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Economic Development, Internet Technology, and Volunteers

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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<http://www.icvolunteers.org/> As those of you who follow the weekly Energize homepage news items know, I was privileged to participate in the Conference on Volunteering and ICTS (Information and Communication Technologies) prior to the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) held in Geneva, Switzerland in early December. WSIS brought together over 15,000 participants from 200 nations and, remarkably, volunteers were a formal topic of discussion. Many speakers and papers specifically acknowledged the instrumental role of volunteers in developing and maintaining the Web, Open Source software, and other technical elements of cyberspace. In addition, the Summit recognized the wide range of ways that volunteers are using Internet technology to assist the world's poor. For a flavor of this sort of testimonial, see [Volunteers The First and Last Mile of Connectivity](#), a speech by Ad de Raad, Executive Coordinator of United Nations Volunteers: <http://www.unv.org/>

I am still reflecting on all my impressions from WSIS, so I am using this Hot Topic forum to share my thoughts and open further discussion. Here we go:

Reflection #1: Once shown the power of the Internet, people in need are hungry to use it.

Take any group of people, demonstrate how the Internet can bring the world to their fingertips, make online computers available to them, and watch what happens. Whether it's lines at the senior center computer lab or the public library Internet room, cyberspace attracts users. Cynics will question if online shopping, anonymous access to pornography, or computer gaming are worth all the fundraising to bring the Internet to everyone, but we have to pay attention to more positive evidence, too.

WSIS offered an amazing exhibition hall with several hundred booths. This giant room was a window on the world of organizations working toward international Internet connectivity. Representatives of perhaps a hundred countries especially from Africa and the Pacific Rim proudly demonstrated the

ways in which they are joining the Information Society. Exhibits explained public Internet centers, free computer classes, telemedicine projects, technical assistance of all kinds, online universities, and local government outreach through the Web.

In fact, the Mayor of Timbuktu (Mali), Mohammed Cissé, participated in our two-day pre-conference event on Volunteering and ICTs. He happily announced the launching of the City of Timbuktu 's official Internet site, www.tombouctou.net (it's in French). His mayor's online office is a UN Volunteers e-governance pilot project designed by volunteers working together with Mayor Cissé's office and the Timbuktu Community Telecenter.

FarmNet, or the Farmers Information Network, connects rural people (supported by intermediary organizations such as extension services) through the Internet and conventional media to facilitate the generation, collection and exchange of knowledge and information for improved livelihoods. Projects have been developed with groups as diverse as the Uganda National Farmers' Association and a coalition of farmers in China, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Vietnam, FARMnet Asia

The Network of Armenian Youth Organizations (<http://www.erit.am/>) is using the Internet to educate and connect young people across Armenia . Special attention has been given to environmental issues.

These are only three examples. UNV has made a commitment to fielding full-time, on-site volunteers with assignments to bring ICT to developing countries. Read Volunteerism: UNV and Beyond, at <http://www.unvolunteers.org>.

Reflection #2 : Despite the drive for big profits in technology, there is a counter movement that is making software and hardware more accessible to the have nots.

Computers, software, and Internet provision are all big, profitable businesses and will charge what a market will bear and if it can't bear much, the businesses will go somewhere else. However, the good news is that, from day one, the Internet has been pioneered by mission-driven individuals (volunteers) who continue to pursue a course parallel to the commercial exploitation of cyberspace through the free software or Open Source movement. It costs a huge amount of money to operate off a Windows or Mac platform; it costs nothing to use Linux (see <http://www.linux.org>). Similarly, if source codes can be standardized and shared, all sorts of innovative software can be developed and re-circulated to anyone who can use it. The Open Source movement is championed by individuals who sometimes call themselves Informaticiens sans frontières (Programmers without Borders).

In addition, advocates for universal access to electronic communication have succeeded in making the point that the haves must accommodate the have nots, bridging what is often referred to as the digital divide. The proliferation of cell phones (sometimes bypassing the creation of a wired telephone infrastructure), the continuing reduction in the size and mobility of computer equipment (as its capacity enlarges), and the accessibility of previously-unimagined information sources on the

Web are all driving cyberspace forward. Already there are many free e-mail providers and a growing number of public computer sites, even in developing countries. And all these advances offer opportunities for volunteers.

Reflection #3 : Literacy and language barriers are even more formidable than obtaining hardware.

Right now it is almost impossible to use a computer if someone cannot read and write well. In addition, many of the world's poorest countries speak languages that have no hope of being translated in the near future, if ever. So all the volunteer efforts focused on literacy take on a new urgency in light of the desire to get online. In addition, projects using pictures, sounds, and other non-verbal interaction are on the minds of other volunteers. The advent of faster and clear video transmission will be a big help in this area.

Reflection #4 : Creativity is unbounded, but there is much work to do.

