The Lebanese Center for Policy Studies

**In collaboration with
The Centre for Global Studies, University of Victoria,
Canada**

The Digital Initiative
For Development (DID) Agency

International Consultative Workshop
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Narrative Report
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INTRODUCTION

The Lebanese Center for Policy Studies (LCPS), in collaboration with the Centre for Global Studies at the University of Victoria (Canada) held a meeting of ICT experts, consultants and practitioners, in Beirut, on September 11-12, 2001. Among the 20 participants, several belonged to major institutions dealing with ICT for development (World Bank, UNDP, UNESCO, IFIP), while others came from NGOs or university and research background. The participants formed a cross-section of a wide geographical area, and came from ten countries (Dubai, Egypt, India, Lebanon, Morocco, Senegal, South Africa, the United States, Uruguay). The main objective of the meeting was to discuss the nature, the mandate and the areas of intervention of an international agency dedicated to fostering the use of ICT for sustainable development.

A. BACKGROUND

The DID agency meeting is one component of a larger project managed by the Centre for Global Studies (CFGS). This project (Managing Interdependence) aims to propose possible policy initiatives to enhance the impact of global governance institutions, and to promote practices of accountability, transparency, and participation. ICT for development is one of the fields identified that need to be assessed and studied for the purpose of possibly establishing a new dedicated international agency. This report presents the proceedings of the meeting where these issues were first discussed.

The participants reflected on a background paper drafted by the LCPS that was distributed prior to the meeting (see Discussion paper). The paper comes in four sections. The first part discusses **the existing and ongoing international initiatives and programs that address the digital divide**, digital opportunities and digital bridges. International initiatives can be grouped in four types: the policy framework approach (DOT force, UNDP's DOI), the global gateway approach (macro portals), the international special fund approach (SBEM), and the private sector approach (WEF taskforce). Programs are mainly being promoted by UN development agencies and by donor agencies, international NGOs as well as by professional associations, corporations and business groupings. They target a variety of fields such as school networking, distance education, telecenter development, ICT skills development, and databases. The paper surveys two of those set of programs: those launched by the World Bank Group since 1995, promoting ICTs for economic and social development (InfoDev, worLD, AVU, GDLN, GDN, GDG), and those established by the UNDP as early as 1993 dealing with ICT for networking, awareness raising and solutions for sustainable development (SDNP, ICT for development, WIDE, DOI).

The second section of the paper discusses **the reasons for establishing a new ICT for development agency**. Several justifications are presented: the need for a fully **dedicated institution on an international level**, that would contribute to field building and that would act **as an accountable and responsible agency**; as well as the need for **a coordination facilitating** agency and for a **user-oriented decentralized service provider**.

In its third section, the paper details the proposed functions of a Digital Initiative for Development (DID) agency. First, the LCPS suggests that the DID agency would act as a **monitoring, research and resource center** for the numerous on the ground initiatives and programs concerned with ICT and development. Within this perspective, the agency could create an international observatory on ICT and development, and start an international ICT initiatives monitor. It could also conduct empirical research and comparative studies, and contribute to the establishment of sets of international indicators, indices and other methodological and analytical tools on e-development.

The second function of the DID agency would focus on a delimited and manageable field, **ICT for learning**. The LCPS proposes to work on the interface between technology and pedagogy, to enhance the capacity and the efficiency of educational systems in the developing countries. The agency could develop significant programs in this respect: a) supporting educational systems in the use and incorporation of ICT tools and applications (cataloguing existing multimedia products, establishing standards, encouraging regional and linguistic e-networking, etc.); b) promoting ICT-based teacher training programs, to improve the quality of education; c) helping development of distance education; d) supporting national telecenters initiatives.

