



GLOBAL KNOWLEDGE 97: KNOWLEDGE FOR DEVELOPMENT IN THE INFORMATION AGE **22-25 JUNE 1997**

The Global Knowledge 97: Knowledge for Development in the Information Age Conference opens this evening at the Sheraton Centre in Toronto, Canada. The conference, co-hosted by the World Bank and the Government of Canada and sponsored by 45 other public and private organizations, will focus on turning the information revolution into a force for economic development, social cohesion and poverty alleviation in the 21st century. The conference's three major themes are: understanding the role of knowledge and information in economic and social development; sharing strategies for harnessing knowledge; and building partnerships to empower the poor and foster international dialogues about development.

During the four-day conference, there will be eight Plenary sessions and more than one hundred working sessions clustered around seven conference tracks: empowering the poor with information and knowledge; policy and regulatory frameworks for the information economy; infrastructure and capacity-building; fostering science and technology in developing countries; knowledge flows, civic dialogue and the informed citizen; distance education and technology for learning; and partnerships. Interactive global links, including video-conferencing and Internet discussions, will also be in operation at the conference in an effort to expand the participation and audience of the conference.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF GLOBAL KNOWLEDGE 97

As new technologies and new patterns of communication and interaction create hitherto-unimagined opportunities for access to information and knowledge and new ways for individuals, communities and nations to learn and work together, they also pose new challenges to developing countries and to the international community. GK97 is one of a number of international initiatives that has emerged in attempts to grapple with the challenges posed by new technologies and to take advantage of the ways in which information and knowledge can serve as tools of economic and social empowerment.

Building on what began at the 1995 G-7 Global Information Society meeting in Brussels and continued in 1996 at the Information Society and Development conference in South Africa, Global Knowledge 97 is part of a learning process of collecting questions and observations in order to nurture and guide the knowledge revolution.

SUMMARY OF VIRTUAL CONFERENCE ACTIVITIES

In an effort to stimulate a truly global dialogue on the role of knowledge and information technology on development, a number of virtual conferences have been taking place in the lead-up to GK97, including the Global Knowledge 97 (GKD97) List; the CIDA Village Well Gathering Site; and the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) Virtual Conference Project, which facilitates three distinct

online conferences on gender, the "storyline," and lessons learned in information technology and development. These virtual discussions provide those with access to the Internet opportunities to participate in the debates surrounding the conference issues, to connect with other interested groups and to interact electronically with conference participants. The virtual conferences will continue after GK97 to encourage ongoing dialogue. Below is a summary of ideas and recommendations that have emerged from the virtual conferences.

GLOBAL KNOWLEDGE 97 LIST

Run by the Education Development Centre and hosted by UNDP, this conference (at http://www.globalknowledge.org/graphics/ mailing_list.html) revolves around the question of how the information revolution transforms the development process. The dialogue centers around several themes, including: control over and access to information and technology; equity concerns; indigenous and local knowledge; women and technology; distance education; capacity-building; and donor priorities. Participants have provided numerous examples of innovative initiatives underway to address these issues, and have shared information regarding relevant conferences, publications, web sites and networks.

Questions such as whether technology may actually widen gaps between rich and poor, what effect the introduction of information and communications technology (ICT) has on social and cultural elements in developing countries, and how to use technology for development, have been addressed. Recommendations include: ensuring access to ICT, particularly for women and the poor, and strengthening their ability to package and disseminate the valuable information they possess; encouraging Southern governments to develop national information policies; installing infrastructure, telecommunications capacity and access to information networks to lower Internet costs in the South; building networks to connect development agencies globally; and providing citizens with access to government information.

Concerns regarding the direction of information flow from North to South were expressed and the need for further development of South to South information exchange was also highlighted. The need for multilateral organizations to provide support for building information production capacity in the South and enhancing local IT organizations' capacity, such as Internet Service Providers, have been underscored.

The benefits of community computer networks, community radio and local information and media programs were highlighted. Many emphasized that representation and consideration of indigenous needs and knowledge systems are crucial to the success of ICT implementation efforts, and proposals include: using local school libraries as venues for meeting local development needs with technology; establishing a communications network to connect indigenous populations and promote the use of local knowledge in sustainable development planning; and developing a database of indigenous knowledge. Several participants have solicited a model for "best practices" in helping communities learn how to select appropriate technological solutions for local problems.

APC VIRTUAL CONFERENCE PROJECT**GENDER AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY CONFERENCE:**

The "gk97.gender" conference (at <http://www.community.web.net/gk97>) focuses on the role of women in IT and Development. Discussions have centered around: gender considerations in IT program and policy development; gender-sensitive training and support; problems of access; privacy and security for women on the Internet; and making IT a priority for women.

Participants have exchanged information about innovative uses of IT, such as the community women's networking access initiative in Tver, Russia, operating out of a university professor's home, where one e-mail account is shared among 30 women who then act as information bridges to those not on-line by making presentations of their findings.

