2 February 2011

PO Box A307 Sydney South 2000

ATTENTION:    Independent Review of Aid Effectiveness Secretariat
              GPO Box 887
              Canberra ACT 2601
              Australia

Dear Sir/Madam,

Please find following a submission by the One Laptop per Child Foundation to the review on the future direction of Australia's aid program.

Kind regards,

Michael Hutak,
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2 February 2011

# Submission to Independent Review of Aid Effectiveness

By Michael Hutak, Regional Director, Oceania, One Laptop per Child Foundation

## Bridging the Digital Divide in Australia's Aid Program delivery

**From the perspectives of humanitarian aid, human development and human rights, contributing to global efforts to bridge the digital divide needs to become an urgent and central priority of Australia's aid program.**

Information and computer technology (ICT) is facilitating an era of unprecedented social, political and economic change across the globe, profoundly impacting the international system and both developed and developing countries. Innovations in ICT such as the internet, the personal computer and the mobile phone are breaking barriers and breaching borders, sparking an explosion in information and communications, changing forever the way we interact as individuals, communities, and organisations.

The advent of phenomena such as social media, open data, wireless and broadband connectivity, e-commerce and e-government are radically affecting forever the way we work and socialize, how we conduct politics and business, and how we deliver services, design policy, and implement, monitor and evaluate development projects and programs. And, yes, technological innovation is also radically impacting how the vulnerable are exploited, how dissent is suppressed, free speech censored, hate speech spread, crime organized, and war waged between state and non-state actors.

On the positive ledger, these tools are being embraced and applied to ensure freedom of information, to open up public access to government data, enhance the delivery of better governance, boost transparency and accountability, and enlisted as aids against corruption. In so-called emerging markets, countries are leapfrogging obsolete networks and outdated infrastructure, leveraging inexpensive new technologies to rapidly accelerate economic development.

In the context of international cooperation and development through official direct assistance (ODA), these tools are increasingly being enlisted across the spectrum, from advocacy campaigns to poverty reduction strategies to global health programs. They are being applied to catalyze community-level participatory development, to address entrenched inequities, and to increase access to basic services such as education and health, to populations which have hitherto suffered generations of social and economic exclusion. In donor countries, among "development partners", across knowledge networks and in communities of practices, advocacy, campaigning and fundraising have been completely re-engineered by the new tools.

There is, of course, a gap in equitable access to the digital domain between rich and poor countries, and between the rich and the poor within all countries. Since it was broadly identified in the mid 1990s, this "digital divide" is widening in some contexts and narrowing in others. It has come to mean several dimensions: those who use computers and the Internet and those who do not; those with access to broadband networks and those without; those groups within society such as the poor, uneducated or disabled who are denied access to 21st century skills such as "information literacy". Progress on bridging these gaps is now widely accepted as key indicators of human development within and among all countries.

In 2003 and 2005, in Geneva and then in Tunis, the United Nations convened two *World Summits on the Information Society*, to address the global digital divide, resulting in the international community adopting the goal of extending internet access to all, and setting a target of extending access to 50 per cent of the world's population by 2015, thus aligning with the already established frameworks of the Millennium Development Goals. Then UN Secretary General Kofi Annan told the 2005 Summit in Tunis:

> *"There is a tremendous yearning, not for technology per se, but for what technology can make possible. The hurdles are more of a political than financial nature."*

The most recent essay in this global consensus is a landmark speech by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in January 2010[1]:

> *"I've seen this firsthand in Kenya, where farmers have seen their income grow by as much as 30 percent since they started using mobile banking technology; in Bangladesh, where more than 300,000 people have signed up to learn English on their mobile phones; and in Sub-Saharan Africa, where women entrepreneurs use the internet to get access to microcredit loans and connect themselves to global markets.*

> *"Now, these examples of progress can be replicated in the lives of the billion people at the bottom of the world's economic ladder. In many cases, the internet, mobile phones, and other connection technologies can do for economic growth what the Green Revolution did for agriculture. You can now generate significant yields from very modest inputs. And one World Bank study found that in a typical developing country, a 10 percent increase in the penetration rate for mobile phones led to an almost 1 percent increase in per capita GDP. To just put this into context, for India, that would translate into almost $10 billion a year.*

> *"... There are 4 billion cell phones in use today. Many of them are in the hands of market vendors, rickshaw drivers, and others who've historically lacked access to education and opportunity. Information networks have become a great leveler, and we should use them together to help lift people out of poverty and give them a freedom from want."*

Secretary Clinton quotes F.D Roosevelt's famous "four freedoms" speech -- Freedom of speech and expression, Freedom of worship, Freedom from want, Freedom from fear – before identifying a fifth freedom for the 21st century:

> *"...the freedom to connect – the idea that governments should not prevent people from connecting to the internet, to websites, or to each other. The freedom to connect is like the freedom of assembly, only in cyberspace. It allows individuals to get online, come together, and hopefully cooperate."*

**From the perspectives of humanitarian aid, human development and human rights, contributing to global efforts to bridge the digital divide needs to become an urgent and central priority of Australia's aid program.**

As evidence of the current lack of such a priority, conducting an internet search in January, 2011 for the term "Digital Divide" using AusAID's own website search tool yields the following results[2]:

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[1] Accessed 25 January 2011 at  http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2010/01/135519.htm
[2]  Accessed 26 January 2011 at:
http://search.atomz.com/search/?sp_a=sp08097d00&sp_f=iso-8859-1&sp_q=%22Digital+Divide%22&sp_k=

There would appear to be no references to the "digital divide" in any publicly available AusAID policy or programme document since 2003.

This is extraordinary, considering that the second World Summit on the Information Society occurred two years later in 2005 and was attended by representatives of 175 countries including Australia, 1500 people from International Organizations, 6200 from NGOs, 4800 from the private sector, and 980 from the media[3].

The opportunity cost borne by this technological blind spot must be extracting a significant impact on Australia's capacity to meet the commitments it embraced in the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness. Such institutional oversight indicates in 2011 that AusAID needs to urgently rebuild its knowledge networks and skills capacity in this area. It needs institutional strengthening in the discipline and practice of ICT for Development (ICT4D) and related fields such as e-health, e-learning and ICT for Education (ICT4E) in order to develop more effective strategies and deliver more innovative programs through Australia's aid program that meet both developing country demands and the aspirations of Australia's own highly-networked, tech-aware and -enabled society.

Australia's aid agency needs to develop a substantial, coherent, and overarching digital strategy with respect to the delivery of its programs and the conduct of its activities. It needs to join the debates, begin to develop policies and start publishing position papers on how it is tackling the digital divide, both in relation to the development sectors in which it is most active, and in its regional or situational analysis of developing countries. It needs to rethink its approach and reconsider ICT as a significant driver of development suitable for inclusion among its key programmatic themes.

And it needs to incorporate ICT into those themes where it is now standard professional practice, such as in infrastructure development, education, and health. It needs to adopt as standard the interactive tools which will enable it to be more responsive to beneficiaries and other key stakeholders' needs, and allow them in turn to engage more meaningfully with AusAID personnel, thus rendering it more accountable and more effective. It needs to take to heart the advice offered

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[3] United Nations General Assembly Document 687 session 60, *Report of the World Summit on the Information Society* accessed at http://www.undemocracy.com/A-60-687.pdf on 29 January 2011.

on the "Development Gateway" web portal, one of the few digital initiatives which AusAID has supported:

> "**Knowledge Sharing/ICT Tools**: Knowledge sharing and management is one of the key issues facing many organisations today in both developed and developing country contexts. It relates, in particular, to how lessons learned are recorded and transferred within and between organisations, as well as collaborative processes and tools for knowledge and information exchange."[4]

Australia's aid agencies need to demonstrate not only that they are serious about embracing these tools and frameworks themselves, but that it will listen to developing countries when they express national aspirations to apply the same tools to the achievement of national development goals. When the Rudd Labor Government took office in 2007, the Honorable Julia Gillard, then Education Minister, oversaw the implementation of a "digital education revolution" in Australian schools. Australia's aid program should equally respect the political demand for better quality education augmented by ICT when it comes from both grass roots communities and political leaders in developing countries.

To illustrate this, let us consider just the education sector and we here relate our experience with AusAID on attracting support for our regional ICT4E initiative: *One Laptop per Pacific Child*.

*One Laptop per Pacific Child* is a regional initiative sponsored by the One Laptop per Child Foundation[5], national governments and their development partners to provide every child in basic education with access to a rugged, low-cost, low-powered, web-connected laptop, loaded with appropriate Pacific content and open source software designed to unleash every child's creative potential and foster collaborative learning. In the first instance, we are seeking to reach more than 700,000 children in schools across 22 Pacific island nations. This goal recognises that a similar number of children in the region remain disadvantaged in that they attend no formal schooling whatsoever[6].

