YOUTH AND ICT AS AGENTS FOR CHANGE

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Abstract

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I. Introduction

The impact of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) in the economic, social, cultural, political and individual spheres of life has dramatically transformed societies the world over. And in this evolving world, the younger generation seems to be more comfortable and adept at using ICTs to further expand their knowledge. Demographically, about 85% of the world’s youth (between 15 and 25 years of age) currently reside in developing countries, and the numbers are growing in many parts of the world, such as Africa and the Middle East. The importance of these numbers underscore the fact that in order to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), development planning must understand and recognize that many of the goals are youth-oriented, such as education, health, HIV/AIDS, etc.

Given the demographic significance of the global youth population and the keen interest of this age group in ICT, it is necessary to assess how ICT has transformed the lives of youth around the world, how the youth have influenced their own lives and those of their communities, how they are shaping the lives of future generations, and how communities, national governments and the international community can assist in the realization of global youth development using ICT.

The Purpose of the Global Forum

The objective of the Global Forum on Youth and ICT for Development is to actively engage youth in debates and discussions with their peer representatives, policy makers, technology leaders and others in exploring ways to empower the community and to participate more fully in society through the appropriate and responsible use of ICT. The Forum will provide an ideal platform to showcase youth-led initiatives such as “For Youth, by Youth,” and also create a space to foster adult-youth cooperation to encourage inter-generational transfer of skills and resources. This will also be an opportunity for young people to share ideas and learn from peers who have successfully used ICT as a tool in promoting their own economic and social advancement, as well as that of their communities.

II. Focus of the Paper

This paper presents a review of information in key areas of youth development pertinent to the Forum. It views the role of youth as participants, actors, promoters, influencers, and in some cases, leaders of ICT-led development in the following four areas, corresponding to GAID’s areas of focus:

- **Education:** How can ICTs help to bridge the learning gap between the rich and poor countries? How can ICTs help the education system cater more effectively to the diverse learning needs of the individual learners and the needs of their communities? What are the main barriers?
• **Health:** In what way can ICTs be used to improve medical care to youth and how can they promote their well-being.

• **Youth entrepreneurship:** To bridge the gap between skilled and unskilled jobs, how can ICTs be used to promote the next generation of educated and qualified job seekers who are able to contribute to the global economy?

• **Governance:** How can ICTs help to improve the participation and empowerment of youth in the decision-making process and policies that affect their lives?

Cross-cutting issues of digital divide and gender concerns will also be addressed so that reasons for disparity between the 'information rich' and the 'information poor' can be examined further. Additionally, issues related to youth groups such as those living in urban slums will be included in the discussions, in order to showcase the particular constraints faced by marginalized youth in growing urban centres, and address their needs. Furthermore, the creativity of youth will be given ample visibility to showcase how youth are exploring and exploiting ICT for their own benefit, as well as for the benefit of their families, peers and communities through innovation, entrepreneurship, and awareness of “Our Common Humanity” and the MDGs.

III. **Issues for the Global Forum**

    a. **ICT in Education**

While the number of educated youth continues to grow worldwide, there is insufficient knowledge about the use of ICTs in schools, the distribution of ICT skills among students and the role that ICT-based skills has in terms of future employment opportunities.

Potential questions/issues for discussion at the Forum:

• What should be done to compensate for the lack of access to books, information and ICT facilities for students in developing countries?
• What should be done to assist those among the youth who have failed to complete secondary education by age 18? Should ICT-based vocational training be used to address this gap, such as focusing on technical assistance and operation and maintenance of computer hardware?
• What should be done to compensate for the lack of trained and available teachers (in ICT-based skills)?
• How best can the benefits of an ICT-based education be articulated for the government and society at large?
• What type of curricula should be considered to produce skilled and trained workers for the local job market? Should partnerships between the private sector and the academia be promoted (through internships, job opportunities, etc)? Will that enable the educational system to keep pace with the demands of the local, as well as the global economy?
• How can curricula and teaching/learning methods be more consistent with the increasing multidisciplinary nature of human knowledge? How can ICTs help in this regard?
• What type of curricula should be introduced to help students deal with the challenges of world wide rapid economic and social transformation and accelerating connectivity and globalization?
• Will the proliferation of ICTs encourage higher enrollment of girls and women?
• Will peer mentoring and assistance help or hinder the educational system? Is it feasible (if encouraged as part of academic requirement such as credits)?
• Should e-mentoring be encouraged in the absence of “mentors” in the immediate environment of the youth, such as in schools, the local society and the job market?
• Local content issues: Is language a barrier to e-learning? What should be done to address that?
• How can ICTs help make learning at school more responsive to the diverse learning needs of individual learners?
• How can ICTs help make the school learning environment more conducive to students well being?

b. **ICT in Health**

The focus on youth and health is obvious. Not only does it mean addressing the wellbeing of a critical mass of the world's population from both common health problems and life threatening diseases such as HIV/AIDS, but ultimately from dying young. It is therefore, crucial to address the inter-generational cycle of poor health and poverty to ensure that it is effectively broken. Real life examples show that e-networking is an effective and confidential way to access information on health-related issues. It is a means of: sharing experiences; connecting researchers and strategists with the needs and priorities of the field; connecting communities; and allowing access to a wider range of information on any health topic.

