

The International Institute of Communication and Development (IICD)

An Evaluation for the
Netherlands Department General of International Cooperation (DGIS)

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1 Introduction

The introduction of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in developing countries, raises a whole range of questions. Which role should development aid play in this field? Is an ICT policy not by definition a technology driven policy? How can it become demand driven, and how can it help to benefit those population groups most in need? IICD has been founded with the explicit objective that it should make a contribution to reduce the so-called 'digital divide', or at least to prevent it from further deepening. This applies both to the international divide between countries and to the internal divide between different groups and regions within a given country. The digital divide overlaps with the 'economic divide', which separates the poor and underprivileged from the rich and privileged, but is not identical with it.

Also, there is an obvious tension with other aspects of development aid. ICT *may* be used in a way that benefits the poor (to promote this can be seen as an important part of IICD's mission). Yet, as the spread of ICT does not directly help to alleviate poverty, it may not have as high a priority as activities that more directly promote the socio-economic well-being of the poor. Nor can it easily reach the poorest groups of the population, who normally lack the prerequisites to make an active use of ICT themselves. Partly this results from the fact that all projects (including ICT projects) are inserted in one way or another into existing power structures and can easily be (mis-)used to perpetuate these structures.

1.1 ICT gives power

ICT is a powerful tool for co-ordination and it advances the opportunities to access additional information. As a result, it often increases the power differential between those with access and those without. It provides those with better education and more financial resources with additional means, which could increase the internal digital divide as well as the economic divide. Applications of ICT to e-commerce in agriculture are a good example, since often only the large farmers benefit from such a development.

Nevertheless, ICT gives *any* user of a computer who can access the Internet access to an enormous wealth of information. It can thus contribute to the empowerment of groups hitherto underprivileged. So ICT can be used to increase power differences, but it can also be used with the opposite effect. In principle, it can provide large groups of the population with up to date information that would otherwise remain beyond their reach. It can be used to achieve much more transparency in all kinds of organizations, and to increase the accountability of government.

Where the government is primarily an instrument of the 'ruling class', with sections perhaps taking turns to enrich themselves, the increased use of ICT might only make government more effectively exploitative. But in favourable circumstances, where the state apparatus does not simply function for the benefit of those in power and their relatives, clan or tribe, it makes sense to contribute to its effective functioning, also through the use of ICT. In this way ICT can be used to bolster 'good government'. It can improve the use of scarce physical and human resources by providing better communication and co-ordination, avoiding that one department does not know what another has been doing. By making information accessible to a broader range of civil servants, it can make government structures less hierarchical and break down the barriers between bureaucratic fiefdoms. In general, it can provide government with better management information so that it may develop into a 'learning organization'. It can also help broaden the basis for democratic decision-making.

This requires a minimum of scale, however. If there is only one computer in an office, on which all relevant files are stored, it is handled with kid gloves because so much of the daily routines depend on its functioning. Less experienced people are kept away from it. As a

result, computer skills do not spread, and access remains a privilege and contributes to maintain traditional hierarchical structures. And a computer breakdown creates havoc, because previously existing routines have been lost.

Discussions on how to use ICT, to whom to connect, or on the kind of information that would be useful, have had a significant positive impact on the people involved, often people that normally would not have talked to each other. This has also brought about greater awareness of what is going on elsewhere. Such side-effects can increase the positive impact of ICT-related projects. It may well be that the social and organizational changes triggered are ultimately more significant than the concrete information exchanged.

Moreover, many people feel that connection to the world wide web will enable them to catch up with global developments, helping to get them out of what they may see as a hopeless situation. ICT thus has a considerable mobilising impact - more than many other technologies. Even though living conditions would change much more fundamentally by the introduction of electricity, ICT gives a sense of orientation towards the future. Thereby it can have a substantial impact on self-confidence, an often underestimated condition of development.

1.2 The public/private balance

Different forms of ICT penetrate developing societies at a breath-taking pace. Much of this does not need to be supported by development aid – an issue to which we shall return in the discussion of IICD. A prominent example is the spread of cellular telephone systems, at least in urban areas.¹ Similarly, Internet cafés and computer training facilities often proliferate as they become a new area for entrepreneurial activity. Private actors get relatively easily connected, in spite of bottlenecks, and in spite of the substantial cost of connections. The contribution that ICT can make to a business is large enough to make an investment worthwhile.

With such a dynamic in the private sector, a new 'digital divide' may open up between it and the public sector. If fiscal services or customs offices do not catch up with this development, the general functioning of the state may be threatened, because of the erosion of its income base. Yet, in spite of any measures the government may take to prevent such a divide, the dynamism of the private sector will tend to sharpen the differences in the employment conditions between the public and private sectors. Civil servants with a good knowledge of computer applications may increasingly feel the attraction of a job outside government (such skills are in high demand), and skilled staff can fetch a much higher salary in the private sector. Only if training is provided on a large enough scale, can the vacancies, which will almost inevitably arise, be filled with relative ease.

In addition to the public/private divide there is usually also a regional divide. In principle, ICT applications can help reduce this and thus aid regional development, because information can also be accessed at a distance. However, the opposite normally occurs, especially in the early stages: infrastructure, repair shops, or training facilities tend to be concentrated in the most important urban areas. In those early stages, ICT may therefore contribute to the power of the centre, rather than counteract it. This is therefore another reason why, in order to have a positive impact, the use of ICT, and training for it, has to reach a certain (minimum) level. With only a few computers installed and a limited number of civil servants trained, the results may even be counterproductive.

¹ Mobile phones are often a good alternative to intricate computer systems for providing people with more information. They are much easier to operate, much less costly, and can be used in an even more decentralized way. They can, for example, give immediate access to market information – much more effectively than a computerized system, as the latter depends on centralized inputs and access to a functioning terminal connected to a functioning telecom infrastructure.

2 IICD's 'Mission' and modus operandi 1997-2000

2.1 Introduction

This evaluation report has been commissioned by DGIS at a time when an assessment of the *impact* of IICD's work must remain in good part tentative. Yet the work undertaken for this evaluation has made it clear that in the short period of its existence much has been achieved by IICD in terms of helping less developed countries (LDCs) in the development of Information and Communication Technology. An early tendency to overstate achievements, to confuse hopes with reality, to use repetition and hype, has clearly been overcome. The guiding thought now appears to be that ICT exists and that it will spread to LDCs whatever IICD does or doesn't do – so that it is worth while to try and attune it as much as possible to a country's development needs. More about this later. Even though the report will raise a fair number of queries, this is in the context of a positive overall view, which supports the continued operation of the Institute wholeheartedly. Partners on the whole are very appreciative of IICD, which frequently gets favourably compared with other donors. This needs to be said loud and clear, and without qualifications, at the outset, also because the recommendations inevitably focus on areas where we suggest change.

At the start of its operation in 1997 IICD was given five tasks by DGIS under its then Minister for Development Cooperation, Jan Pronk :

1. To assist less developed countries to obtain **access** to advanced communications and telematics;
2. To help them engage in **two-way communication** – not only as receiver, also as sender;
3. To assist them to use information and communication technologies to foster **sustainable development** on their own terms;
4. To help reflect on possible **negative consequences** of ICTs on **traditional cultures** and design policies to avoid these;
5. To foster **people's participation** in development through new ways of communicating, helping them express their views in a truly **democratic** manner.

IICD has undertaken activities under all of these headings, with the exception of that which refers to possible negative effects on traditional cultures. This omission has not emerged as an issue of concern in interviews with staff, nor in interviews at DGIS. In view of other, more pressing issues to be discussed below, this matter will not be further pursued in the evaluation.

It is worth pointing out that the definition of development is not spelled out in this formulation of IICD's mission. We have taken sustainable development to refer to a process which is inclusive rather than excluding, and that activities which merely or predominantly benefit those who are already well-off, people who usually do not much care about the distributional aspects of development, are not compatible with it. We regard this as an important issue in a field where the private sector rightly and inevitably plays a significant role.

2.2 Core activities

National Roundtables, ICT Information Services, Capacity Building, Strategic Policy Explorations and Special Projects have been considered 'core activities' from the beginning of IICD's operation. All these will be further discussed in chapter 3, below.

The Roundtables are central, in that they are meant to elicit the *local* views on desirable projects. They are the anchor of IICD's 'non-directive' policy, providing the fundamental justification for the argument that the Institute should *not* get involved in the decisions on what precisely it should support beyond being a catalyst and facilitator to help to speed up the decision making process.

Website development is one of the main supportive tasks of the ICT Information Services. IICD's own website gives elaborate and highly structured information on IICD activities, model development, lessons learned, and networks. Website development is also increasingly stimulated *locally* through capacity building activities, so that independent websites with local content, reflecting local needs and local culture, can be developed in LDCs, and where appropriate be linked to the website of IICD. Well-focused capacity building is a jewel in the IICD crown. Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) instruments, necessary to answer questions about effectiveness and impact in a rapidly changing context are being developed, although they do not always help to provide guidance on the issues raised in this report.

