

Waiting for pilots to land in Tunis...

By Nalaka Gunawardene

Tunis, 18 November 2005: As the UN-convened World Summit on the Information Society ends today, there are still too many pilots hovering around, looking for landing space.

No, they are not trying to bring in late arriving summiteers to the Tunisian capital, which has seen thousands turning up to talk about the future of our information society and networked world.

In fact, it is uncertain when – or whether – some of these pilots will ever touch the ground. For they are creations of development donors or well-meaning civil society groups, many completely detached from the real world.

Thousands of ‘pilot projects’ have been seeded all over the developing world during the past few years to find out if information and communications technologies (ICTs) can foster development. Among these are attempts to put computers in underprivileged schools, provide internet access to the poor, or bring ‘community radio’ to villages.

The development community – ever anxious to coin more jargon and acronyms – now has a collective name for these efforts: ICT4D (ICT for development).

Of course, there is nothing wrong in trying out new ways of improving lives and livelihoods. Every possible tool must be employed in the global battle against poverty.

When technologies can offer part of the solution, we should indeed welcome it.

But the enormous development challenges we face – captured in recent years by the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) – are not going to benefit from what I call ‘forever-pilots’: projects that remain externally supported for years or decades, and never seem to stand on their own.

It is also strange how the generic ideas behind these pilots don’t seem to catch on, in a world that is quick to emulate – even pirate or plagiarise -- good ideas.

Here in Tunis, where a massive ICT4D exhibition ran parallel to the official, inter-governmental meeting, project proponents from UN agencies, civil society and private sector have spent much time, effort and money in promoting their pet pilots.

Phrases like ‘up-scaling’ and ‘ensuring sustainability’ have been bandied about over endless cups of coffee. But these are precisely what the forever pilots fail to accomplish.

One much hyped project comes from my own country, Sri Lanka: the Kotmale Internet radio project. Established in 1999, it used a “community radio” service – really, a rural broadcast of the fully state owned radio network -- to bring the World Wide Web slightly closer to its listeners. Surfing the web was not a practical option in the Kotmale valley, some 250 km away from the capital. So a daily two-hour interactive radio programme enabled listeners to request (by live telephone or by post) information on any topic. Radio presenters sourced it from various websites and summarised on air in the local language, Sinhala .

This helped to overcome the twin problems of Internet access and English proficiency. For a while, the station also provided free Internet access at two public libraries and at the station itself. The capital and running costs were covered by donors.

The project appealed to communications researchers and journalists all in search of a “good story”. Never mind the project was government-driven, and rarely provided information of economic or social value. In reality, the community had no say in either management or content development. Nestled in the scenic Kotmale valley, the pilot project had all the ‘sexy’ trappings for the development community.

But when the donors finally wearied of funding, everything came to a standstill. Amazingly, however, the project lives on in development textbooks and websites, and is still cited widely as a South Asian ‘success’.

If it was such a success, why didn’t it spawn similar efforts in Sri Lanka or elsewhere? The rural and urban information needs are vast and remain unmet.

Joining Kotmale are a large number of other ‘small-is-beautiful’ ICT4D initiatives across Africa, Asia Pacific and Latin America. The tele-centre fever that is currently sweeping the developing world is only the latest wave. Tax payers in the North keep these numerous projects on life support, believing the hype that it really helps the poor.

If some people want to believe in myths, that’s a personal choice. But projects like Kotmale do great harm by distracting funding agencies, distorting investment priorities and creating an illusion of accomplishment. Murali Shanmugavelan, a researcher with Panos London, calls these initiatives ‘donor mistresses’.

I see them as ‘picture postcard opportunities’ for roving development workers. There is a seductive allure in images of school children playing with a computer, a Buddhist monk using a mobile phone, or tribal people trying out a palm-top. They lull us into believing that we are fixing the world’s ills with geeky gadgets.

Ten years after the Internet went public and a dozen years into mobile telephony, some continued to advocate more pilots in Tunis. We were told that pilots would find test the ground, assess the limits of the possible, or 'demonstrate' a concept before rolling it out.

With only 10 years left to meet the globally agreed development targets of MDGs, how much longer can we keep studying problems or piloting at the fringes?

Investing disproportionately and endlessly in scattered 'pilots' will not bridge the digital divide or reduce global poverty. These pilots -- and their jet setting proponents -- look at problems from 30,000 feet above the ground, and create small islands of prosperity amidst much deprivation. They should be irrigating the whole vast desert, not keep watering the few donor-pampered oases.

Development donors looking for a bigger bang for their increasingly limited buck should put more money in regulatory and structural reforms that have tangible downstream returns. For example, telecom reform in Sri Lanka during the 1990s brought mobile phones within reach of most people. When they were first introduced 15 years ago, mobiles were over-priced and over-rated. Today, they make up over half of the country's 2.5 million phone connections, and have revolutionised how people work and conduct business.

Two years ago, as part of a nine-country Asia Pacific study on how ICTs are influencing human development, I was desperately looking for instances of any communications technology that has directly benefited the poor. The market-driven mobile phone phenomenon stood out amidst many donor-driven 'pilot' projects that had either collapsed or never delivered the promise.

These misdirected pilots only give ICTs a bad name. Yet many of these technologies hold untapped potential to make good development better. When applied correctly, ICTs -- from phones, radio and television to computers and internet -- can also liberate millions of people from ignorance, ill-health and unemployment.

I didn't hear that message loud and clear in Tunis. Or maybe it was lost in the self-congratulatory cacophony.

Every big UN summit generates its share of hype, and WSIS has been no exception. Tunis brought back memories from three years ago, when I attend the World Summit on Sustainable Development. Held at the other end of the African continent – in Johannesburg, South Africa – it had a similar deluge of pilots, on environment.

The richest square mile of Africa – where that Summit was held – probably held the world's highest concentration of development hype and rhetoric for a few days. It will be interesting to go back and see how many of those pilot projects – all trying to save the planet – have been able to save themselves.

The Tunis KRAM Centre – venue of WSIS -- must have had the highest concentration of laptops and mobile phones in Africa for the week. It was also drowning in everything e -- from e-readiness studies to e-development plans, and from e-commerce strategies to e-waste management plans, there is a deluge of it everywhere.

'Forever pilots' were lurking among all this, looking for landing pads. They would happily settle for a few sympathetic listeners – or some more funding to keep them going for as long as they can.

If governments, UN agencies and donors don't move on from this basic level and begin investing in what really makes a difference, it's not the pilots who will soon crash land.

It will be all of us.

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