

# Laptops, funds not enough to shrink digital gap

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From talks about launching the \$100 laptop to setting up a technology investment fund, poorer nations made certain that addressing the digital divide between the wealthy and impoverished countries was addressed at the latest United Nations conference on the information society.

Yet while few would doubt that the rapidly growing gap in access to information technology in particular will only exacerbate the divide between rich and poor nations, there was no real consensus reached at the Tunis, Tunisia, meeting of the World Summit on the Information Society that concluded over the weekend.

Granted, there was no lack of trying to engage in dialogue about the many issues surrounding the digital divide. Participants from 174 countries agreed there was a need to set up a financing mechanism to attract both public and private capital for information technology, specifically by boosting the importance of the digital solidarity fund.

The fund, which was started two years ago, "underlines the importance of providing quality, affordable communication access to all citizens, and notes the inequalities that presently exist," the WSIS secretariat said in its statement at the conclusion of the conference.

"It also identifies areas where existing financing mechanisms could be improved, and where (information and communications technologies) could be given a higher priority by both developing countries and their development partners. ... While it is recognized that financing of ICT

infrastructure cannot solely be based on public investment, it is also recognized that private investment and market forces alone cannot guarantee the full participation of developing countries in the global market for ICT services," the secretariat added.

Enthusiasm for the fund was echoed by many African leaders, including Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo.

"We are convinced that the fund will, among other benefits, make significant contributions to addressing the exclusion of rural and local communities in the digital revolution. The fund will soon begin to finance the implementation of projects in Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean countries in accordance with its guidelines," he said.

Senegalese President Abdoulaye Wade, who spearheaded the effort to establish the fund in 2003, expressed his enthusiasm for the fund's potential at the Tunis conference, stating in his speech there that "it is clear that the private sector cannot overcome all our problems," so the fund will be able to ensure that private companies will be able to make headway in industries such as telecommunications.

The problem, however, is that of the nine nations that have signed up to become members, France is the only non-African country. As a result, few even in the international development aid community were even aware of the fund's existence, let alone its works, prior to the Tunis meeting.

"It's a failure of the fund ... if we're not really aware of it," said Wayan Vota, program manager of the Geekcorps division at the International Executive Service Corps, a non-profit organization that provides volunteers and experts to help alleviate poverty across the globe.

Another much-ballyhooed event at the conference was the official

launch of the \$100 laptop that was developed by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan said at the launch that "these robust, versatile machines will enable children to become more active in their own learning."

The laptops, which will be powered by hand cranks, are expected to be distributed to Brazil, Thailand, Egypt and Nigeria by early next year, with each nation prepared to buy at least 1 million units.

Still, IESC's Vota said that it was still not clear how and whether there will be any support mechanism to make sure the countries do not waste their \$100 million investment, pointing out that the cost did not include the training, teaching, support, and other follow-up measures necessary to keep computers up and running and relevant to people, not to mention ensuring an equitable way to distribute the computers. In addition, he said that those who are deeply impoverished might well sell off their computers for a profit in order to make ends meet in the near term.

Indeed, in a paper entitled "Information and Communication Technologies for the Poor" released last week, Maximo Torero and Joachim von Braun of the International Food Policy Research Institute argued that while technology provides an opportunity for growth, it is "not a panacea."

"For the potential benefits of ICTs to be realized in developing countries, many prerequisites need to be put in place: prompt deregulation, effective competition among service providers, free movement and adoption of technologies, targeted and competitive subsidies to reduce the access gap, and institutional arrangements to increase the use of ICTs in the provision of public goods," Torero and von Braun said.

"Access to information through ICTs is a question not only of

connectivity, but also of capability to use the new tools and relevant content provided in accessible and useful forms," they said.

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