2.3 Main working methods

In general terms, IICD's operates as a *process architect*. In its approach to project formulation it builds upon existing ideas and initiatives. These, however, are often contradictory, based on exaggerated expectations, and promoted by competing social actors. The Roundtables consider the different options and scale down exaggerated hopes, thereby helping to make the perceptions of what ICT can do more realistic (it is no longer seen as a 'silver bullet'). The participants come from a broad spectrum, thereby often bringing together persons concerned with the decisions about ICT who have never spoken to each other – notably senior executives and 'ICT-savvy' middle level technicians.

As for working methods, two matters deserve special mention. The first is IICD's emphasis on combining the *provision of seed money* with paying attention to '*sustainability*'. The Institute has been willing and able to provide significant seed money from its general DGIS grant to get projects underway, a mode of operation that is much appreciated by its partners. The prudent use of IICD resources as seed money has been a major factor in getting projects started. It is helpful to be able to make a rapid start when an unexploited opportunity has been identified during a Roundtable or its aftermath. Often the seed money is applied to pilot projects, or to what is intended to be the first phase of a larger operation, and will include a significant element of capacity development.² Further finance then needs to be secured, for example by incorporating the project into the regular departmental budget. The demonstrated success of the undertaking should help in that next step, particularly by clearing the way for the credible incorporation of the ICT component in future projects or programmes submitted for donor support. A pilot project whose success can be demonstrated can help make a *convincing* case for ICT, overcoming possible scepticism on the part of donors.

As for sustainability, this covers organizational and technical issues, but special attention is paid to financial sustainability. Seed money is not made available unless a project has a clear plan for its financial survival after the initial period covered by the grant – usually a 5-year 'business plan' which demonstrates that its financial needs are covered either through its own income, or through guaranteed financial support, for example from government. Also, this concern for financial sustainability has made IICD commendably careful in the use of its funds (a 'lean' approach), reluctant to enter into commitments that might be open-ended, always on the look-out for alternative sources of finance. Another aspect of sustainability, in a more technical sense, is IICD's welcome insistence that project *maintenance* be provided for (keeping the hardware working; keeping the machines virus-free; updating the training, etc) – something that is widely neglected in ICT-related activities in LDCs.

Secondly, there is the central emphasis in IICD's working method on *partnerships*. At first, exhaustive lists of potential partners were produced which included virtually the whole of the

² This was, for example, the case in two of the large public sector projects in Ghana, the National Information Clearing House and the project with the Environmental Protection Agency, EPA.

UN, major donors, multilateral organizations, and a string of international NGOs.³ More recently the emphasis has shifted onto a much smaller number of effective partners, while partnerships with private sector firms have concentrated on forms of 'twinning' with them around activities where they have expertise.⁴

'Partnership' also refers to the relationship with IICD's project partners overseas, in which the guiding philosophy is that of being 'non-directive', demand-led, responding to *their* requirements rather than steering the relationship towards what IICD has to offer. On request, IICD may help in such matters as distributing their experience on the web; mediating in often messy situations between government, NGOs and the private sector; or filling knowledge gaps, also with knowledge from other LDC partners.

Since early 2000, there have been efforts to 'de-concentrate' IICD functions and roles to key partners (sometimes called 'champions') in the focal countries. Thus, local partners focused on training or local information are expected to work with Roundtable project owners in a kind of ICT network, mobilising local expertise and resources and spreading ICT development work beyond the circles that IICD can reach. The idea behind this is to keep IICD small, to deepen country collaboration, and ultimately to build local capacities to do what IICD is currently doing. The likely impact of such arrangements will depend on the orientation of such champions: organizations working for development have quite different concerns from those representing business, for example.

2.4 Shifts in emphasis 1997 - 2000

Between 1997 and 2000 IICD's formal mission statement has not been altered. In practice, however, there have been changes in emphasis that can be traced through the Annual Reports (ARs). In the AR97 the Chairman of the Board saw IICD's main objective as being to help LDCs keep up with the latest developments in ICT, involving innovative activities said to be driven primarily by young entrepreneurs in the private sector. While IICD should anchor itself in the world of development cooperation, where it would focus on ICT applications to improve access to basic social services by the underprivileged, it should also work with the ICT industry, technology institutes and the commercial media. In that same AR97 the then Managing Director emphasized that ICTs are commodities, with a market and a price, and that the market is driven by private sector organizations, not by policy makers or governments.

At first the tension between an orientation towards the underprivileged and an alignment on the market was not clearly recognized within the Institute. However, as ignoring it became increasingly difficult, IICD made certain adjustments that both subtly changed the approach to the private sector (which of course remained important) and focussed more of the work on activities in the social sectors. Work with the public sector (above all with departments of health, education and agriculture or rural development) was given greater prominence as time passed. In the North, other bilateral donors, more than private sector businesses, are becoming providers of funds besides DGIS, notably DFID (UK), and there are further prospects of grants from Swiss development cooperation and from a foundation that receives its funds from the Dutch National Postcode Lottery. Nevertheless, DGIS remains by far the largest provider of funds (for the year 2000 its overall contribution to IICD's budget came to around 95 per cent).

The limited success in attracting private sector funds has reduced the emphasis on the 'bankability' of projects (a word no longer used at IICD) and to some extent on the importance of the business plan and of self-generated income. The emphasis has shifted to

³ *IICD Vision 2007*, IICD, The Hague, October 1999, p. 70.

⁴ An example was the workshop on e-commerce, organized together with Cap Gemini in February 2001 for those overseas partners who have requested help in this area.

sustainability – which involves not only financial solvency, but issues of an operational, organizational and institutional nature. It is now understood that *development*-oriented activities, and activities with the poor and excluded, have little attraction for commercial sponsors (beyond the possible image-usefulness of being involved in ‘charity’). Nevertheless, as we shall argue below, it remains true that much ICT-related activity is entrepreneurial and anchored in the private sector, and that IICD’s expertise is relevant to helping this get off the ground in LDCs. How such IICD assistance should then be financed is, however, a different issue (see 5.4).

3 Survey and overall assessment of current activities

3.1 Roundtables

The *Roundtables* continue to be the starting point and anchor of most of IICD’s work. They are meant to ensure that local projects and programmes are initiated and capacity building is done according to locally identified and articulated needs. ‘Deepening’ the work in those countries where activities are underway is now under discussion: Burkina Faso, Ghana, Jamaica, Mali, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia. Bolivia will be added late in 2000.

The basic Roundtable conception is widely appreciated by partners. It represents a genuine attempt to empower local actors and stakeholders, to help them identify opportunities and then to develop locally appropriate ICT-based solutions. We strongly support its continued utilization as a clearly more desirable approach to the generation of development cooperation than many widely used ‘top-down’ and ‘supply-driven’ methods.

Prior to a Roundtable there is a lengthy process of exploration in the country concerned. Possible participants are identified through visits made to senior officials in key areas. Attention is also paid to the issue of ‘good governance’, in the sense of the effective operation of ICT within government. The actual Roundtable is a ‘non-directive’ affair supposed to start from the ‘hopes and fears’ of participants in relation to socio-economic development. IICD does *not* make an initial presentation, though it does prepare a reference document; only at the end of a wide-roaming discussion on possible projects does the issue of how IICD might help get considered. Education often emerges as a key sector and ‘obvious’ proposals (notably around grand distance learning schemes) are often put forward; they are usually discarded as over-ambitious and replaced by more practical ideas. At the end of the process local organizations are identified who are willing and able to commit themselves to the proposed projects. These become IICD partners once projects go ahead.

‘Second-round’ Roundtables usually have a sectoral focus: this gradual change towards sectoral emphasis is a positive development. Follow-up Roundtables are more fine-tuned, less discretionary than the initial ones; expectations tend to be more realistic and more modest. A good example was seen in Ghana, where the second Roundtable concentrated on health issues. It helped change the approach to ICT of those involved in health management, leading them to think beyond ICT ‘infrastructure’ to the issue of how to use it, and it brought the different perceptions of participants nearer to each other. The discussion initiated the formulation of a comprehensive strategy, and led to a shift in priorities. Technology was no longer seen as the ‘silver bullet’ that would change it all, but came to be regarded as a support to help realize plans that otherwise would be difficult to achieve.

Outsiders frequently argue that ‘who participates’ in the Roundtables is likely to affect their outcome, but IICD staff feel that this is not a serious problem. They stress during the Roundtable preparations that participants should come from different institutions, different ranks and different regions – thereby usually involving a broader spectrum of persons than

would normally be the case. This is said to be especially so for Roundtables with a sectoral focus, where participants tend to come “from all areas and all ranks”. In fact, a small exercise which classified participants in the Roundtables between 1997 and 2000 suggests that on average no more than one quarter were persons with explicit ICT backgrounds, knowledge or responsibilities.

