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ICTs and Participation:

Learning from the Sustainable Development Networking Programme

United Nations Development Programme

DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE

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UNITED NATIONS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME

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BACKGROUND

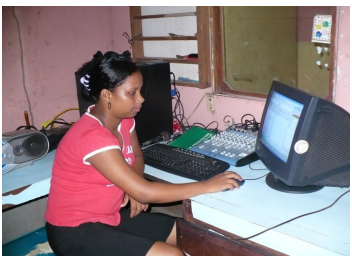
Sustainable development has evolved both substantially and conceptually since the ground-breaking 1992 UN Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro.[1] During the early 1990s, concerns over the impact of climate change gave rise to international agreements such as the Kyoto Protocol, geared towards addressing climate and environmental challenges. Today, as the effects of climate change are more notorious than ever, sustainable development encompasses the three distinct but mutually reinforcing areas of social, economic and environmental sustainability. The social and economic components of sustainable development gained new impetus with the Millennium Developments Goals – and now new ideas and dynamics are emerging as we look to new international development goals past 2015.

Logo of the Sustainable Development Networking programme (animated)

There is still much we can learn from the Earth Summit and the programmes that flowed from it. For instance, UNDP's Sustainable Development Networking Programme (SDNP) launched more than a decade of pioneering work by spearheading the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) to tackle the challenges of sustainable development. Building on Agenda 21,[2] SDNP courageously charted - and often defined – innovative development programming into the new millennium with the core idea that enhanced networking and communication between all stakeholders is critical to sustainable development. New ICTs that were only just emerging at that time – especially the internet – offered the potential of facilitating and reinforcing networking, information and communication exchange among stakeholders, well beyond what had been achieved up to that point. Much was learned about how, and in what circumstances, ICTs could interact with and enhance positive dynamics, create new opportunities for communicating, and promote innovative collaboration among stakeholders. This knowledge continues to resonate with the challenges we face today, more than twenty years after the Earth Summit.

These days, web 2.0 and mobile technologies are being heralded for their revolutionary potential, not unlike the 1990s when the internet's potential was only starting to be understood. The ubiquity of mobiles and their constantly expanding capabilities have a far greater reach than any other new ICT in the developing world. Could the potential of web 2.0, combined with mobile technologies, be realized and help the most disadvantaged people and communities? Just as SDNP spotted the potential of new ICTs and invested in them, should we also now be looking to web 2.0, social networks and

mobile technologies to contribute to achieving sustainable development?



SDNP Nicaragua

The SDNP is a good place to find sound rationale for such an undertaking, understand the contribution of ICTs and assess what lessons we can draw from the experience of the programme.

Development organisations like UNDP must capture, compile, synthesize and share lessons learned from earlier investments, to ensure they are put in context and are relevant to contemporary dynamics. In this light, this paper analyses the experience of and lessons learned with SDNP, and considers their relevance today as we look to furthering sustainable development.[3]

MAIN FEATURES OF SDNP

Goals and means

SDNP was launched by UNDP in May 1992 and was innovative both in how it was organised and in what it set out to achieve. Its scope was ambitious: overseeing the creation of sustainable development networking centres in over 45 developing countries, several of which independently continue in various guises to this day. The programme, through the centres,[4] aimed to:

- Enable widespread access to key information relating to sustainable development;
- Improve the quality of decision-making for sustainable development by enhancing interaction between stakeholders and stimulating multi-stakeholder participation in key areas of relevance.

At the heart of SDNP was the notion - innovative back then - that new ICTs could play a catalytic role in helping achieve ambitious sustainable development goals. The programme did not seek to promote access to ICTs per se. Rather, it sought to get the most accessible and practical ICT tools - capable of delivering information sharing and participation in sustainable development activities - into people's hands.

