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Development Agency

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Canada's Role at the Global Knowledge 97 Conference & in the Global Knowledge Partnership

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Executive Summary

This desk study is a contribution to a comprehensive review of CIDA's performance in delivering Infrastructure Services. Like several others, it focuses on the effectiveness of CIDA's policy dialogue in influencing the nature and impact of CIDA in a specific activity or project. In this case, it was the Global Knowledge 97 Conference, held in Toronto in June, 1997. Proposed by the World Bank, and with CIDA as a principal Canadian partner, the Conference highlighted the growing importance of information and communication technologies in enhancing developing countries' access to information and knowledge. The study also assessed CIDA's effectiveness in the continuing Global Knowledge Partnership, an information sharing and co-ordination group of some 40 development agencies, which was a chief outcome of GK97.

Development Context

The study notes that a great deal of work had been done by the international community, notably the IDRC, and to a lesser extent CIDA, prior to the World Bank's focusing on the issue in the summer of 1996. CIDA had an extensive track record in telecommunications development, and adapted its approach towards the need for capacity building, institutional reform and commercialization. CIDA also worked closely with the ITU in creation of a development sector there, and the Government of Canada was a major actor in the G7's major conference on the information society and development in South Africa in May, 1996. While there was a growing awareness that information and knowledge would be drivers of social, economic and cultural development, few development agencies, including CIDA, had a well thought-out strategy which linked knowledge creation and dissemination and information and communication technologies.

Purpose of the GK97 Conference

The Bank set out its objectives for the GK97 Conference in the fall of 1996. These did not vary greatly, as Canada and other partners became involved. The Bank saw the need to promote national policies that support access to technology and the accumulation of knowledge; new partnerships to extend benefits to the poor, taking into account cultural differences and local knowledge and better focused donor support for country programs and strategies that mobilize knowledge for development. In the Bank's view the Conference was a learning opportunity for participants so that from the start it resisted attempts by Canada (and others) to structure the event, for instance through working papers, a declaration and concluding report.

CIDA Strategy and Objectives

Canada was not well prepared, intellectually or organizationally, to engage in such a major conference, as a principal partner, within a six-month time frame. The twin themes of knowledge dissemination and better use of information and communication technologies were difficult to interpret and many of the individuals initially involved were telecommunications or information technologists. CIDA and other Canadian partners were caught up in the process of organizing the event and did not set out precise objectives which differed greatly from those conceived by the Bank. However, CIDA participants consistently promoted issues of poverty reduction through

greater access to information and communication technologies (and hence knowledge), the importance of knowledge flows to good governance, an enabling regulatory environment and the need for partnerships, including public-private sector ones.

Process

Canada's participation in the Conference was organized interdepartmentally, and with the non-governmental and private sectors, through a variety of committees. This worked well, as process, despite the short time frame. CIDA provided a GK97 Team Leader from Policy Branch.

Inputs

The three-day Conference was costly, at an estimated cash outlay of \$US3,700,000, with Canada contributing \$C1,400,000, mainly through CIDA. About 80 CIDA staff were involved, 20-30 significantly.

Outputs

The Conference was judged a success by its organizers, including the Canadian high-level committee, in that it attracted more than 2,000 persons from over 100 countries and had wider participation through extensive Internet sites and a trade forum. Canadian Ministers and private-sector executives were well represented in the program. However, because of the breadth of the topic and the lack of agreed criteria for selection of "content" the program became overloaded, lessening its focused impact. No report was produced, so the intellectual legacy is partial. A number of problems of equitable attendance were also apparent.

Outcomes

For CIDA, the three principal outcomes of the Conference were the ongoing Global Knowledge Partnership of some 40 development organizations, from both the public and private sectors; and the signing of agreements for ICT-based co-operation with the World Bank and the International Telecommunication Union.

The Global Knowledge Partnership, to April, 1999, had proved its worth as a clearing house for sharing information and appeared to have encouraged some agencies to take ICTs more seriously as a developmental field of activity. However, the Partnership has yet to agree upon its mandate, membership criteria and financing. CIDA played a key role in its development and took the lead

in developing the governance track for the GK2000 Conference planned for Kuala Lumpur in the spring of 2000.

The ITU and World Bank Agreements provide frameworks for action in ICT-based projects by the Agencies but remain to be developed.

The Conference as a Learning Event

The study finds that the Conference was a lost opportunity, as a learning event, in that those involved, from CIDA and other agencies, were caught up in the process and had little time to study the wider implications of the information and knowledge revolution and the role ICTs play in it.

Poverty Reduction

The study notes a growing debate between proponents of information and communication technologies and development practitioners concerned with poverty reduction issues. CIDA could play a role in resolving this debate in productive ways if it developed an agency strategy, given CIDA's deeper understanding of poverty reduction programming and knowledge transfer mechanisms. It notes that gender issues appeared to be underrepresented in the program of the GK97 Conference and that considerable scrambling was necessary to bring participation by women to 31 per cent.