3.2 ICT Information Services

Next to the projects that emerge from the Roundtables, IICD's *ICT Information Services* are the Institute's most visible presence in the world at large. The two central activities are the IICD website and the Service Desk with its link to the Expert Network. The ICT Information Services are also responsible for a research programme, and for the small publications programme.

The *website* is well-organized, with numerous sub-sites and links, providing a wealth of information on ICT, with a good built-in search engine. It relays 'best ICT practices' in health, education, environmental management and public information through an open network with links to the websites of partners in LDCs, so that it includes much material based on local experience. Local websites are 'up and running' in trial versions in Ghana and Zambia, and were being developed during the period of this evaluation in Burkina Faso, Jamaica and Tanzania. IICD also collaborates on website development and capacity building for this work, with ministries and other local organizations. Staff members of various project owners have been able to launch impressive sites.

Local information services also include media other than the Internet. In Mali, for example, there is a lively independent local *radio* presence, where local issues are raised and which is said to contribute to the empowerment of people. This was also seen in Burkina Faso. Another instance of communication not based on a website are e-mail conferences which arise spontaneously between people who have participated in Roundtables or their follow-up.

Over time the Information Services have become more focused on the countries, activities and areas in which IICD has a measure of expertise.

The Information Services are also responsible for a growing *research programme* at IICD. In preparation for the Roundtables local researchers are commissioned to write a background paper on the state of the art of ICT in the country concerned. Guest researchers from the South also come to IICD to gather information on the relevance or applicability for the home country of (mainly) Dutch situations or procedures, e.g. on the technical feasibility of projects, existing regulations, or e-commerce procedures. In this context, IICD rather surprisingly also acts as a grant-giving body. It pays for practical projects that involve LDC researchers. Currently four such projects are being financed:

- A methodology for the setting up of local websites, with good local content (together with City University, London);
- A technical piece of research on infrastructure to enable small enterprises to get on the Internet, e.g. to start a Telecentre (satellites, small dishes, radio links);
- Lessons from ICT Stories, compiling stories that have wider lessons ('keep-in-minds') for aspects of ICT, and presenting them in a standardized form;
- An M&E tool for projects, to understand their impact on the people who 'run' them.

This catalogue does not suggest that there is a well-articulated policy with regard to supporting, or co-sponsoring, ICT-related research, but rather that at present such support is dependent on contingent factors. Arguments are developed later in this report that IICD should strive for its work, insofar as it is supported by development cooperation funds, not merely to 'help bridge the digital divide' in some general sense, but to contribute to

overcoming the problems of underdevelopment, poverty and (growing) inequality. It is often neither self-evident what is required to achieve this, nor an easy task.

IICD should formulate clear criteria with respect to its role as sponsor or co-sponsor of research projects. Where these are financed with funds deriving from development cooperation, more emphasis could be placed on investigating what type of ICT project comes closest to fulfilling the developmental objective of improving the lot of the poor and excluded, and how such developmentally beneficial effects can be maximized and replicated elsewhere. Research may also contribute to a foresight role for IICD and its partners, so that upcoming challenges can be understood and addressed more effectively.

The *Service Desk*, IICD's 'human point of contact', answers ICT-related (e-mail) queries mainly from institutions and persons with whom the Institute has a longer term link or partnership, largely on technical matters. When in-house expertise is not sufficient to deal with a query, IICD has recourse to an outside *Expert Network*, as yet rather informal and ad hoc but growing – its costs already amount to between Dfl 100k and 150k. Part of this is to 'retain' outside experts to answer queries locally, as they arise. In some cases special workshops are arranged. Occasionally a query leads to a more substantive development, as when IICD was instrumental in helping to launch a global network of *indigenous organizations*, with its own website (www.idnetwork.nl).

IICD's *Publications Policy* remains unclear and 'under discussion'. The website is the *locus* of all IICD's 'publications'; old-fashioned publications are not regarded as a priority. Since the start of the Institute very little has been published in hard copy – a small number of short booklets produced during 1998 are the exception. Computer-age media, such as cd-roms, are given rather more attention. In general, the emphasis on 'Internet publication' is defensible for an organization most of whose clients and contacts are Internet-oriented.

While IICD has been right to concentrate on its website, other forms of publication should remain actively under review, as these may help to widen its 'audience'.

3.3 Strategic policy explorations

So far, strategic policy explorations have not prospered, though there have been a few successful 'supra-project' activities. One of these has involved IICD as a permanent member of a web-based initiative promoted by the World Bank Institute, the so-called Global Knowledge Partnership. Another was the initiative at the Africa Telecom 98 Conference to connect schools in South Africa and the Netherlands in a videoconference; this gave rise to the *Global Teenager Project*. There was also the intention to set up a Special Task Force to help donors, especially DGIS and the Netherlands Embassies, to assess and monitor ICT projects. Nothing came of this. A meeting with DGIS personnel organized along Roundtable lines, with the same demand-driven non-directive procedures, caused consternation among officials who hadn't expected to be called upon to 'give their own unformed opinions in an amateurish way'. Though activities such as these could be seen as attempts to take some distance from the workaday concerns with projects, they hardly provide a focus on strategy.

IICD's weakness in this area can in part be attributed to the limited interest shown in this subject in the demand-driven Roundtables. In addition, staff believe that the Institute has developed an appropriate niche in working on the projects that come out of the Roundtables, and that conclusions on policy should emerge from small-scale examples 'that work'. The suggestion is sometimes heard at the Institute that these small-scale examples will together become a set of demonstration projects that could be the basis for policy formulation, or at least help in the identification of the need for such policies. That it is desirable to draw broader policy-relevant lessons from the projects is widely agreed – also by the Institute's International Advisory Council.

Yet it seems unlikely that the expected shift to that 'higher level' will occur without a more deliberate focus on this issue of policy. Rather, as some of our more perceptive and outspoken local informants also pointed out, current working methods carry the danger that the work of the Institute remains fragmented in lots of projects, not focused on a few core tasks and roles and, as Ballantyne already observed in his IICD-commissioned informal evaluation report, prepared in mid-2000, with too much emphasis on collecting and providing information, too little on being a networker and knowledge broker.

While IICD will continue to be centrally concerned with project development, it needs to invest in more, and more targeted, products for policy use. As the number of professional staff at IICD is unlikely to grow significantly, time needs to be freed from project-related activities and devoted to broader 'knowledge centre' functions, so as to redress what has become a marked imbalance.

Such a broader approach may also involve a move to fashioning *programmes* in countries rather than supporting disjointed projects – a move that would fit well with current DGIS emphasis on a sectoral cooperation programmes. It would also require thinking more about ICT *policies*, at present give little attention.

This avoidance of wider policy issues is also the cause of the main dissatisfaction with IICD at the top of DGIS (where the general view of the Institute is certainly positive): IICD doesn't help policy makers in policy formulation in relation to ICT, in thinking ahead in a broad thematic approach to the likely changes in the coming years and decades. For DGIS such strategic policy exploration is essential, an opinion shared by at least one member of the Board of Trustees. In this view IICD is not fulfilling its *forewarning function*.⁵ Here, again, there is a tension with the predominant ethos of being demand-led. While IICD should not reduce the importance accorded to the views of its LDC partners, the 'best available knowledge' will from time to time inevitably challenge the wisdom of 'bottom-up' proposals. This tension needs to be faced and worked through, also with (potential) partners.

Some encouraging developments in this direction should be noted. The increasing focus on sectors, and hence on sector *programmes*, helps shift attention to sector *policies*, and IICD is now considering how it can facilitate this in a more proactive way. Also, this country programme approach helps to stimulate exchanges between project partners, stimulating the kind of knowledge that will serve as input to ICT sector policy development. So,

IICD needs to continue down the road of taking distance from its 'day-to-day' activities and pay attention to the wider development policy implications of (likely) ICT developments, also in relation to capacity building. It is important that explicit provisions are made for such strategic work, also to counter a natural tendency towards fragmentation in a plethora of small-scale project activities.

Such a heightened concern with policy development should enable IICD to contribute more effectively to strengthening the interest in ICT among DGIS officials.

With the concrete experience that IICD has gathered in many countries it could seek to play an even more active role in advising national departments of development cooperation, and other donors with whom it has built up strategic relationships, on the ICT component of their projects and programmes. In this context we specifically suggest that IICD explore with DGIS how more regular consultations could be established and institutionalized.

⁵ Both staff and members of the Board do, however, point out that earlier approaches to DGIS that did revolve around such policy discussions elicited at best a lukewarm response.

