



Chapter XXI

Linking Communities to Global Policymaking: A New Electronic Window on the United Nations

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Introduction

The 1990s have been marked by extraordinary changes in many of the fundamental elements of human existence, among the most powerful, the introduction of a global networking system. Indeed, it is difficult to consider thoughtfully any major aspect of our socio-economic-political circumstances, current and future, that are not in some way profoundly affected by this revolution. For those of us with Internet service, even a few keystrokes on a laptop computer can now put us in touch with friends, family, colleagues, or strangers almost anywhere in the world, certainly on all seven continents including Antarctica. Business can be conducted, money transferred, medical records evaluated, books/papers jointly written and edited, inventions created, ideas shared. The unprecedented ease and speed of access to knowledge and experience, and increasingly commerce, is at the heart of the promise of the new technologies for cyberconnectivity. Communities in all parts of the world are finding ways to make the Internet serve them, and becoming energized, organized and activated as a result.

Two factors, however, contribute to a sobering backdrop that frames further exploration of these exciting new frontiers. First, access to the underlying technologies is severely constrained in developing countries, and in poorer communities of industrialized countries. Differential access to key resources, such as capital, electricity, telephone service, exacerbates gaps between the haves and the have-nots.

Furthermore, even for those who gain basic access, other constraints, such as predominance of “colonial” languages, limit their ability to take advantage of opportunities offered by the technology. Second, the glitter of cybertechnology tends to divert us from addressing broader problems of inequities in social and economic development, and their associated ecological consequences. These have been sharply documented in the UNDP Human Development Report Series. (The most recent of these 10 annual Human Development Reports, that of July 1999, can be found at: <http://www.undp.org/hdro/99.htm>.)

This chapter presents the results of an experiment to bring together these two contemporary forces — the Internet explosion, and a sense of growing inequality in economic and political power — to create a new channel into global decision making fora, particularly for communities that seem increasingly to be left behind. The context for this effort was the United Nations, and a series of global conferences that focused attention on the major social, environmental, and economic issues of our time. The objective was to explore ways to use new electronic networking to link communities around the world more directly to top level decision makers.

The global conferences have sought to raise international consciousness of the growing gap between rich and poor, and to set guidelines for future action. They have provided a forum in which Heads of State and national governments offer formal commitments through broad declarations and specific global action plans. They have also helped to engage private industry in new efforts to achieve more equitable, sustainable and benign development for all people. (See, for example, UN Wire 6, July 1999; also see Michael Hopkins, 1999.)

To be effective, however, action to redress problems of inequity must engage people at the level of the village, the community, the family. If new initiatives launched in global conferences are truly to permeate to local levels — to bridge the global-local chasms — and ultimately benefit individual livelihoods, then far greater citizen participation in the process is essential. Enabling that participation was the objective of the approaches discussed in this chapter.

The objective was rooted in the fundamental principles of the United Nations. For more than 50 years, the UN has provided a global forum for its member states. The UN Charter, in its Preamble, calls for the use of “international machinery for the economic and social advancement of all peoples.” More recently, the UN system has reiterated the principle of working not only with governments, but also with broader dimensions of civil society. This resolve, while underlying much of the original intent of the UN charter, embodies an important new emphasis that reflects widespread disenchantment with relying solely on government to redress inequities, and, instead, turns to broader ‘governance’ as an instrument of progress.

The purpose of this chapter is to report the results of three projects conducted by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the Education Development Center, Inc. (EDC) to explore use of the Internet as a means for creating a “virtual global meeting” that could have input into global conference preparations. The chapter describes ways in which electronic communications technologies contributed to the functioning of the UN system in the middle and latter part of the 1990s decade. It examines the ways in which electronic fora enabled individuals and communities who had little or no knowledge of, still less experience with, the UN, to engage in the UN deliberative process for the first time and in novel ways.

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