Third, the DID agency could provide **support for appropriate technology and local content development**. In this perspective, the DID agency would be promoting an appropriate use of ICT, taking into account the economic, social and technical conditions of developing countries. The agency could act both as a technology monitor and a technology advisor; it could play a leading role as a research and development promoter, and as a supporter of appropriate technology, for example in the field of radio for learning and development. The agency could also expand the innovative initiatives of committed local entrepreneurs and scientists.

Finally, the DID agency fourth function could target **facilitating surplus recycling and exchange programs**. There are millions of computers in industrialized countries that are dumped each year; recycling even one percent of them into developing countries could make a significant contribution to reducing the digital gap.

The report ends with **suggestions for the parentage and governance features** of the DID agency, with a set of criteria to bear in mind in selecting options. The main idea is to create an accountable institution, with a defined mandate and state-of-the-art governance features, going beyond the major existing international organizations, with the objective of inducing an incremental progress. This must be done through associating a variety of stakeholders and partners for cooperation, across cultures and institutions.

B. DISCUSSED TOPICS

The participants to the Beirut workshop discussed thoroughly the LCPS report about the feasibility of a DID agency. The workshop started with two introductory sessions where the participants reviewed the international initiatives and programs on the digital divide and raised the question of the value-added potential of a DID agency. The meeting focused afterwards on the four proposed functions of the agency: monitoring, research and resource center; ICT for learning, appropriate technology

and local content development, as well as surplus recycling and exchange programs. Each function was comprehensively and methodically examined. The main considerations raised will be presented below. The workshop closed with a session dedicated to the governance features and institutional design of the DID agency, and a general synthesis of the main issues debated over the two days.

Institutional Design of DID

The issue of institutional design of the DID agency was raised early on in the meeting, and discussed at various sessions of the workshop. The participants examined the pros and cons of having either an **independent** or an **affiliated** institution. The idea of an independent agency was strongly favored, especially if it were to play an evaluation and monitoring role for existing ICT for development initiatives and programs. The need for an **independent evaluation of activities and projects** was largely agreed upon. The point of having **a unique interlocutor** of governments in ICT for development acting as **a global clearinghouse** was also made.

The issue of having **parents and affiliates** was discussed. Would they be international, national and/or regional networks of ICT for development institutions? Moreover, would the agency be a new separate legal entity? Having an independent agency brought up the issues of long-term **sustainability** and **funding** opportunities. Several participants discussed the choice of the agency to be **proactive** or to be **demand-driven**. Others discussed the choice of funding the agency mostly through **capitalization** or through **contractual work**. Several arguments addressed the necessity not to replicate nor duplicate existing efforts made by the Development Gateway Foundation and the UN ICT task force. The agency should channel demands not pilot them. Some suggested that having **a small international NGO acting as a network-coordinating center** might be the most suitable approach, and focused on the necessity of **finding significant niches** for its operations.

Discussions also focused on the nature of the agency, and the **constitution of the international board**. Identifying general criteria to determine **the eligibility of possible major stakeholders** was an issue that was raised but not sufficiently addressed. A majority of the participants stressed the need for insuring **North-South parity**, and also **South-South cross-fertilization**, especially among leading countries such as India, South Africa and Brazil, since there is a strong need for more voice from the South in international organizations. Some participants proposed to think of other **institutional models, such as IDRC** in Canada, which operates as a legal national entity with an international board of governors in which the South is represented, and has an equal say with the North. Others pointed that **UNESCO could be an interesting host** for the DID agency. Finally, an alternative **name** for the agency was suggested: the Development Institute for Global Information Technology – DIGIT.

<u>The DID Agency Mandate</u>

Function 1: Monitoring, Research and Resource Center

There was considerable agreement on the function of monitoring and research for the DID agency. Several participants emphasized the importance of the agency doing independent **evaluations** of programs and initiatives, and measuring **impacts** of change empirically, and on the long term. In this respect, it is highly necessary to devise documentation **methodologies and indicators**. This function would also have the benefit of helping countries and institutions to **compare and share experiences, regionally**. Participants emphasized moreover the importance of **creating incentives**. The discussion also stressed the value of **pro-active information dissemination**; some pointed that while information is widely available, **data mining** and **knowledge building** in the ICT field is still lacking.