3.4 Capacity development

The Capacity Development Programme (CDP) is a relative newcomer at IICD, though before its emergence much work was done with a capacity development or training component. Now these activities have been brought together under one umbrella, and their further development has become a separate task and responsibility within IICD.

The focus in CDP is on the *trainers*, not on the end users. This involves building up capacity in specialized institutions, above all commercial training institutes. The aim is to improve their quality, so that they can provide effective and sustained support to project partners in the future. Though at present IICD itself still plays a significant role in the development of courses, in the long term IICD aims not to be involved in the training courses at all.

Staff feel that CDP is contributing to IICD's success. It has stimulated a new approach to teaching and learning, different from the top-down, rote learning still largely prevalent in many LDCs. The emphasis is on collaboration between teacher and student, focusing on 'learning to learn'. IICD staff realize that the experience produces for many participants a real culture shock, even though most of them appear to appreciate it in the end.

There have also been 'one-off' capacity building activities, such as the three-months web-based conference in 1998, *Learn to build a bright future*, focused on ICT's role in promoting (secondary and vocational) education and training capacity. There was solid participation from the South, and the activity concluded with a workshop in Amsterdam. It led to the identification of a number of projects and the intention to form four multi-regional working groups around ICT-related teacher training themes. One of these did get off the ground, but was not sustained. No such working groups are active, at present.

3.5 Global Teenager and ICT Stories

The *Global Teenager* project did not arise out of one of IICD's original objectives, nor is it Roundtable related. It emerged as a result of Internet-based contacts made between secondary schools in South Africa and the Netherlands, which grew spontaneously into a network.

IICD plays a structuring role in the interaction, where the learning experience is seen as central. The project is organized around a number of 'learning circles', each with a maximum of ten classes. Each class has one collective voice in its interaction with the others. They 'formulate their problem' by posting a question; the response will be (a maximum of) nine answers, to which they have to respond in turn. Constant cooperation *within* a classroom is therefore needed so pupils can agree on what messages to send. The interaction runs for a ten-week cycle and revolves around specific 'inter-cultural' topics, which are also dealt with in the standard curriculum. Examples are human rights, labour issues (including child labour, women's labour, unemployment, etc), the environment and HIV/AIDS. Apart from the potential that arises out of the students' confrontation of cultural differences, the need to engage in 'research' in order to respond to questions also provides some of the participating classes with an entirely new experience.

Much positive feedback on *Global Teenager* was received during the field visits, to which teachers and students involved are responding with considerable enthusiasm. The opinion was expressed repeatedly that the programme had helped the kids overcome shyness and made them much more communicative, self-assured and open. Unexpected developments are also reported – for example, children participating in the programme in two schools in Accra (Ghana) meeting in person, not just 'virtually', via the Internet. In the case of Ghana appreciation was also expressed by the leader of Rescue Mission Ghana (IICD's local partner for *Global Teenager*) for the role it was given in wider project management, by being sub-contracted to organize the learning cycles for *all* Anglophone countries.

The *ICT Stories Project*, a joint activity of IICD and infoDev of the World Bank, aims to capture the learning process of the introduction and implementation of ICT. Anyone can submit a story to the website, which is then 'catalogued' in the searchable database. Every year a jury selects the top stories submitted, with the winner being invited to an international ICT event. 'Content' has not been the main purpose of this project, but rather participation and the chance of being heard. Even so, IICD is now engaged in an exercise of drawing out the lessons learnt ('keep in minds') by compiling a collection of 25 stories which *do* seem to have wider lessons for the introduction and implementation of ICT, structuring these around answers to certain standardized questions, also about finance.

4 The field visits: some findings juxtaposed

We want to start with giving a general sense of how IICD is regarded by those to whom we spoke during the visits. Overall, the opinions that were expressed to us were very positive. There is no doubt, even making allowances for any possible fear of compromising ongoing projects by being critical of IICD, that Institute staff are appreciated by partners and that their inputs are highly valued. Holding back and not imposing their own views *are* seen as welcome characteristics, very unusual among donors: IICD is willing to listen and also to stay the course. 'Committed people', 'people with purpose', 'people who understand us and really want to help' are some of the phrases heard during interviews.

Partners in projects that have been operational for some time are beginning to see results, and IICD is given credit for the impact of its assistance, particularly as this is relatively modest in financial terms. Even so, that impact is on the projects themselves and on their 'developers' or 'managers'; hardly any reference was made to effects on the actual *users*.

Also among knowledgeable Embassy personnel the assessment is positive: notably in Ghana, the relationship has continuously improved during the last two years, and the Embassy is very pleased with what IICD has achieved in health and education, sectors which form the focus of Dutch policy in Ghana.

Here we provide a cross-country perspective on three particular areas: ICT training, empowerment, and information and e-commerce.

4.1 ICT training

Ghana's Centre for Information and Communication Technology (CITC) has provided training to project staff of the Environmental Protection Agency, the Ministry of Food and Agriculture, the Ministry of Communications and the Ministry of Health. Other clients have included public institutions, companies and some NGOs. In addition to such tailor-made training, CITC runs various short courses, mainly lasting between one and three weeks. These range from 'general' courses on Windows 2000, MS Word or Excel, to professional courses in basic programming, Java Programming, networking, computer administration, and web development. Core is the CISCO course for Local Area Network (LAN) technicians, for whom there is expected to be an 'explosive' demand in the near future. Fees for the latter course are US\$100 per student per trimester; the full course lasts four trimesters.⁶ CITC is a private profit-making enterprise supplying tailor-made training to public and private institutions, and offering specialised courses (mainly taken up by young people) to prepare them for ICT-related jobs.

In Jamaica, the Instructional Technology Institute (ITI) aims to build the capacity to develop culturally sensitive ICT- and Web-based materials, maintaining a high educational standard,

⁶ Though US\$ 400 is not a great amount, it restricts participants to those from 'middle class' backgrounds.

and in turn it wants to use these materials in a high quality training facility. The work focuses for now on improving the (English language) training of teachers in Jamaica's various technical and vocational training institutes, including teacher training colleges, and thereby indirectly reaches the whole secondary school population. This training could be extended into the areas of Web Design and e-commerce if additional funds were made available. Here, no fees are involved, and the institution is non-profit-making.

4.2 Empowerment: information for direct users

The rationale for Information Boutiques is to make information available either to the general public or to a particular user group. In Burkina Faso that is the particular focus of SNV, which has long been providing information through its local offices by traditional means (literature, leaflets, meetings, advice). More recently, these local offices have been partly retooled to benefit from ICT developments, and they now use the name Information Boutiques. SNV's orientation has always been squarely on 'development' and it has focused its work, in Burkina as elsewhere, on the poor and 'underprivileged' population groups. FIAB, the Agro-Industrial Federation of Burkina Faso, is also concerned with empowerment through information provision, expressly by linking its offices in different regions of the country and by providing access to quality control and market information for its members (producers were often not aware of prices outside their area and sold their produce to the local middleman for up to 60% below the national market value). While FIAB's expressed aim is to help improve the socio-economic situation of small producers, and empower them, many of its members are probably from among the 'better off' (and not always small) producers.

In Ghana the issue of empowerment was most clearly raised at EPA, the Environmental Protection Agency. People in Ghana these days are much more emphatic than before about their *right to know*, not only about the state of the environment but also about broader environmental policy issues. Empowerment is particularly relevant at the local level, and making information available in local government offices, and to local communities, should enable people to make *informed* choices about matters where their interests are at stake, and also to bring pressure to bear on decision makers. There is, however, still a long way to go before this is achieved. Though no-one can predict who would make use of the new opportunities, at least the public availability and openness of the information would preclude its privileged use by a particular group.

4.3 Information and e-commerce

In Burkina Faso, FIAB is attempting to establish an effective agro-business information system, and it hopes to let this develop in the direction of an e-commerce facility. Its website, under construction, is a potential starting point for this. However, the information placed on the website would basically be related to the needs and opportunities of its members, and this would limit its wider impact.

In Ghana, it is the Ministry of Food and Agriculture (MOFA) which is aiming to promote e-commerce by building up a database of non-traditional products, exporters, and other activities, and to provide access to a website. On the one hand this will contain information on (external) markets in non-traditional crops relevant to the farmers themselves, on the other hand there will be information for foreign importers on Ghanaian non-traditional agricultural exports. MOFA is proceeding carefully, by starting in two districts, though much work remains to be done before the information is ready for use and the project is operational.

In Jamaica, the Rural Agricultural Development Authority (RADA) is developing the ABIS Project, a computer-based Information System to gather data on agricultural production, crop availability and marketing. Besides intentions to provide information on the production cycle, e.g. when to plant, and on production methods, e.g. what fertiliser to use, it also proposes to

process information on sourcing (where to get inputs) and on export markets. It is intended that e-commerce be stimulated by farmers 'posting' on the Internet what they have available, buyers what they are looking for, with the system matching these up, ending the process by sending automatic e-mails to both parties – to the farmers at the local post office. The issue of the excessive complexity of the system will be taken up again, below.