A host of practical suggestions have been aired, such as the need for: greater emphasis on grassroots access to new technologies (e.g., women's microbanking, IT applications to deal with illiteracy and development of solar-based IT technologies for use by rural women); gender sensitization programs for policy makers; the use of IT to improve gender monitoring of organizations; and care to ensure that application of IT conforms to the beneficiaries' concepts of development.

Many participants have addressed the need to lobby decision-makers and to take the World Bank and others to task for the under-representation of women in high-level IT circles. The need to build bridges between connected and non-connected women and to create means to ensure that non-connected groups are not excluded from knowledge and information exchange has been underscored.

Suggestions regarding how to get women to use networks have highlighted the importance of: getting women more involved in the development of information technology so that IT tools will meet women's needs; using other communication tools, such as video, as a way of reaching non-literate people; increasing technical training for women; and developing community outreach programs for women to learn new IT skills.

GK97 STORYLINE: The "gk97.storyline" is a "living document" that asks the question: "what is knowledge for development?" This discussion is based on the original Storyline document that was prepared for GK97 conference organizers to frame ideas and debates, raise questions and present challenges in advance of the conference. The key ideas in the Storyline include: access to information, knowledge and technology; uses of the Internet, both positive and negative; democratization of the Internet and of government; decentralization of power; coalition-building through the Internet; the role players in IT; how funding decisions are made; and how the Internet can redefine "development." Contributors to the discussion have examined the potential implications of the information revolution in traditional native cultures. One participant expressed concern that the Storyline paper is based on the assumption that economic and political globalization will change the life of traditional cultures and wipe out their heritage. It was suggested that perhaps there should be a conference on Global Wisdom rather than on Global Knowledge. Another participant responded that human history is the history of great migrations, peoples mixing, disappearing and emerging with new identities. It was also asked if archeologists, as communications specialists, were invited to this discussion.

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY AND DEVELOPMENT:

LESSONS LEARNED: The purpose of the "gk97.lessons" conference is to share the experiences of APC users and others who have triumphed, struggled or been by-passed during the information revolution. This list invites subscribers to post examples of APC network successes or failures and to develop ideas, strategies and projects that can take advantage of information technology. Many examples of the successful use of IT for development purposes have been described, including: the use of IT and telecommunications technology by an NGO to support agrarian reform in Brazil; the use of an "InterRave" to raise funds to supply modems to the indigenous people of Sarawak; the establishment of an on-line women's discussion forum during the

Fourth World Conference on Women; and the use of e-mail to free a jailed democracy activist in Russia. Other examples of IT-based initiatives are also outlined, such as the use of e-mail to support international campaigns for human rights and freedom of expression and to publicize the plight of the rainforests of New Guinea; the establishment of an e-mail network in the former Yugoslavia dedicated to improving peace-oriented communications possibilities; the activities of a women's media association in Tanzania; and the establishment and activities of an electronic conference for Francophone African women. One participant raised the question of how "success" and "failure" in the field of electronic communication for development should be thought of and noted that the "connection" of people does not automatically induce active communication. Another participant reminded the discussion that the existence of telecommunications infrastructure should not be taken for granted, especially in developing countries.

VILLAGE WELL GATHERING SITE

This virtual initiative (<http://www.villagewell.gk97>), operated by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), allows people worldwide to share their ideas on the conference themes, establish networks and interact with participants during the conference itself. It aims to ensure that dialogue is ongoing and continues after the conference. The discussion has recalled the basic principles of community development, such as the need to establish multi-directional communication between people and the need to take full advantage of all available media.

The site's "guestbook" style allows contributions to be entered directly from the web site and through e-mail and fax. Postings of text, graphics, drawings, photos, slides as well as links to other sites are welcomed. Professionals, NGOs, academics and students from around the world have contributed interesting case studies, practical considerations and philosophical debates. Questions of spirituality, holistic wisdom and utopianism have been explored, though the conversation has been dominated by practical considerations, including access to legal knowledge, health information, literacy and basic educational concerns and media literacy.

Extensive dialogue has occurred in the site's special area for schools, promoting children, teachers and parents to join the global knowledge dialogue. New threaded dialogues have recently been added, geared towards university students, encouraging contact between academia and the private sector, as well as towards Spanish-speakers, called "Dialogo en Castellano." The organizers hope that at least one school or university from every country will join in the dialogue. In a section on "Building New Partnerships," a number of contributions have been made, for example, a legal scholar from Estonia pointed out how useful the Internet could be for supporting information-sharing that might facilitate legal and constitutional reforms in emerging democracies around the world. It has also been noted that IT should not be used "for its own sake," but for tangible goals that can be shared by entire communities. Other features of the site include sections entitled "Looking for Assistance," which posts requests for assistance and information, and "Stories from the Well," where participants share knowledge on practical experiences. The "Stories" section will focus on stories of innovative uses of radio in the coming weeks.

THINGS TO LOOK FOR TODAY

PLENARY: The conference will open at 8:00 p.m. in the Sheraton Center with welcoming presentations by Roméo LeBlanc, Canadian Governor General and Commander-in-Chief, James D. Wolfensohn, World Bank President, Kofi Annan, UN Secretary-General, and Diane Marleau, Canadian Minister for International Cooperation and Minister responsible for La Francophonie.