Canada help build e-economy capacities in developing countries?

Maureen O'Neil
President
International Development Research Centre

e-commerce to e-economy
Strategies for the 21st Century

September 27, 2004-09-23

Check Against Delivery

Let me begin by expressing my appreciation to our colleagues in Industry Canada for having invited me to participate in this panel. We have a very close working relationship with Industry Canada in many areas of our work and especially within our ICT for Development Program Area. From the DotForce (Digital opportunities Task Force) to the World Summit on the Information Society, to Connectivity Africa to the Institute for Connectivity in the Americas, we work together. It is indeed a pleasure to be with you today.

I've been asked to share a few remarks about the role of civil society, of the not-for-profit sector, in the e-economy and how it is that new partnerships can be generated among these groups. First, you should know that the International Development Research Centre, IDRC is a funder of applied research by developing country researchers working to solve problems in their countries and regions. This support also contributes to improvements in their research institutions: "Capacity building".

We work with people who understand that public policy matters and is better developed with evidence: and with people who know that doing this together with civil society is often the fastest way to build public support for new ways of solving problems.

This has everything to do with the business of innovation and, more exactly, with the role of the not-for-profit sector in ICT-based innovation.

We heard this morning about the origins of the Internet. For the next quarter century the Internet was incubated by not-for-profit, applied research organizations, including universities, private research contractors as well as governments. Imagine if in 1969 someone had said to the Internet "where's your business plan"? We don't need to look to the United States for evidence that social innovation in the Not-For-Profit Sector "makes" the market. In Canada we have a CANARIE that is emulated all over the world. The Canadian Network For Advanced Research, Industry and Education (CANARIE) embodies the collaboration of the not-for-profit, private and government sectors. CANARIE is largely responsible for the reliability and speed of our Internet services in Canada. It's also the principal agent for ICT-based social innovation in the Canadian North, and at the peripheries, both East and West, in digital innovation in the health, education and small business sectors.

In our ICT for D program at IDRC we look at ourselves as social investors. We have learned from the Canadian experience. We have supplemented that with the experiences of African, Asian, Caribbean, Central and South American digital pioneers with whom we've partnered since the early to mid 90's, when the Internet "came out of the box".

In Africa, Asia and the Americas, our not-for-profit, civil society collaborators raise digital awareness, increase people's skills and strengthen ICT organizational capacity. In East Africa we are working with an NGO called HealthNet Uganda and an American NGO called Satellife. They are in the second phase of introducing the use of Personal Digital Assistants or PALMs, to help create the first medical records, epidemiological

research data management and tracking and point to point communications using GSM. While the technology side of this is fascinating, the people, organizational and policy elements are more intricate than the technology any day. The NGO's have the staying power and the reach to sustain the focus and community pressure to ensure a positive policy outcome.

In Asia we are working with six different universities to help develop digital fonts in local languages. If the Internet is to actually help the poor, then job 1 is to make sure their language and alphabet is digitally available for use. In the Americas we have just launched a new not-for-profit company called "E-Link Americas" that will dramatically reduce the cost of access to Internet based data communications, first in the Caribbean and Central America and then throughout the remainder of the hemisphere. E-Links collaborates with private sector partners like SatMex (Mexico's principal satellite provider) and a Canadian WiFi company (EMS) EON Technologies, Spacebridge and Alcatel.

Recently we have been asked by the Community Affairs Division of Microsoft Corporation in Redmond, Washington to serve as host for a worldwide Telecentre Support Network. This will dramatically increase the support, training, advisory and start-up services to community learning centres and telecentres throughout the world. Better support to telecentres is a task to which we committed IDRC during our time on the DotForce. We are delighted that the private sector has provided the start-up capital to launch it. For IDRC this is an important private sector partnership.

Let me end my comments recalling one of the insights from DotForce. If the not-for-profit sector helps to "make" the digital market in poor countries, then having the private sector and the government side-by-side with the not-for-profits improves the efficiency of this process.

It is now much better understood that "multi-stakeholder" partnerships like this are the only real way to achieve scale in solving problems and building opportunities. At IDRC we think that modest and strategic social investments with the not-for-profit sector help to do this and that with good public policy the private sector will "pick up the ball" and create the wealth (and jobs) that will reduce poverty.

At IDRC this has become of our mantra. It is how we now do business with our colleagues in the developing world.