Closing the knowledge gap in support of the MDGs

by Jan Teun Visscher, IRC

The NRC, a respected Dutch newspaper gave the following information on August 2, 2003. Out of 10 million children below five that die each year on water borne and other related diseases, the death of 6 million could have been prevented if available and known prevention and treatment methods would have reached them. This includes some 1.5 million that could have been saved by Oral Rehydration Therapy and 1.2 million if they would have received breastfeeding.

According to the Millennium Development Goals the number of child deaths should be reduced by 66% in 2015. Yet the NRC indicates that a group of scientists that met in Ballagio are very skeptical about this. They say we are making improvements, but particularly among the poor the reduction is flattening out.

Here information could make a clear difference. It is not likely that these children would have died if their parents would have been better informed, and would have known about simple prevention measures, such as the importance of hand washing.

Let us take another example where information can make a difference. Would a community accept a poor deal from a local contractor if they would know the real cost of a water supply system? In Bolivia local water supply systems sometimes cost 2 to 3 times as much as necessary. Would this remain the situation if information was shared properly? Would families in Kerela pay local contractors to improve their family wells if they would know that the improvement has little effect to reduce contamination?

To meet the MDGs we clearly have to step up our efforts. Information and knowledge sharing is a key element to take into account as it may make all the difference. And it is not just gender neutral information we need. Gender specific data are very important. Most gender differences are socially constructed and hence unfair differences can be adjusted to ensure a more equal sharing of burdens and benefits (Gender Water Alliance). Knowing that baby girls have a 40% higher chance to die in India than baby boys or that more girls drop out of schools because of lack of toilet facilities makes it possible to address these issues with more urgency.

We have an important problem. A lot of information exists, but it is NOT

- Available at right time
- Of good quality
- Gender specific
- Tailored to local problems and needs
- Shared
- Used

On the other hand we see that opportunities to share information are increasing with the growth of the Internet. Unfortunately opportunities are not the same for everyone. The gap in access to electronic information is growing between the North and the South and even more so within the South.

Just a few data concerning Internet connectivity according to CIA's World Factbook. http://cyberatlas.internet.com/big_picture/geographics/article/0,,5911_151151,00.html

The percentage of the population of internet users in the world in 2002 was around 9%. In the Netherlands and Denmark however it was around 61%, in the USA some 59%, in Canada 50% and in Belgium 36%. In Colombia it was about 2.8%, in Bolivia 0.9% in India 0.7%, in Nepal 0.23%, in Mozambique and Bangladesh 0.1% and in Ethiopia 0.03%.

Mr Kamel from Nepal telcom indicates that there are 8 phone lines per 1000 persons in Nepal. Email was introduced in 1993 and Internet in 1994. They have 50 cyber cafes in Kathmandu and 20 in Pokhara. Government official Mr. Vandya indicates that IT development is important and Nepal has to continue to develop it, but in parallel with other media such as wall news papers, taking into account that basic literacy is 55% and English literacy 2%. In Burkina the literacy is only 20% and they have 60 spoken local languages in a 2.6 million population. A local priest is making a very interesting effort by publishing a quarterly farmers magazine in some of the local languages. He indicates that Internet is useful to find information, but a considerable part of the information in the magazine comes from local farmers.

In terms of difficulties it is clear that the number of users is very low in the South and even more so in rural areas. Another difficulty is that Internet performance gives problems. Down loading in the South for example is slow and cost of access is high. It is often a struggle to access a telephone line let alone high bandwidth facilities. In the preparation for the knowledge management workshop it was already very clear that files over 1 MB gave a lot of problems. Only after simplifying and zipping them they became more manageable.

Another interesting element concerns the time of use. The Gartner group estimates that Email use in USA is on average 1 hour per employee and at least 33% concerns useless information. Furthermore they indicate that a lot of email information is treated as urgent whereas this is not at all necessary.

Still it is clear that Internet and email are great developments that can make a huge difference in information access and sharing information products. By introducing e-publishing of several of its publications IRC has increased its outreach for example by 150%. So this is great, but we can do better, because still too much information is developed by individual organizations in parallel, that could have been produced jointly. So therefore IRC has stepped up its efforts to join forces with others to jointly develop information products.

Still an important question remaining in information production concerns what type of information do we share? Usually this is the type of information we know and have access to. Here it is needed to bring in much more of a users perspective and above all a dialogue. It is good to realize that Joharis Window applies very well in this context. When sharing information to help others improve their situation, we should remind ourselves that we deal with four types of information: the one both we and the community know, the one we know and they don't, the one they know and we don't and the one neither of us knows but can discover together. Hence it is crucial to initiate a knowledge dialogue to truly be able to support communities in their endeavor to improve their future.

So the production of information products in itself is not enough, we need a dialogue and we need intermediaries that can entertain this dialogue. Here is where IRC is strongly supports the development of resource centres at regional and national level and in many cases these will even be needed at district level to bridge the knowledge gap, connecting the communities to the information available in the Internet and in institutions in their country and connecting the Internet community with the real world in the communities and cities in the South.

So we can conclude that we need

- Good quality information preferably produced jointly
- Opportunities and resources to make country specific information
- Locations and means where this information can be accessed
- People who help others to understand and encourage them to use information
- And above all great listening skills and collaboration

What can we gain?

- More efficient and effective water, sanitation and hygiene programmes
- More people served with safe and sustainable facilities
- Good for health, poverty reduction and environment

Hence by improving information access, sharing and use we can contribute to reaching the MDGs.

References

NRC, August 2, 2003, Rotterdam
DFID-DGIS ICT Newsletter, November 2000