Overall Assessment of Results

In summary, the study finds that several factors have lessened the effectiveness of CIDA's policy dialogue on issues of information and communication technologies and their contribution to the creation and dissemination of knowledge:

- CIDA lacks an agency strategy on ICTs and development. More significantly, the real issue for CIDA is to understand the role knowledge plays in development and how a development agency can "grow" knowledge within its partner organizations. This understanding is emerging within other organizations, notably within IDRC and to a lesser extent within the UNDP and the World Bank.
- While knowledge transfer has been an instrument of Canadian development co-operation for decades, we need to better understand the link between information, knowledge and ICTs and develop a strategy which will focus on how to use them to shape trends and transform society through governance and other means - as a key to development.
- When CIDA was tasked by the Prime Minister's Office with being the Bank's principal partner in the proposed Global Knowledge 97 Conference, the Agency lacked a conceptual and policy underpinning for its participation; also, a focal point for administrative co-ordination and program delivery had to be created overnight. The Conference program echoed Canadian development priorities in infrastructure - equitable access to communications; use of the new technologies to assist in poverty alleviation; attention to gender issues. But the Canadian private sector and Industry Canada felt short-changed, as they continue to believe CIDA should be more proactive, a natural belief, in promoting export of Canada's rapidly expanding know-how and capabilities in these fields. Some non-Canadian respondents found it curious that Canada's federal and provincial governments have given high priority to making Canada an internationally competitive Information Society, while Canada's development agency lacks a strategy on ICTs in development and appears to invest at only a modest level in this field, although the real amount is unclear from

CIDA records. This belies the growing evidence that ICTs, carefully positioned, can accelerate equitable development, even in poorer countries.

Despite these structural and conceptual obstacles, the study finds that CIDA was relatively successful in the use of policy dialogue to influence the nature of the GK97 Conference, and continues to have significant influence on the activities of the ongoing Global Knowledge Partnership. In the absence of an ICT strategy, this flows from the vision of a very small team. But CIDA's influence is only as sustainable as that fragile group.

The study found that the GK97 Conference was a lost learning opportunity for CIDA in that a parallel educational program could have been implemented to help Agency officers focus on the importance of ICTs in development; and eventually to develop a strategy on ICTs and development. However, the short lead time and slim resources precluded this. It recommends that such a program should still be implemented, as a component in developing an Agency strategy.

To do this, the Agency needs a strong focal point to develop policy, co-ordinate multilateral co-operation and show leadership to program branches as they begin to tap the benefits of ICTs, in specific ICT programs, and to enhance the impact of programs in health, agriculture, the environment, and other existing sectors.

In terms of policy dialogue, as CIDA increasingly uses ideas rather than money as an instrument of its development activities, the Agency's skills in policy dialogue need to be honed, through the preparation of suggested approaches and guidelines.

Finally, as a second major Global Knowledge conference is planned for the year 2000 in Kuala Lumpur, the study recommends immediate action to set out clear objectives, a statement of expected results and tasks, and to allocate the required resources. Early attention needs to be given to a conference design that fosters dialogue and participation, meaningful involvement of the business sector and NGOs, greater advance consultation with stakeholders and more strategic attention to gender issues.

The following recommendations were made:

Recommendation 1:

Domestically, Canada strives to be in the mainstream of the Information Society. CIDA's programming priorities fail to take full advantage of the potential of ICTs, and knowledge in development. CIDA should recognize the importance to developing countries of the Information Society and give greater priority in programming documents to the issues and challenges for regions and countries.

Recommendation 2:

CIDA should increase its capacity to set an agency direction for the importance of the Information Society - with an emphasis on the contribution of good governance - in CIDA partner countries. A focal point for policy direction and monitoring should be established in Policy Branch. One of the first priorities would be to develop an agency strategy in the use and promotion of information, knowledge and ICTs, as part of CIDA's overarching responsibilities to help partner countries generate and disseminate knowledge.

Recommendation 3:

CIDA should begin a dialogue, at the highest levels, with Industry Canada, and other appropriate groups representing the interests of the Canadian ICT private sector, with a view to ensuring that Canada's know-how - generated very largely by federal incentives - is put to work for the benefit of developing countries in activities in which Canada has a clear comparative advantage. (To paraphrase Canada in the World.)

Recommendation 4:

The GK97 was a lost learning opportunity for CIDA in that participation by the Agency was relatively thin. If greater attention is to be paid to the impact of information and communication technologies, as a generator of knowledge, a program of sensitization should be undertaken at the corporate level, and within program branches.

Recommendation 5:

Given the increasing importance of policy dialogue as an instrument of CIDA interventions, CIDA should systematize the policy dialogue process through the development of suggested approaches and guidelines and ensure policy co-ordination throughout the agency.

Recommendation 6:

The GK partnership approach, begun at GK97, could be a critical factor in creating a global concept of development more in tune with the realities of our 21st century world. The Canadian GK Partnership group should consider a more strategic approach to applying knowledge to development, through electronic workspaces for resolving development problems, supporting dialogue and fostering co-operation and partnerships in program and project development. This could involve the creation of a community of Canadian organizations as a platform for a distinctly Canadian approach to the application of knowledge for development and the associated use of ICTs.

In relation to GK2000,

Recommendation 7:

CIDA should develop a strategy for GK2000 which includes clear objectives, a statement of expected results, an approach, required tasks and a schedule, appropriate allocation of human and financial resources, and indicators of success.

Recommendation 8:

CIDA should address the following issues or themes in its planning for GK2000.

- how to give more strategic attention to gender equality issues
- ways to facilitate greater stakeholder participation, particularly by NGOs, through advocacy and the provision of financial resources in the run-up to GK2000
- mechanisms to give greater attention to involving the business community given their lead role in creating access to knowledge and information through ICTs
- promoting a conference design that fosters dialogue and participation
- putting governance issues at the forefront of the conference