5 Operational issues raised by the field visits

5.1 Where to work and on what

It is useful to reflect briefly, here, on IICD's apparent rationale for choosing the countries where it operates. As in the case of many similar organizations, this rationale is not particularly clear. Different factors seem to have entered into different decisions, but historical reasons ('we've worked there in the past') or some fortuitous link probably explain as much as can be expected. There would be no point in trying to start afresh, but the Institute may wish to consider how it might gradually rationalize its area of operations.

Formulating a few simple criteria might help to guide decisions about starting work in new countries, but also aid in deciding where to run down operations and withdraw in due course. Contiguity with existing operating countries could be one criterion; strong DGIS interest and involvement in the country could be another (the latter appears not to be considered at all – almost as though this were a taboo). We believe that

IICD should give more explicit consideration to the criteria used to choose countries in which to operate; closer liaison with DGIS in this area is an option.

We expressly do not mean to imply that IICD should necessarily work in fewer countries. Accumulated experience is useable in similar contexts elsewhere, and no local institution can contribute, like IICD, to the creation of a network of ICT specialists in societies which confront similar problems. IICD could still continue to stimulate 'local' innovation by supporting national institutions in the co-ordination and prioritising of ICT projects within their own countries.

As a 'carrier of best practices' and an international disseminator of experience, it makes sense for IICD to spread its activities to more countries rather than merely consolidate or intensify its existing work. Within any given country IICD should also consider switching to other sectors once the activity in a given sector has borne fruit.

IICD's special contribution has often been to bring the different actors together and to facilitate (and speed up) a decision making process that has led to clear priorities. Once this has been achieved, and the 'seed projects' have helped to build up some capacity, IICD could shift its attention to other sectors (or sub-sectors). This could also bring different partners in contact with each other and stimulate mutual learning.

Specifically, IICD might become more active in the NGO sector.

The NGO sector is highly diverse yet has quite specific needs. By working more closely with NGOs, IICD might make an interesting contribution to the strengthening of civil society – and this could in turn aid social mobilization and good governance.

5.2 Advising on the use made of installed technology

IICD does not believe in offering equipment where there is no capacity to use it. Much emphasis is therefore quite rightly placed on training, done either by IICD staff or by local partners. Donors often neglect this aspect, and the effects of that neglect are frequently

visible when IICD commences operations in a country: offices with unused, or broken down, hardware. Shifting attention to training can be beneficial in this respect. For example, before the sectoral Roundtable on health in Ghana some 60 per cent of ICT expenditures of the Ministry of Health are said to have gone to equipment and 40 per cent to training. Since then the proportions have been reversed. In general IICD activity appears to have contributed to shift the emphasis from hardware towards training, thereby enhancing local capacity more than by the mere installation of computers. This is a positive achievement.

However, there is another aspect of the use of the installed technology where the IICD approach is more problematic. Even if partners have learned how to use the equipment, how the software operates, they may pay insufficient attention to what can and what cannot be achieved 'in use'. Installation of the technology, and providing training to operate it, does not exonerate the responsible parties from thinking clearly about what it can and should contribute.

We should note, however, that not all partners are mesmerized by technology. SNV field staff and their local partners in Burkina Faso seem to be quite aware that in the locally existing circumstances not too much can be expected of advanced ICTs, and they stress the importance of less sophisticated methods for much of what they need to do. Yet they do utilize the new technologies whenever appropriate, because these can help make better use of equipment, aid in the collection and analysis of relevant data and improve the competence and capacities of the local teams.

Paradoxically the field visits also suggested that the actual utilization of the technology, once installed, is fairly limited – at least in the initial stage, which is all we could observe. Again and again the main benefit mentioned was a basic but important improvement in communications: the ability to send and receive reports, the capacity to locate documents by posting their location on the web, the reduction in the cost of communication.

IICD pays laudable attention to capacity building – helping partners to use the project's hardware and software. Of course, without infrastructure no ICT activity is possible. Yet the spread of technology does not guarantee the relevance or the quality of the activities undertaken. From its experience IICD should be able to share with partners what *kind* of information is relevant to particular activities, or how to focus on *priorities*. Yet neither is this kind of issue raised, nor are partners made aware that information overload or clutter can greatly diminish the effectiveness of activities – another way of failing to raise the question of priorities. While indeed only partners should set priorities, IICD can play a helpful role, there; at present, any interaction in this respect is seen as 'contaminating' the process. Here, again, IICD's insistence on not 'interfering' diminishes its potential to play a useful role.

IICD should be willing to share its gradually growing experience on matters of 'content' with partners, and should not be excessively concerned about the way in which this might 'contaminate' their independent decisions. It may be ideologically 'pure' to let partners make their own mistakes, but it is inefficient to have the wheel reinvented again and again. It is necessary to strike a more reasonable balance in this respect.

5.3 Reducing operational fragmentation

There is a feeling in IICD that the anchoring of activities in concrete foundations in focal countries is a key element of its added value to the development community. IICD's 'global' initiatives (in the knowledge sharing and capacity building areas) should, it is thought, be given explicit country links to ensure that the country experiences and partners are properly used.

This has, of course, the advantage of building on what already exists. But it has two distinct drawbacks. First, it strengthens the tendency to focus on *projects* to the detriment of seeing how different projects might reinforce each other or, broader still, what contribution a particular activity might make to the *global* role of IICD – to its capacity also to be of relevance to people in places where it does not have project-bound activities.

Second, this anchoring in the concrete activities places even more emphasis on the role of the country manager. It is a role that has become pivotal in the dynamics of IICD, which further adds to the over-emphasis on country experience (and on projects) to the detriment of broader analysis, learning from comparative experience, and a future-oriented overview. Paying more attention to strategic issues and spending comparatively more staff time on these (see 3.3, above) would clearly help, here. IICD intends to place more emphasis on internal lessons sharing through more effective teamwork, notably by more joint visits by staff with different internal responsibilities (programme management, capacity development and knowledge sharing). That will be a helpful development. But a further practical change to IICD's organization and internal *modus operandi* might also be considered. In the present division of labour each country is the responsibility of an individual country manager. While staff members have more than one country in their 'portfolio' and can therefore compare different country realities, their individual strengths and weaknesses inevitably replicate themselves from one situation to the next, and they pay attention above all to the operation of specific projects.

We suggest that it be seriously considered to give staff overlapping responsibilities, with 'country teams' supporting each other and taking turns in making country visits over a longer period of time. This would create structured opportunities to 'learn the lessons' of the country work from each other and also stimulate moving up from the project level to consider the broader implications of IICD's work. Such broader lessons, which should also be available on the website, can then be used to achieve a more balanced approach to decision-making, one that takes account of local demand for particular activities (projects) as well as of IICD's comparative and analytical experience and its 'global' responsibilities.

5.4 Development projects as against 'business' projects

While the primacy of the private sector in the development of ICT remains unchallenged, and collaboration with the private sector a necessity for an institution like IICD, there has been a shift from the early IICD emphasis on ICTs as 'commodities', in a market driven by the private sector, towards the role of ICTs in the development process, with greater attention paid to social sectors such as health or education. Yet the dichotomy between 'development' and 'business' persists in the real world. Many of IICD's activities are clearly development-oriented, undertaken with partners from the public or voluntary sectors. Others, however, involve collaboration with commercial enterprises, whose possible protestations at being concerned about development or the poor should inevitably be taken with a grain of salt.

Two implications follow. First, that some of the supported projects, perhaps precisely those which are most relevant from a development perspective, may not become independent in financial terms even by the end of the usually applied time frame of five years.

Projects may require the continuation of (perhaps partial) external support over a longer period than is at present envisaged by IICD. DGIS should be asked to assist in developing a procedure to enable funds to be earmarked, from those controlled by the local Netherlands Embassy, for the medium-term support of projects where the development impact is likely to be high.

Secondly, as IICD has much to offer also to entrepreneurial or 'business' ICT projects, it will and probably should continue to be involved in such activities and projects, even when they

are of dubious value in developmental terms. Moreover, public-private partnerships, where private capital and initiative can be used to produce public goods, are both acceptable and necessary for development, perhaps especially in the ICT sector. Private training enterprises are a particularly good example. However, we feel that giving support to private profit-making enterprises out of development cooperation resources should, in general, be subject to stringent safeguards. Similar considerations apply to organisations that represent or work largely on behalf of the better-off sectors. Specifically,

IICD should not continue to use resources derived from DGIS or other development cooperation donors to support projects with private enterprises where the generation of profit for those enterprises is the main or even a major result of the use of such resources, nor should it use such resources to collaborate with organisations that effectively represent, or work with, the better-off sections of the population.