In 2007, the leaders of 22 Pacific nations cited OLPC in the Pacific Island Forum's regional strategic plan, *The Pacific Plan*, and resolved to test the OLPC Laptop in their primary schools and education systems. OLPC Foundation responded by donating more than US$2.5m and 5000 laptops to Pacific children. Government-sponsored pilot projects are now up and running in 41 schools across 10 Pacific Island countries. As OLPC's Oceania Director, I have been petitioning donors such AusAID to meet the Pacific Leaders' explicit requests[7] to support scaling up the testing of OLPC in the region.

Quite apart from the relative merit of the OLPC program, AusAID has been careful to not make any

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[4] See http://www.developmentgateway.com.au/cms/sectors, accessed on 28 January 2011.

[5] One Laptop per Child Foundation (OLPC) is a global non-profit organization, dedicated to creating educational opportunities for the world's poorest children. OLPC is the creator, manufacturer and distributor of the ground-breaking XO laptop, developed at the MIT Media Lab. Launched in 2006 at the World Economic Forum, the XO has been distributed to over 2 million children in 40 countries including Uruguay, Peru, Pakistan, Nepal, Rwanda and Afghanistan.

[6] See Secretariat of the Pacific Community's Pacific Regional Information System statistics on Education accessed at http://wwwx.spc.int/prism/ASP/Education.asp?EducationOrder=Sorter_Source&EducationDir=ASC on 28 January 2011.

[7] OLPC was also mentioned as a priority in the Pacific Regional Digital Strategy (2007), the Pacific Education Development Framework (2009) and the Framework for Action on ICT for Development in the Pacific (2010) in formal letters of request to donors for support by Prime Ministers, Education Ministers and Permanent Heads of Education from at least 10 Pacific nations, and all five of the region's Least Developed Countries: PNG, Solomon Islands, Samoa, Kiribati and Vanuatu.

statement on the explicit requests to support OLPC coming from either individual countries, or in the Pacific Plan or any subsequent plans and strategic documents. It has resisted country-level requests by citing that there is no sound evidence that OLPC impacts educational goals, despite the fact that Pacific leaders are seeking donor support to trial the technology to gain this very evidence and assess OLPC as an appropriate tool in the Pacific.

As far as we can determine, AusAID has not published any research or produced any position papers on the use and/or effectiveness of ICT in any format in schools, yet ICT4E is a vast issue area, is the subject of a huge and growing body of academic research, and is an accepted and widely deployed option in the international development arena[8]. At the UN General Assembly in September, 2010, the Foreign Minister, the Honourable Kevin Rudd, reaffirmed Australia's commitment to the MDGs, to primary education and to the Pacific:

> *"All governments at this General Assembly have participated in the Millennium Development Goals Summit. Australia fully embraces the MDG framework. … Over time, more of our aid will go to the least-developed countries and we will continue to give high priority to assisting the world's small island states, and particularly our Pacific neighbours, in recognition of their special needs. We expect to invest some $5 billion in education to 2015, including support for universal primary education."*

We know the long-term benefits of investment in Basic Education[9]:

- o Increases national and lifetime individual earnings and productive output
- o Less crime, slower population growth, less poverty, a cleaner environment
- o Positive relationships between education and health, the health of family members, the schooling of one's children, life choices made, fertility choices and infant mortality.

But we now also know the benefits of Investment <u>in ICT</u> for Basic Education[10]
- o engagement and integration with region and the world
- o builds income-generating skills, realises productive potential
- o improves medium- and long-term economic performance
- o stimulates economic development (esp. Infrastructure – power, communications , internet)
- o fosters the digital economy, e-governance, Free and Open Source Software (FOSS), enhances transparency
- o ensures long-term competitiveness in an interconnected, globalised world

And we know that there a broader economic benefits that accompany extending access to the Internet, just one example: a recent World Bank (2009) report estimates that for every 1% increase in population's access to the Internet, exports increase by 4.3% across both developed and developing countries.[11]

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[8] See zunia.org, the web portal for knowledge exchange among development professionals. See especially the coverage of e-learning (http://zunia.org/cat/e-learning-1/), technology and innovation (http://zunia.org/cat/technology-innovation/) and technology transfer (http://zunia.org/cat/technology-transfer/).
[9] Economic, Social and Non-Market Returns to Education, Owens 2004. Accessed at http://bit.ly/bEkKGJ
[10] Ibid, Owens, 2004
[11] *Information and Communications for Development 2009*: Extending Reach and Increasing Impact, World Bank Group 2009. Accessed at http://bit.ly/jwJgM

Australia can enhance aid effectiveness and boost both social and economic development among developing countries through investing not just in the basics of basic education but in programmes which incorporate ICT for education and which strengthen its capacity to meet challenge of bridging the digital divide. This principle can be applied across the broad spectrum of Australia's development program.

ENDS


MORE INFORMATION:

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