

Is Microsoft a role model for tech aid?

May 2 2006



International organizations including the United Nations should improve the way they finance and implement technology projects by learning more from how the private sector goes about doing business in developing countries, an executive at Microsoft said Tuesday.

While technology-related projects undertaken by U.N. agencies and the World Bank may be well-meaning, trying to improve information-technology access in poorer nations, they are by and large "low on efficiency, with low returns on investments," argued Jonathan Murray, worldwide public-sector technology officer for Microsoft. In his presentation on the final day of a two-day conference on technology and education co-hosted by the Qatar Foundation and UNESCO, he argued that of the \$1 billion that the bank invests on technology projects more than 60 percent has failed to deliver its objective, namely to increase IT proliferation in developing countries.

Before the nearly 200 conference participants largely made up of teachers in secondary and higher education from across the Middle East as well as Europe and the United States, in addition to U.N. officials and members of the Qatari royal family, Murray said that public institutions are less likely to be cost-conscious, and in addition, less likely to consider the recipient countries' needs and more likely to be concerned about their own agencies' needs.

Certainly, there have been growing concerns among those in the development-assistance community that while international agencies have stepped up their aid levels to poorer countries to equip them with IT products such as mobile phones and computers, they have not trained the recipients adequately enough to make full use of personal computers or deal with technical problems when they do occur. In addition, the Microsoft executive pointed out that by coming up with projects that were worth tens of millions of dollars each, local companies were less likely to be able to win the contracts generated by those plans. Rather, the winning bids would go to multinational corporations, thus making the profits from the business go back to industrialized nations rather than benefiting the local companies and the country at large.

"Companies in developing countries aren't able to take risks ... which only the biggest companies can manage," Murray said, adding that the public sector needs to come up with smaller projects that can be managed by local ones. In the case of Microsoft, Murray said the software giant has hundreds of thousands of local partners who "understand the cultural imperatives and local culture" that could provide what that particular market wanted. In addition, local partnerships would ultimately allow the regional companies to profit from their ties with Microsoft and bring in revenue into the country as well.

As for the much-ballyhooed advent of the \$100 laptop developed by researchers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Murray said

that while the low cost may make personal computers more affordable to people worldwide, there were also other ways to make the technology that it makes available through other devices, most notably the mobile phone.

"There's a higher penetration rate of mobile phones" compared to cell phones in rural communities, "and the business model needs to be sustainable throughout" insofar as it is not only cheap to buy, but also cheap to maintain and easy to repair, for which cell phones might well be better than personal computers, Murray said.

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