It is easy now to lose sight of how risky and pioneering this idea was at the time. In 1992 many developing countries had yet to even register two-letter national internet domain names and had never even seen or used email communications. With limited-to-no digital access, there were few users at any level. Undaunted, the SDNP team pursued ICTs for sustainable development in dozens of countries for over a decade. Between 1992 and 2002, UNDP invested about US$9 million in SDNP,[5] leveraging enough cash and in-kind contributions to bring the total to almost US$15 million.[6] Self-generated income, which began towards the end of the programme, sustained many centres into an independent future.

SDNP Logos Cameroon, Malawi and Mozambique

Organisation of SDNP Centres

SDNP Centres had significant autonomy to organise nationally, subject to a few key principles, some of which were pre-requisites for providing financial support and launching in a given country:

- A firmly committed Interim multi-stakeholder SDNP Steering Committee of key players in sustainable development, including government, civil society, the private sector, and donors among others;
- A clearly defined objective or thematic focus relevant to sustainable development and to SDNP's commitment to using ICTs, identified and agreed between all stakeholders;
- Good actual prospects as indicated by an independent feasibility study, put to tender, including securing a host organisation and local partners offering matching contributions. If the indications proved positive - 30 of the over 90 countries who requested assistance did not proceed beyond the feasibility study, for instance - principles were drafted to guide the creation and management of an SDNP Centre;
- The Centre's multi-stakeholder Steering Committee, providing general direction and support, needed to include a broad range of stakeholders, espe-

cially civil society and government, and adopt a participatory and transparent approach;

- Strategic management had to be exercised by a number of players, including a national programme coordinator, local governments, local partners and donors, and the Steering Committee, thus requiring careful definition and delicate design;
- Business and sustainability plans had to be developed during the initial stages;
- To ensure impartiality, trust and openness, SDNP Centres were encouraged to locate outside of government, or if this was not possible, governments could host but not own the premises nor directly manage operations.

In practice, the application of these principles often meant that national SDNP Centres diverged from traditional UNDP programme operations in terms of the direct involvement of non-state actors, the methods of cooperation, and the organisation and levels of transparency. While this brought definite benefits, it also often led to new challenges and difficulties.


SDNP Honduras

At the same time the absence of strict guidelines regarding the operation of SDNP Centres yielded a diversity of types, some located within civil society organisations (CSOs), others in government offices, while others were set up as stand alone institutions, each pursuing a variety of activities. The balance of internal influence varied greatly among different stakeholders, as did their external influence on policy and other areas. But national ownership, by both governments and civil society organisations was a key driver in successfully establishing the SDNPs.

Features and characteristics were determined mainly by national context and circumstances, as centres tailored themselves to the local environment and its potential for sustainable development while also carving out an area of relative autonomy from which they could influence that environment.

SDNP activities

SDNP Guyana

The objectives of SDNP were to ensure the widest possible creation and circulation of information relevant to sustainable development and to enhance stakeholder interaction in order to generate new avenues of influence in decision-making processes, especially for civil society. Bearing in mind that ICTs were to be the main but not the only instruments, these can be broken down into progressive activities or goals:

1. Reinforce national, regional and international internet connectivity – sometimes by stimulating a conducive political environment for internet acceptance;

2. Ensure accessible internet connectivity to sustainable development stakeholders, both geographically (particularly in rural and remote areas) and financially. Initially most SDNP centres were established using Free/Open Source Software store-and-forward email servers and systems as local costs to access the internet were prohibitive at the time;

3. Ensure stakeholders' ability to identify, locate and use available information;

4. Ensure availability of appropriate content and information online locally and nationally in accessible forms applicable to sustainable development issues;

5. Generate such content where unavailable, and facilitate others in documenting and disseminating local information and experiences, especially among civil society actors;

6. Create opportunities and spaces for stakeholders to interact as peers, and facilitate decision-making processes to be more inclusive of marginalized groups especially from civil society.

Almost all SDNP Centres progressed through these phases, each with their own set

of priorities. The tools and activities deployed to navigate this course were ICT-based: providing internet access and helping people to use it; building web sites and training others to do so; punching in and scanning information; building databases and portals; and creating electronic fora and building local communities around sustainable development themes. But SDNP activities also included lobbying, researching and producing publications, building and joining partnerships, as well as running public meetings, events and awareness-raising campaigns.