Hundreds of projects are underway in which volunteers make a difference in bridging the digital divide. Apart from those already mentioned, here is a partial list:

- Efforts to wire older school buildings to accommodate Internet-connected computers
- Classes to teach computer and Internet use in all sorts of venues, or one-to-one tutoring and for various target audiences such as older people, people with low reading levels, the visually-impaired, etc.
- Pilot testing of wireless Internet connections
- Projects to refurbish and redistribute older donated computers
- Task forces studying and making recommendations on a range of issues such as assuring online privacy and international standards for copyright protection
- Establishing Web sites on every conceivable topic to help people to gain and share knowledge

These types of volunteer service are occurring both through formal programs or institutions and by individual action. Virtual volunteering is coming of age in offering help to developing countries, particularly with:

- Project planning with input from people anywhere in the world
- One-to-one consulting and technical assistance via e-mail (professional issues)
- One-to-one mentoring and support via e-mail (personal connections)
- Online participation in self-help groups

In addition, the Web has allowed cause-driven activists to engage in public education, lobbying, mobilizing for action, and other political activities in ways that were inconceivable (and unaffordable) even a decade ago. (See my essay for the WSIS event, Online Power for Volunteer Action, <http://www.icvolunteers.org/index.php?what=docs&id=74>, for more details on this phenomenon.)

Some incredible examples of online service on behalf of people in need can be seen in NetAid (<http://www.netaid.org>), UNITeS (<http://www.globalunites.org/>), NetCorps-Cyberjeunes and OneWorld Network (<http://www.oneworld.net>).

Reflection #5 : This is unstoppable.

In the long run, the most powerful capability of the Internet is to connect individuals, joined only by a common cause and not defeated by physical separation. Yes, language and literacy are serious obstacles. But e-mail lets people reach out to one another, across all sorts of political and jurisdictional boundaries. As long as those with the knowledge and access are eager to help those without, progress will be made. This is a new frontier in every way, and volunteers are right in the center of it all.

Perhaps I also should verbalize a 6th Reflection: It is no longer an option for those of us in the First World to be disinterested in Internet technology.

It amazes me that we still have colleagues who persist in disdaining the Internet. Some of these hold-outs even use the digital divide as an excuse, arguing that the Internet only serves the rich or the young, and so old-fashioned communication methods best meet the needs of the people they serve. This is short-sighted and ignores the demonstrated interest in technology by volunteers from all walks of life. If WSIS proves anything, it's that with or without volunteer program managers volunteers will continue to be involved in building and using the Internet, assuring that the Information Society includes everyone.

What's Next?

The WSIS Governmental Plenary issued both a Declaration of Guiding Principles and a Plan of Action (<http://www.icvolunteers.org/>). The latter includes the following statement (C4.11.O.):

Volunteering, if conducted in harmony with national policies and local cultures, can be a valuable asset for raising human capacity to make productive use of ICT tools and build a more inclusive Information Society. Activate volunteer programmes to provide capacity building on ICT for development, particularly in developing countries.

Anyone may comment or make suggestions through May 2004 and there will be a follow-up Summit in Tunisia in 2005. Similarly, you can read the full Volunteer Action Plan as presented to the Governmental Plenary of WSIS on 12 December 2003 at: <http://www.icvolunteers.org/> and add your own thoughts and consider joining the discussion on site in Tunisia.

I'm eager to hear *your* reflections on the volunteer community and technology:

- How are volunteers in your setting making the Internet available to people in need or previously without access to this resource?
- Have you done any virtual volunteering to provide technical assistance to someone in a developing country? How might we link volunteer program managers interested in this sort of online service to those who would welcome it?
- What are other examples of Internet use by unexpected populations?

Related Topics: [Online service \(virtual volunteering\)](#) | [Rural Settings](#) | [Diversity and Inclusion](#) | [Social Media and Internet Technology](#) | [History](#) | [Image of Volunteering](#)

Submitted on 6Jan2004 by Mark Takefman, Community Service Advisor, New World Foundation, New York

Susan, I use the Internet as my main tool for much of my service work. As a member of the International Association for National Youth Service (IANYS) I contact and discuss issues and programs with many of the members and funders associated with this cause to promote national community service.

I also use various list-servs to keep in touch with other local agencies, including the Energize site.

Unfortunately, there is no real political will to put funding into the expansion of this kind of technology so that many more could use it and be connected.

Submitted on 4Jan2004 by Prof. Arnaldo Coro Antich, Chair: New Information and Communications Technologies Instituto Internacional de Periodismo "Jose Marti ", Consultant: Cuban National Commission for Cooperation with UNESCO, La Habana, Cuba

My first reading of your thoughtful comments have reminded me once again about the importance of developing better communications links between peoples of different cultures. I will certainly read your comments in detail later today and will then post some reflections about them. In the meantime, please DO KEEP UP THE GOOD WORK YOU ARE DOING !!!

Have a happy and fruitful year 2004, hopefully with peace and better access to the ICT's for the peoples of less wealthy countries, and those less wealthy living in highly developed societies with their own "built in" DIGITAL DIVIDE...

Submitted on 4Jan2004 by Jayne Cravens, Online Volunteering Specialist, UN Volunteers, Bonn, Germany

I, too, was at the WSIS, and am floored by how well Susan has absolutely *nailed*, in such straight-forward and in such a no-nonsense/jargon-laden way, both the causes of the Digital Divide as well as the vital role volunteers are playing to address such. I hope to see many replies to the questions she has posted at the end of her most-interesting reflections about the WSIS.

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