5.5 Helping to prepare for the longer term

At the present time, IICD rightly links technology transfer and capacity building, and it operates mainly through the provision of seed-money. However, as ICT becomes more established in a country where IICD has been active with the public sector, capacity development may well become an increasingly critical issue. The more general lack of resources and staff in the civil service may then turn out to be the bottleneck, rather than ICT. In the longer term, IICD cannot solve that wider capacity issue – as one of our Embassy informants graphically said: “IICD cannot become a capacity factory”. After the ‘seed project’ phase capacity development, like other aspects of ICT development, has to be embedded in regular government activities. However, donor support could then be sought, especially in respect of further ICT development in the social sectors, possibly – as was suggested in the previous section – from DGIS funds administered locally by the Dutch Embassy. Such support may be more easily obtained if the success of the seed project can be demonstrated. IICD is well-placed to help with this.

Towards the end of a successful ‘seed-project’, IICD should offer to help partner institutions draw up follow-up grant applications, notably proposals that would address the capacity issue, for subsequent submission to international donors.

5.6 Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E)

Even if IICD moves to a new ‘mix’ of work, demand-driven activities will remain important, and this gives added weight to the need for close monitoring of projects and ongoing evaluation of outcomes and effects. Only with close M&E can adjustments be made if necessary – at the very least to the inputs provided by IICD. This is recognized within the Institute. Evaluation, in the sense of impact assessment, is difficult where projects have only recently started. Yet it should be attempted, and questionnaires should be so constructed that potential criticism has a chance to emerge. Although there was an internal evaluation of the Roundtable process in 1998 – to which we have already referred and which anticipated a number of the issues central to this report – in a broader sense M&E is still in its infancy. So far, it has been largely focused on the so-called participants, i.e. the people or organizations who, as partners of IICD, are actually running the projects. It is important that more attention be paid to the position of the ‘end user’.

A comprehensive tool for monitoring and evaluation has recently been developed, based on direct questionnaires among project partners and end users, which does address the composition of end users (rural/urban, gender, age, sector), as well as the development impact on them – issues such as awareness, empowerment, economic and socio-cultural impact. Such monitoring is particularly important in the context of the non-directive, demand-led approach espoused by IICD.

Projects should be beginning to emerge from their development stage, so that more end users are actually reached. Hence,

resources should be earmarked to start using the monitoring tools that have been developed as soon as possible, also in order to learn about those who are not reached by the work of IICD. In addition, a special impact study might be conducted in one or two of the countries where most progress has been made with project implementation.

6 Wider issues for IICD

We read in the AR99, written early in 2000: "IICD's future strategy will be based on coherence with DGIS policies as well as on enhanced partnerships with other donor agencies and private sector organizations. ... IICD will increasingly focus on local institution building ... [to create] ... the institutional capacity to utilize ICT applications as tools for sustainable development and empowerment of the poor, based on informed decision-making." IICD also intends to place locals even more firmly in the 'driving seat' of projects, even though it is recognized that different partners have very different levels of competence, and that in this connection the hitherto neglected development of institutional and organizational skills is of great importance.

In order to put these laudable aims into practice, IICD needs to reconsider its approach to three central issues. One of these has already been dealt with in section 3.3: the need to pay more attention to strategic concerns. Secondly, the intention to give partners even more room in the 'driving seat' may well further strengthen the disjointed focus on projects and incidentally weaken the attention paid to strategic thinking; it also brings up forcefully the dilemmas of being 'demand-driven' or non-directive. In the third place, the promise to work for sustainable development and empowerment of the poor throws the spotlight onto the development impact of IICD's activities. It is to these last two questions, crucial for IICD's future direction, that we now return.

6.1 To what extent should IICD be demand-led?

It has been noted frequently that being 'demand-led' is integral to IICD's working methods. In the four years since the foundation of IICD the demand-oriented approach has emerged as an increasingly central guideline. As a result, IICD has not felt the need to test the relevance of its activities against the mission with which it was originally entrusted. Rather has it been guided by the outcomes of the Roundtable processes, accepting the views and interpretations of participants and taking up projects that emerged from these. It is argued by IICD that all projects and programmes must fit into the national development policies, and that they must be explicitly relevant to development as well as sustainable from an organizational, cultural, technological and financial perspective. Nevertheless, in the final analysis, as one Programme Manager argued passionately, "... if our partners want something, then it is up to them, whatever we think, or whatever the latest fad is at DGIS, or the World Bank", and he rightly pointed to the tension in the DGIS position which often argues for being demand-driven ('owner-led') while simultaneously posing a string of conditionalities. Notwithstanding the just mentioned IICD 'criteria' of fitting into a development perspective, the choice of activities is basically left to its partners. And if those activities ultimately benefit the relatively well-to-do, so be it.

Perhaps in part as a reaction against a rather 'cocky' approach in the early days of the Institute, being demand-led has become a central tenet of IICD – "nothing will make us deviate from that". So it would appear that a number of questions, raised in October 1998 by the (internal) Roundtable evaluation, have now been dismissed. Various points were made at that time. Demand-driven initiatives could be out of keeping with IICD's own objectives. The

make-up of the Roundtable participants was seen to influence the outcome of the deliberations (the issue being: demand-driven *by whom?*). The process could lead to an under-representation in the activities of IICD's focal areas. Finally, it was observed that projects do not necessarily lead to policies, and that the shift to a 'higher level' doesn't occur automatically.

Let us be clear about one thing: there is no doubt that IICD's demand-driven approach is preferable to a supply-driven one, where ideas and activities are 'sold to' LDC partners by Northerners. There can also be no question that it is desirable for projects to be locally 'owned'. Yet the limited awareness among staff that a demand-driven approach at the country level creates its own problems, that *there are tensions here that need addressing* rather than being 'ideologically' pushed under the carpet, is unfortunate. The question 'demand-driven by whom?' is absolutely critical. The developmental relevance of the demands of those partners who *in fact* represent the better-off or privileged sections of the population, or work with them, is at best questionable. That was confirmed by the field visits. This issue is taken up again in Section 6.2, below.

There is another side to this. We have already remarked on the limited attention paid to Strategic Policy Explorations. That under-emphasis is probably exacerbated by the centrality of being 'demand-led', which impedes thinking about the future (doing that is not being 'demand-led'). But even at the country level it will have additional effects: it can prevent the Institute from using its knowledge and experience for the benefit of its partners, from actively *forewarning* them or alerting them to what seems to be genuinely significant on a global scale. As we have already observed, IICD should accept that sharing experience, or giving an element of guidance, is not 'interference'. A case can indeed be made for letting partners 'get on with it' and learn from their own mistakes. However, IICD's definition of 'facilitation' has been rather too limited in the past: there is little merit in intentionally letting people make same mistakes again and again, and in failing to share with them what has been learned elsewhere. There are indications that this position is now changing for the better.

Generally, it should be stressed that while many of the issues identified from the bottom up are important, they do not constitute the be-all and end-all of IICD's mission. As a senior DGIS official put it: IICD also needs a capacity to take distance, to draw conclusions about broad and significant implications, and *to engage in well-founded speculation about the future*. This viewpoint still finds echoes among some IICD Board members, though they do not appear to have pressed their case strongly.

The Institute should not abandon its emphasis on the central importance of LDC partners' views, also in order to ensure sustainability. Yet the tension between wishing to be demand-led, and IICD's responsibility for providing long term guidance and for thinking ahead to the future, needs to be more fully recognized. The outcome cannot always be in favour of the former. Providing guidance implies that lessons learned elsewhere are made available, even in project activities. It also implies that strategic thinking about the future should be taken into account in deciding on projects.

6.2 Ensuring IICD activities contribute to development

Efforts are now being concentrated on 'mainstreaming' ICT in *sectors* such as health, agriculture or education: staff increasingly see this as the proper and successful IICD niche. This is a perfectly reasonable position: it binds work more easily into national priorities, builds on IICD experience and available expertise, and promotes activities that are feasible and well-bounded and potentially linked. Yet it also heightens the danger that work continues to disregard strategic considerations, gradually becomes ever more narrow and technical, and fails to address the broader issues of 'development'.

The Institute's Director clearly stated the prevailing view at IICD about the link between its work and development. At Roundtables staff always encourage participants to start with a discussion of the development needs of the country. Only then do they ask how participants believe ICT can contribute to solving them. The process is seen as helping to empower people. Nevertheless, concern about the *actual* development impact of its activities remains weak, at best. In the past there was a tendency to postulate the ICT-development link as near-axiomatic, even though there was no evidence to underpin that view. Nowadays it is accepted that it is indeed necessary to gather information on this, though this tends to be strongly qualified by the argument that four years is too short a period for any effect to be visible.

