

FORUM

A Central Role for Universities in the Information Society

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Universities in lesser developed countries must be central participants in the creation of information societies. Regretfully, the role of universities in development is too rarely discussed or even mentioned in many international meetings. Witness WSIS, which was mostly a road show for international development agencies, and NGOs, where universities simply did not matter.

Having served in the university system for 42 years, during which time I have attempted to integrate work in sustainable development, I believe that in the developing world the university community remains an obvious group to mobilize around problems of development. The university community is only partly dependent on the state machinery and generally independent of business and multinational interests. I wonder how to get this message across in the WSIS process.

I did not have the opportunity to be a delegate to the Summit itself. However, thanks to one of our donors, Sida of Sweden, my institution was sponsored to participate in the ICT4D platform, which we willingly did. Here, we were able to share our experiences with many other visitors. The experiences we shared included our successful Third Country Training Program at the University of Colombo School of Computing (www.ucsc.cmb.ac.lk) where, with support from a donor country, we conduct short-term, intensive, in-house training programs for participants from other third world countries. This has been in existence for the last 10 years with the latest program being "The Design, Implementation, Administration and Management of Network Systems" fully supported by Sida for 34 participants from 16 countries in Asia, Pacific, Africa, and Latin America. Fortunately, we did not have to rely on external faculty from the developed world, as expertise was available at the host institution.

We were also able to make use of another great opportunity when Sida organized a workshop at WSIS/ICT4D on December 10 on "The Role of Universities in Developing Countries for National ICT Development." This was attended by a representative audience from universities and the donor community who shared their experiences and models of

South-South cooperation and contributions to national ICT4D initiatives that could benefit from the competence already available in universities in the developing world. Examples were presented from Mozambique, Sri Lanka, and Tanzania, among others. The experience of donor agencies such as Sida, NUFFIC, IDRC/CIDA, JICA, and of universities in the developed world was also discussed.

It was clear that Sida had identified a valuable input to ICT4D in the form of North-South and South-South cooperation of the university communities catalyzed by the donor agencies. There was also the added benefit of research cooperation between universities in the North and the South. My hope is that we will now take further steps to integrate the university community of the developing world into the general effort to take on the critical problems of the Information Society. ■

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