Potential questions for discussion:

- How best can ICTs be utilized to provide basic health services to the youth? Can current initiatives be improved upon? If so, how?
- What types of linkages need to be established between communities and health care providers to facilitate need-based support and services?
- Can youth groups be reached just as effectively without the use of ICTs? If not, what are the advantages of using ICT-led health programmes versus traditional means of advocacy and outreach?
- What should be done to enable the youth to participate more effectively in the consultative process to develop youth-focused health initiatives?
- How does the heavy use of ICTs by young people impact their overall well being?
- How can ICTs help in nurturing healthy life styles and behavior patterns and how can they make young people be more conscious of and responsible for their mind/body health?

c. **ICT in Employment**

Youth unemployment has become one of the biggest developmental challenges in almost every country in the world in recent years. There is growing pressure on young people to compete in an increasingly globalized labour market. So far, efforts by governments to promote job creation through planned programmes, both in the private and public sectors have been ad hoc and insufficient. Furthermore, the impact of globalization in terms of opening up markets for the youth in developing countries has been non-existent or negligible in most cases, contributing further to widening of the gap between the rich and the poor, and the skilled and the unskilled.
Potential questions for discussion:

- How can youth groups be empowered by ICT to influence job creation strategies within their respective country conditions?
- What types of assistance would they require from the government and the private sector, financial and other?
- Should practical skills, such as mentoring, job training and vocational skills be a mandatory aspect of the secondary and tertiary educational curriculum? Will it be cost-effective?
- Given the limitations of the technology available in most developing countries, should other options be considered, such as mobile computer labs?
- Should skills building and job training be available (through eLearning and eTraining) to job seekers by institutes outside the country if none are available in-country? If so, how relevant would the training be in the country context? Should the focus be instead on finding local solutions for local problems?
- Should governments focus on providing incentives and opportunities specifically geared to the local labour market, or rather on providing opportunities for skills building, no matter where the jobs are to be found? Will the latter have implications for the “brain drain?”
- What type of incentives should be considered for local business communities to recruit more youth?

**d. ICT in Governance**

It is both desirable and necessary to empower and engage the youth to participate more fully in society and in governing issues of importance to their lives; however, it is equally important to emphasize that with rights also come responsibility for the youth and non-youth alike. Therefore, communities must take account of the need to be aware of the dangers of misuse, vulnerability and breach of security.

To promote socially inclusive policies to improve the participation of youth in a knowledge-based society and economy, alternative devices should be considered as viable means for promoting e-government and e-participation, through multi-channel strategies and solutions, such as cell phones, community computing, etc.

Potential questions for discussion:

- To what extent do young people feel isolated from their government? How prevalent is this sense of isolation?
- Does the sense of being ignored in society prevent the youth from participating more actively in politics or in the governance of their lives?
- Will the incorporation of ICTs facilitate better interaction with the non-peer groups in society?
- What types of interaction with the community at large do the youth feel will better serve their purpose towards influencing decisions?
- What are the most effective means of getting their voices heard by policymakers?
- How can ICTs facilitate a more effective and systematic engagement of young people in the various local, regional and global reform agendas influencing their lives?
- Will participation at the local level be more effective than at the national level?
- What types of issues would the youth be most interested in addressing at global events? How wide are the regional disparities? Would they be better represented at the regional level?
- In what way will the rapid spread and infiltration of ICTs, especially amongst young people, contribute to building bridges across cultural and geographic divides? How will this impact young peoples sense of identity?

IV. Regional concerns

Development challenges among the different geographic regions are as varied as they are numerous, shaped by their respective political, economic, demographic, social and cultural differences. It is therefore not surprising that in terms of ICT access and use, disparity is equally prevalent, given that almost 80% of the world’s population has had little or no access to telephones, let alone the internet. This paper highlights some of the most pressing regional challenges faced by the youth. ICT solutions should therefore focus on addressing these particular priorities and concerns.

V. Expected Outcomes of the Global Forum

The Global Forum will offer an opportunity for articulating the views and concerns of youth, policymakers, civil societies and other stakeholders towards reaching consensus on particular areas for follow-up action. In consultation with GAID’s partners, the following are suggested activities as expected outcomes of the Forum:

- Youth networks to support the Global Alliance on ICT for Development which would promote constituencies and provide support to ICT-led initiatives and policies that address concerns and priorities of the youth population;
- A mapping exercise of the outcome of the deliberations at the Global Forum “marketplace” in order to follow-up on the proposed programmes, activities and initiatives;
- Youth campaigns at the regional and national levels to energize the youth base and build awareness of youth-focused issues;
- Research and data collection on youth-specific issues;
- Establish Centers of Excellence in each region;
- Involve youth in “Our Common Humanity”, Millennium Declaration values and goals.