IICD needs to sharpen its sensitivity to the relationship between specific flows of information and general development processes. 'ICT and development' embraces more than the installation of infrastructure and capacity building. IICD has to take a closer interest in the content of the information flows and the actual use of the information made available: not in order to push the collection and dissemination of specific types of information, but to advise institutions on the experience of other organizations in this respect and to intensify the discussion on the specific needs for information in any given local situation.

Moreover, if IICD aims to help 'mainstream' ICT into the sectors where it now mainly works, then the development issues faced in those sectors need to be understood. This may be relatively easy in relation to non-social sectors such as the environment: a good example is the cooperation with EPA in Ghana, whose objective to make environmental information available at local level can help stimulate local action.⁷ However, with respect to the social and economic aspects, there is a danger that IICD asks fewer questions than is desirable about how its technical niche work relates to some of the central issues of development: inequality, exclusion, institutional inadequacies, and poverty.⁸

We recognize, however, that when this question is raised a number of serious counter-arguments are put forward. One of them is that (some of) IICD's partners do worry a great deal about those issues, but that they have found their own balance between a concern for the poor and excluded, and for closing the digital gap. IICD, so argued the Chairman of its Board, must respect that balance. Also, staff rightly argue that it would not be possible for IICD to get the requisite development-oriented and sectoral expertise on board so as to be able to deal with these issues directly. Such expertise should, in their view, preferably be found 'out there', particularly among its partners. That this *can* work, is shown by the cooperation with SNV in Burkina Faso. That partner constantly asks questions about the priority of different activities, and the way in which ICT might help promote its basic development tasks – or not. Another example was the occasion when Ghanaians involved in the health sector refocused their plans for ICT development from the teaching hospital onto district hospitals and local health centres. Nevertheless, the fieldwork highlighted other cases in which partners were much more dubious guardians of a 'development-orientation' because, *de facto*, they represented the interests of the better-off members of the particular constituency.

Strengthening this development-orientation in the future may require two separate 'adjustments'.

⁷ Even here, however, it would be interesting to monitor to what extent this is achieved. Locally available information may be a necessary condition for action, but it may not be sufficient. Other impediments may prevent this.

⁸ It is important not to demand too much in this respect, however. In the words of a Programme Manager: "We should be realistic: don't think that we can ever maintain seriously that with ICT we can directly improve the lot of the poorest of the poor. But with a focus on basic social services we can contribute to this."

In the first place, even though the staff at its base in The Hague do not have a predominantly technical background, the effect of the focus on projects, and often on their technical aspects, is to bring the development issues less centrally into the policy debates than is desirable – notwithstanding the sincere concern to be ‘developmentally relevant’.

We feel that the best response at this level is to develop a ‘privileged partnership’ with one or more of the specialized development-oriented organizations in the Netherlands, to provide greater input on socio-political and institutional issues. It would be necessary to ensure that such cooperation is ‘institutionally incorporated’ into IICD’s operating procedures, and that funds are allocated for this. Possibly one or two joint appointments might help provide significant anchoring.

It would be inappropriate to make a specific recommendation in this respect, as this is clearly a matter for the Board and the Institute’s staff.

In the second place, it is also desirable to develop such ‘privileged partnerships’ with development-oriented institutions in the field. While there is a trend towards developing several ‘champion relationships’ in each country, specifically with sectoral leaders, there does remain one main ‘champion’ or prime partner in each country, perhaps a senior official in the Ministry concerned with communications, or a major player in the private ICT sector. These champion-partners may indicate that they are genuinely *concerned* about development, but that does not make them knowledgeable about the central problems, nor do they necessarily have the requisite commitment to relevant change. The field visits demonstrated that it made a profound difference whether the local partner was knowledgeable and committed in this sense, or not.⁹

In those countries where it intends to continue operating for the foreseeable future, IICD should consider appointing a further ‘champion’ from outside the ICT sector. Its explicit task would be continuously to raise questions about the likely development impact of activities undertaken, notably their impact on the poor and excluded (or, conversely, their irrelevance to that aspect of development). IICD should also continue to ensure that its partners, and the Roundtable participants, are not predominantly drawn from the ICT sector itself, nor from among ICT specialists in non-ICT organizations.

We end this chapter by briefly considering some broader development-related questions that are nonetheless very relevant to ICT-related activities.

6.3 ICT, poverty and exclusion

We do not wish to imply that income distribution or poverty-alleviation are the only relevant aspects of development, nor that ICT should be *primarily* concerned with these. Nevertheless, a central aspect of the ICT-development nexus is the question about who really is empowered by ICT – who actually benefits. IICD staff realize the importance of this issue, and there is even the occasional printed reference to it: “Aside from the positive ones, negative consequences of the Internet are also beginning to show. Authoritative reports state that ICT is partly responsible for the growing gap between rich and poor. Moreover, Internet usage tends to divide young and old; male and female; literate and illiterate people. ... Therefore strategies are needed to mitigate negative consequences.”¹⁰ Such strategies might focus, we read, on capacity development ‘within a local context’, notably in rural communities. Yet little is said on what might be involved in translating such good intentions into practice. Preliminary results from the ‘trial’ evaluations in Ghana and Tanzania show that

⁹ The most outstandingly positive example was the partnership with SNV, the Dutch development NGO, in Burkina Faso.

¹⁰ “Vision 2007”, op.cit., p 76

around three quarters of the projects are focused on the urban areas. This could be relevant to expected future developments if the work were focused on the urban slums and shantytowns. However, as various staff members explained, so far the urban elites (and the younger generation) have been the main beneficiaries of projects. Overall, the field visits confirmed this picture. As far as the rural areas are concerned, it is true that conditions are usually not conducive to Internet-based ICT projects in the more remote areas (no phone lines and often no electricity). Yet there are relatively cheap alternatives of which IICD is aware – local radio is the most obvious – but these do not appear to have been given the disproportionate attention that should arise from a concern with ‘who benefits’.

For the most part, staff just assert that IICD’s work does have ‘an indirect effect upon the poor’, or that women and the young do ‘get a great deal out of ICT’.¹¹ Some staff members indeed do consider issues such as the distribution of power within villages, the bolstering effect decentralization can have on the locally dominant, or the question of whose voices are heard in consultations and what their particular interests are likely to be. Yet little of the actual project work seems to address these, or the biases to which they give rise. In fact, being demand-driven, often by urban ICT enthusiasts with little interest in empowering the poor, may well make it more difficult to correct these biases. It is natural that, in the present stage of ICT development, counterparts familiar with ICT will come from such an environment. This only reinforces the need for built-in mechanisms to counter such biases.

Confirmation of this was seen in all three countries visited. Let us recall a few examples. FIAB in Burkina Faso, an insignificant organization without offices or facilities until IICD provided the finance, gives a good service, but does seem to be run by and for the larger farmers and traders. We saw no evidence of any attempt to reach those who are struggling. In Ghana, the main partners and ‘champions’ NCS and ISOG are bustling Internet-promoting organizations, but they are above all commercial in their orientation. They are in the perfectly respectable business of making money out of the fascination with the Internet. The courses given at CITC, too, are commercial undertakings, out of reach of those without an income or savings. (In contrast, Rescue Mission Ghana, a non-profit organization, explicitly proposes to set fees for its planned courses at a level which merely covers costs *and* to set up a scholarship fund, in order to reach beyond the offspring of the better-off). Even in Jamaica, a country at a much higher level of economic development than Burkina Faso and Ghana, with widespread literacy among the poor, there are no explicit efforts to shape activities so they affect the poorer sections of the population.

The oft-mentioned apparent general exception to this are the rural Telecentres and Information Boutiques, which are thought to bolster the position of underprivileged groups, and in ‘traditional’ male-dominated areas such as in N Mali especially of women. Such facilities can facilitate the spread of information that is relevant also to the underprivileged. A good example was the identification of the mango blight and its cure in Burkina Faso, which helped raise productivity and incomes. The rapid spread of commercial Telecentres in Burkinabé small towns suggests that they fulfil a function not just for ‘the rich’. Yet even here there is a lack of specific information about the impact of IICD-sponsored activities on users. Particularly in terms of e-commerce, benefits to small farmers are unlikely to arise without *prior* conventional interventions, such as the refocusing of extension services or the building up of organizations or cooperatives. ICT without this cannot be expected to have the desired result.

Together with its partners, IICD should monitor the social composition of the users of the Telecentres and Boutiques. If few are from among the poor or excluded, more

¹¹ There is indeed evidence that youngsters learn very fast, given a chance. See the prize-winning ‘story’ about the Indian computer in a ‘hole-in-the-wall’, on the ICT Stories website.

conventional developmental measures should be encouraged in association with organizations working with and for the poor.

