

Crossing the Digital Divide: What's Next?

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With access to limited financial means and technological development, the digital divide, in a technical sense, can be tackled. However, what do we do once we have taken significant steps on this road?

Today, Iran can be categorized as a developing nation, with over 70% of its population under the age of 25 and a high unemployment rate. Therefore, supplying this young population with the innovative technology that has overtaken the global political, social and economic systems is a necessity. We traveled to Geneva to attend the World Summit on the Information Society as two of the youngest associates of the Science and Arts Foundation (SAF), a nongovernmental organization that aims to empower Iranian youth by means of information technology.¹ Thus far, SAF, in collaboration with Sharif University of Technology, has provided the technology, hardware, and software necessary to train over 50,000 students, teachers, and school administrators to connect to the World Wide Web. While the technology is permeating the nation at a rapid rate (particularly through programs supported by nongovernmental organizations such as SAF), we have witnessed a communication divide unrelated to the physical ability to connect to the Internet. The social inability of youth to connect with people in different nations due to language and cultural differences presents a greater challenge to advances in information and communication technology than that of technological accessibility. This deficiency is particularly evident in Iran, a nation with limited access to the outside world and apprehensions about the intentions of outside nations. Therefore, we must also provide the means for young Iranians to connect with youth abroad, an event that will promote cultural understanding. It is only by providing this mutual cultural understanding that the citizens of the next generation will have the opportunity to learn from each other, rather than through the present hierarchical system which industrial and developed nations face. We entered the ICT4D Platform of WSIS to find a remedy for this difficulty.

Thus far, SAF has made substantial efforts to provide a platform for students in Iran to connect with each other and with students across the globe. Currently, few attempts have been made in Iranian schools to connect students within a school to work together in a collaborative setting, let alone providing an arena where students from different schools can share ideas or experiences. SAF, therefore, pioneered the concept of cooperative learning through electronic clubs in academic fields such as biotechnology, robotics, Persian literature, and mathematics. Participation in these e-clubs requires that students work together and share the results of their projects with students throughout Iran via a network called SchoolNet.² However, cooperation and team work between students within Iran represents the first step in making possible one of the most important factors in advancing knowledge: the exchange of ideas. To that end, SAF expanded its activity by supporting the participation of Iranian students and educators in international educational networks.

One of our main objectives in the first phase of WSIS was to take an active part in the Global School Networks Alliance meeting provided by the United Nations Cyberschoolbus and the European Schoolnet to further our connections with international educational networks. This conference gathered networks from across the globe in one assembly to meet and discuss commonalities. During this one-day event, we were able to achieve our key goal. The majority of networks present at this conference use education as a way to gain mutual understanding and cultural exchange. By connecting with these organizations, we have already embarked on a mission to connect Iranian high schools with schools internationally. Another important feature of the networks we encountered was their global vision. Either as an international nongovernmental organization or an international organization, the system of hierarchy between the developed and developing world is absent. Rather, these networks provide the opportunity to work in a universal system where students are equal partners on a mission to advance their knowledge. We had the opportunity to connect these networks with Iran and provide a rare portal into the nation's education system

1. www.saf.ir

2. www.schoolnet.ir

FORUM

through the channel of a nongovernmental organization.

WSIS provided us with an opening to bridging the communication divide that will remain after the digital divide has been resolved through technology. ■

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Information Technologies and International Development
Volume 1, Number 3–4, Spring–Summer 2004, 117–118

Globalization and Local Identity as Demonstrated at the ICT4D Platform

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The ICT for Development Platform (ICT 4D) at WSIS demonstrated global civil partnerships by showcasing some of the strong and diverse actions currently being taken at local and regional levels. This was an interesting contrast to the Summit plenary meeting, where policy makers sought a convergence around ideas of the global Information Society as its outcome. I would like to reflect on the enhancement of local identities within the globalization process, which I observed in a series of events and demonstrations at the Platform.

Globalization processes can intensify the shaping of local identities. The age of globalization is also the age of nationalist resurgence, expressed both in the challenge to established nation-states and in the widespread (re)construction of identity on the basis of nationality, always affirmed against the alien (Castells, 2003). What was notably different about the Platform showcase from the nationalist resurgence perspective, however, was that the local identities were resurgent not due to nationalism but in a partnership of local groups within a transnational civil society.

One of the occasions showing the bipolar opposition of globalization and local identity was an award ceremony for the regional Women's Electronic Network Training (WENT) workshop, run by a coalition of women's groups in Asia for the past 5 years. The winner, Chong Sheau Ching, was selected for her outstanding practice in using ICT for women's empowerment. After attending the WENT workshop held in Korea, she built a portal, "ehomemakers.net," helped 200 disadvantaged women to learn about ICT, and prepared them to earn income from home. She organized a number of conferences and seminars, which attracted several thousand homemakers and disadvantaged women in Malaysia. Her remarks on how the WENT workshop contributed to her subsequent works show how she found her local interests through meeting others at this regional-level training workshop:

"It was there that I realized that there is such a network as WENT for women community change