The issue of **transfer of experiences** was widely covered: suggestions for establishing **an information service center** were discussed, where concerned players would come with 'shopping lists' for needed items. The DID agency could thus act as both a **coordination** center and a **service provider**. Some participants suggested focusing also on **training local groups** so they are able to do themselves the design, management and evaluation procedures of their information and research needs.

Function 2: Promotion of ICT for Learning

Most participants approved that ICT for learning should be a priority field of intervention of the DID agency because new technology might be the only tool that would allow to bridge the gap in education between developing and developed countries. Supporting ICT for learning could be a challenging function for DID to address, especially since **learning has to be contextual**. Also, the agency could promote **research and development** (R&D) activities, and focus on encouraging **innovative methods of teaching** through media ICT, and the **design of learning materials**.

In this respect, the problem of **local languages use in ICT** was mentioned, and a suggestion was for the DID agency to play a role in **translating content**, since there is a wide availability of interesting educational software but their accessibility is limited by most of them being in English. In addition, some participants raised the possible role of the DID agency in promoting **university programs and curricula** relating to ICT and education. Others had reservations about the agency involvement in education, as this entails a long-term commitment, and complex procedures, which raises issues of sustainability. They also emphasized that the agency **should not duplicate existing policy initiatives** and programs, but should rather act as a **coordinator** and an **intermediary** between providers and users.

Function 3: Support for Appropriate Technology and Local Content Development

The need for the promotion of local content development was largely acknowledged. Issues of **penetration, cost and availability** were main key words in this session. Some participants mentioned the difficulties created by **national and global regulations and legislations** (the policy environment) that would limit development

and dissemination of locally designed software. Others referred to successful experiences in **digitizing printed content**, and highlighted the potential role of the **private sector**. There was also concerns that the DID agency should not be a producer of content, but rather **develop interfaces and portals** through which it promotes **networking** among existing initiatives that operate in the field of local content development. Suggestions were made to think of **creative methods of funding** to make dissemination possible, such as micro-loans for innovative start-ups, according to the market availability. In this respect, providing advice and information on **alternative business models** and financing formulas to support ICT for development, such as prepaid phone cards, could be interesting options to investigate. Specific **"how-to-do" models and ideas to package ICT projects** could be among the services proposed by the agency.

Two important points were finally made: about the possible **brain drain** following training for local content development; and about **the difficult role of the DID agency as a technical advisor** in a field where changes are very fast.

Function 4: Facilitation of Surplus Recycling and Exchange Programs

There was considerable debate about this function of the DID agency. Several participants raised the **problems of transportation costs and customs** that recycling and exchange programs have to deal with. National regulations, taxation systems and complex bureaucracy are key variables in this respect. Hence, it is crucial to address issues of **appropriate regulations** and intellectual property rights, when dealing with technology transfers. The discussion also focused on the need to consider maintenance costs in ICT recycling programs. Furthermore, a major consideration related to **cultural issues**, since local groups could reject what could be viewed as an 'obsolete' technology; moreover distributing hardware and software for free can seriously **disturb local economies**.

Interesting suggestions to facilitate rural accessibility to ICTs were made, promoting for example **'caravans'** equipped with PCs and other "mobile" projects. Most participants emphasized the **coordination and mediation role** a DID agency could play in this area, matching donors, institutions and players, and also promoting **job opportunities**.

C. OTHER DEBATED IDEAS FOR THE DID AGENCY

Sustainability
- Operating in a club-like form: members would benefit from sharing experiences and, in exchange, would provide information to the agency.
- Enhancing the networking function, and developing niches programs.
- Functioning as an international agency with country offices of other agencies as relays, at the regional and local levels.