We do not doubt that IICD wishes to implement its oft-stated aim of making ICT relevant to development. Nor do we doubt that this is put forward to participants in Roundtables and to its partners. As one Embassy official expressed it to us: "Even though it is not their first concern, at present IICD does clearly have an added-value in the more development-oriented aspects, as some of their current partners are *even less* concerned with this." Of course, there are important exceptions to this generalization in all three countries, notably among officials in the health, education and environmental protection areas, while for partners like SNV their whole *raison d'être* is to work with the poor. Yet, overall, very little is done by IICD to connect (lack of) development with the widespread existence of poverty and the social mechanisms of exclusion, and to take active steps to consider how its activities might begin to overcome this weakness.

Conversely, there is the need to consider the circumstances in which IICD's work can actually strengthen the powerful, even those who exercise power arbitrarily. Particularly in Africa the reality in many countries remains far removed from Western ideas about democracy and good governance. Bolstering ICT within the government and bureaucracy, for example by networking all the ministries and districts, may worsen rather than improve such situations. There may well be potential activities in such countries that would support democratic organizations or raise the ability of the population at large to resist the self-seeking exercise of power.

This argument does not apply to work which is clearly independent of the regime, work done for example through Information Boutiques not controlled or censored by officialdom, and which *might* in some sense help empower people. The already recommended greater emphasis on cooperation with NGOs may also help to address this issue. In general, these matters of 'politics' cannot be taken for granted and should involve a careful weighing up of risks and chances. Such systematic assessments are not currently undertaken by IICD.

IICD cannot ignore the political context in which it works. Particularly in respect of work with 'officialdom' there should always be a careful assessment of the advantages and disadvantages to ordinary people of any proposed collaboration, as well as an assessment of the 'robustness' of the expected positive contribution in the light of possible political twists and turns. The Institute needs to develop procedures to enable it to undertake such assessments.

7 Recapitulation of Recommendations

The general conclusion of this evaluation is unreservedly positive, even though we point to a number of desirable changes in IICD's *modus operandi*.

We have made recommendations throughout this report. We now provide a recapitulation of those recommendations, grouping them so that suggestions in similar areas are presented together.

7.1 How should IICD's programme be determined?

We begin with a number of recommendations that address a central aspect of IICD's ethos – namely its insistence that it should not be an active party to the decisions that shape its work programme. IICD goes much beyond shunning a supply-driven approach and trying to empower local actors: any active participation by IICD staff in decision-making is seen as undue influence on the process, and is therefore rejected. This starts with the Roundtables.

The basic Roundtable conception is widely appreciated by partners. It represents a genuine attempt to empower local actors and stakeholders, to help them identify opportunities and then to develop locally appropriate ICT-based solutions. We strongly support its continued utilization as a clearly more desirable approach to the generation of development cooperation than many widely used 'top-down' and 'supply-driven' methods.

Hence,

The Institute should not abandon its emphasis on the central importance of LDC partners' views, also in order to ensure sustainability. Yet the tension between wishing to be demand-led, and IICD's responsibility for providing long term guidance and for thinking ahead to the future, needs to be more fully recognized. The outcome cannot always be in favour of the former. Providing guidance implies that lessons learned elsewhere are made available, even in project activities. It also implies that strategic thinking about the future should be taken into account in deciding on projects.

More specifically,

IICD should be willing to share its gradually growing experience on matters of 'content' with partners, and should not be excessively concerned about the way in which this might 'contaminate' their independent decisions. It may be ideologically 'pure' to let partners make their own mistakes, but it is inefficient to have the wheel reinvented again and again. It is necessary to strike a more reasonable balance in this respect.

7.2 Taking distance from projects; de-fragmenting

While IICD will continue to be centrally concerned with project development, it needs to invest in more, and more targeted, products for policy use. As the number of professional staff at IICD is unlikely to grow significantly, time needs to be freed from project-related activities and devoted to broader 'knowledge centre' functions, so as to redress what has become a marked imbalance.

So,

IICD needs to continue down the road of taking distance from its 'day-to-day' activities and pay attention to the wider development policy implications of (likely) ICT developments, also in relation to capacity building. It is important that explicit provisions are made for such strategic work, also to counter a natural tendency towards fragmentation in a plethora of small-scale project activities.

IICD's country experience should also be put to work for a broader objective:

With the concrete experience that IICD has gathered in many countries it could seek to play an even more active role in advising national departments of development cooperation, and other donors with whom it has built up strategic relationships, on the ICT component of their projects and programmes. In this context we specifically suggest that IICD explore with DGIS how more regular consultations could be established and institutionalized.

To facilitate the change in outlook,

We suggest that it be seriously considered to give staff overlapping responsibilities, with 'country teams' supporting each other and taking turns in making country visits over a longer period of time. This would create structured opportunities to 'learn the lessons' of the country work from each other and also stimulate moving up from the project level to consider the broader implications of IICD's work. Such broader lessons, which should also be available on the website, can then be used to achieve a more balanced approach to decision-making, one that takes account of local demand for particular activities (projects) as well as of IICD's comparative and analytical experience and its 'global' responsibilities.

7.3 Where to work and what to do

IICD should give more explicit consideration to the criteria used to choose countries in which to operate; closer liaison with DGIS in this area is an option.

Making seed-money available for initial projects has been a successful IICD procedure. But seed-projects come to an end.

Towards the end of a successful 'seed-project', IICD should offer to help partner institutions draw up follow-up grant applications, notably proposals that would address the capacity issue, for subsequent submission to international donors.

As a 'carrier of best practices' and an international disseminator of experience, it makes sense for IICD to spread its activities to more countries rather than merely consolidating or intensifying its existing work. Within any given country IICD should also consider switching to other sectors once the activity in a given sector has borne fruit.

Specifically, IICD might become more active in the NGO sector.

In terms of its 'public face',

While IICD has been right to concentrate on its website, other forms of publication should remain actively under review, as these may help to widen its 'audience'.

7.4 Placing more stress on development

Longer term and developmentally relevant activities in poor countries often cannot become financially self-sufficient.

Projects may require the continuation of (perhaps partial) external support over a longer period than is at present envisaged by IICD. DGIS should be asked to assist in developing a procedure to enable funds to be earmarked, from those controlled by the local Netherlands Embassy, for the medium-term support of projects where the development impact is likely to be high.

It is legitimate for IICD to undertake projects with a 'business-orientation'. But

IICD should not continue to use resources derived from DGIS or other development cooperation donors to support projects with private enterprises where the generation of profit for those enterprises is the main or even a major result of the use of such resources, nor should it use those resources to collaborate with organisations that effectively represent, or work with, the better-off sections of the population.

Even though IICD staff do not have a predominantly technical background, their tasks do not bring issues of development 'naturally' to the foreground. It is unrealistic to expect significant change in this respect. Therefore,

We feel that the best response at this level is to develop a 'privileged partnership' with one or more of the specialized development-oriented organizations in the Netherlands, to provide greater input on socio-political and institutional issues. It would be necessary to ensure that such cooperation is 'institutionally incorporated' into IICD's operating procedures, and that funds are allocated for this. Possibly one or two joint appointments might help provide significant anchoring.

The issue needs also to be addressed in the programme countries.

In those countries where it intends to continue operating for the foreseeable future, IICD should consider appointing a further 'champion' from outside the ICT sector. Its explicit task would be continuously to raise questions about the likely development impact of activities undertaken, notably their impact on the poor and excluded (or, conversely, their irrelevance to that aspect of development). IICD should also continue to ensure that its partners, and the Roundtable participants, are not predominantly drawn from the ICT sector itself, nor from among ICT specialists in non-ICT organizations.

The development issue also arises in connection with the research programme, and with regard to monitoring and evaluation (M&E).

IICD should formulate clear criteria with respect to its role as sponsor or co-sponsor of research projects. Where these are financed with funds deriving from development cooperation, more emphasis could be placed on investigating what type of ICT project comes closest to fulfilling the developmental objective of improving the lot of the poor and excluded, and how such developmentally beneficial effects can be maximized and replicated elsewhere. Research may also contribute to a foresight role for IICD and its partners, so that upcoming challenges can be understood and addressed more effectively.

Resources should be earmarked to start using the monitoring tools that have been developed as soon as possible, also in order to learn about those who are not reached by the work of IICD. In addition, a special impact study might be conducted

in one or two of the countries where most progress has been made with project implementation.

At the field level,

Together with its partners, IICD should monitor the social composition of the users of the Telecentres and Boutiques. If few are from among the poor or excluded, more conventional developmental measures should be encouraged in association with organizations working with and for the poor.

Finally, a general caveat:

IICD cannot ignore the political context in which it works. Particularly in respect of work with 'officialdom' there should always be a careful assessment of the advantages and disadvantages to ordinary people of any proposed collaboration, as well as an assessment of the 'robustness' of the expected positive contribution in the light of possible political twists and turns. The Institute needs to develop procedures to enable it to undertake such assessments.