Research and Resource
- Bridging research and policy making.
- Need to establish hard evidence that ICT can make a difference in development.
- Need for trend analysis in ICT for development.
- A solution identification center based on a networking model.

- Producing indicators, data, innovative ideas, methodologies, and action-oriented knowledge.
- Constructing legal and financial templates for ICT in development work.

Information Sharing and Dissemination
- Information service center, mapping issues, identifying the players, sharing the lessons, giving responses.
- Need for demand driven, pro-active data mining of the wealth of information available.
- Dissemination of existing initiatives, ideas, and projects.
- Need for more systematic sharing of experiences.
- Establishing an efficient and sustainable portal.

Capacity Building and Training
- Helping to build capacity of researchers in the different regions of the South.
- Addressing the issue of professional mobility and brain drain.
- Identifying and training local human resources.
- Training trainers, helping them develop their own pedagogic tools; reject the formula of imported infrastructure and content.
- Training in multimedia production and local content development.
- Proposing a 'Computer driving license' that would promote job opportunities.

Networking, Participation and Partnerships
- Bringing together initiatives on ICT volunteering (where and how to go…).
- Assembling a pool of ICT professional (including diasporas ICT professionals from the South).
- Linking emerging regional centers on ICT for development (West Africa, East Africa, India…).
- Enhancing the role of private sector.
- Working with local groups.
- Match making between requests and supply.

D. PERSPECTIVES AND OPTIONS FOR A DID AGENCY

The workshop ended with a consensus on the need for establishing an international agency working in the field of ICT for development. However, the nature and mandate of such an agency needs to be further researched and discussed, in more specific details, as this first meeting was mainly for brainstorming purposes.

A rich set of elements came out from the workshop that pave the way for future discussions, especially in the frame of forthcoming international events (such as the World Summit on Information Society, Geneva 2003 – Tunisia 2005). In conclusion, a variety of challenges will have to be addressed in the establishment of a DID agency: its precise institutional nature, its specific mandate, its long-term sustainability, its resources and funding, as well as political issues, and coordination problems.

The LCPS suggests provisionally the following mandate for a DID agency, based on the four components presented in the discussion paper, and developed in relation to

the Beirut international workshop. **The agency would mostly be monitoring initiatives and conducting research, offering project and training support, and operating as a global clearinghouse and a referral center.**

Proposed Mandate for a DID agency

1) <u>Monitoring</u>
    -   Monitoring and data mining of projects, initiatives and experiences

2) <u>Research</u>
    -   International set of indicators and measurement tools
    -   Independent evaluation of activities
    -   Impact assessments studies
    -   Comparative research
    -   Trend analysis of ICT for development

3) <u>Support</u>
    -   Support for ICT project development
    -   Support for specific training programs (local content development, multimedia)
    -   Support for specific R & D niches
    -   Pool of ICT professionals

4) <u>Clearing-house and referral</u>
    -   Systematic sharing of experiences
    -   Facilitate recycling and e-volunteering
    -   Supply of alternative business models, technical solutions…
    -   Match making between requests and experiences

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VI. Annexes

Abbreviations

AVU African Virtual University
DOT force Digital opportunity task force
DOI Digital opportunity initiative
GDG Global development gateway
GDN Global development network
GDLN Global Distance Learning Network
GDN Global development Network
IFIP International Federation for Information Processing
SBEM Soft bank emerging market
SDNP Sustainable development networking program
WEF world economic forum
WIDE Web of Information for development
worLD World Links for development

Selected Background Documents

1. *Digital Opportunities for All: Meeting the Challenge,* Report of the Digital Opportunity Task Force (DOT Force) to the G8 Summit, May 2001.

2. *Donor Information and Communication Initiatives and Programmes*, OECD, March 2001.

3. *List of on the Ground Initiatives in the Developing World*, Bridges.org, June 2001.

4. *Landscape of Relevant Activities on the Digital Divide by the International Community*, Center for Global Studies, August 2001.