Thus SDNP gave birth to diverse national institutional arrangements, bringing together a range of actors who pursued many different kinds of activities aimed at achieving sustainable development, using ICTs as the primary tool.

Globally as the ICT and internet sectors have evolved rapidly over the years, a certain progression of overlapping stages is discernible.

From 1992 to 1997, when internet connectivity was non-existent or very limited in developing countries, SDNP Centres focused heavily on securing free or affordable internet use for sustainable development actors, ensuring they could access, distribute (and network with) information relating to sustainable development. The emphasis was always on appropriate, affordable and usable technologies, rather than on the most advanced.

From 1997 on, when the internet finally started to diffuse to most developing countries, experimentation took off. The emphasis moved from simple connectivity (increasingly the concern of the private sector) to content creation and delivery, and capacity building in the use of ICTs for sustainable development.

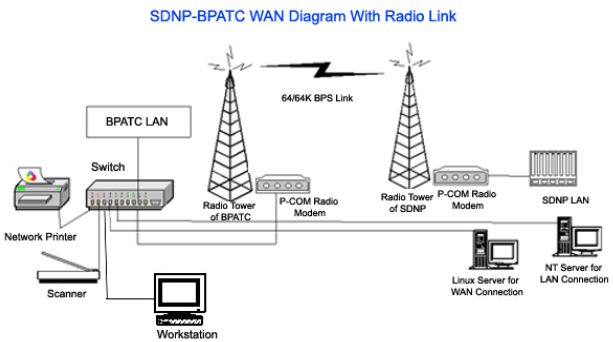
The late 1990s onwards saw a period of adaptation, as some SDNP Centres strove to achieve a sustainable institutional and economic context, as well as consolidation, as attempts were made to deepen the achievements through partnerships and collaborations.

THE SUCCESS OF SDNP

The core question is: Did ICTs deliver on their promise for sustainable development? The final evaluation, based on *in situ* assessments in 15 countries and documentary analysis of the rest, drew conclusions on SDNP's success with the six goals outlined above. Each is considered below.

From improving access to building communities of practice

Did SDNP make ICTs and the internet more widely available to sustainable development stakeholders? And did it influence the political and regulatory environment making it more conducive to the emergence of the internet and spreading the use of ICTs?

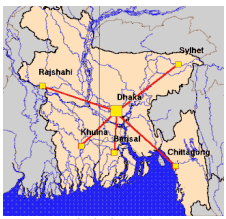


In many countries, SDNP Centres neither sought, nor had any influence on, the wider environment for the internet. But in a few where they did, success was impressive (see Box 1). There is little doubt that the timely arrival of the SDNP Centres at the cusp of the internet's global explosion, and the manner in which they were established and run, resulted in a high level of influence in a short period of time in some cases.

In Honduras, Guyana, Mauritania and Pakistan, SDNP Centres exerted a major influence on the political and regulatory environment, decisively contributing to the acceptance of the internet and multiple ISP environments, securing or administering national internet domain names, and extending access to the internet beyond where it would otherwise have gone. A lesser but still discernible influence was achieved in Benin, Haiti, Nicaragua and Bolivia. And in Bangladesh, the centre managed to even influence ICANN (the international internet domain name register), a key international regulatory body for the internet, potentially benefiting all least developed countries (see Box 1).

In Pakistan and Bangladesh, success at this level led directly to the growth of the SDNP's influence in other areas, helping them become major internet service providers, and in the case of Pakistan, the largest one. This in turn secured them access to a wide constituency of sustainable development stakeholders and contributed to building a

solid economic base. Indeed, SDNP Centres initially became significant ISPs in many countries, negotiating access to, or even constructing, infrastructure to reach target groups in rural or marginalized areas. Almost all SDNPs provided internet access at some level and, in line with the Programme's goals, also targeted sustainable development stakeholders, especially CSOs, seeking them out and offering low cost or free services and free training. An important development was the creation of group access centres, such as Cyber Cafés and Community Access Centres, which helped to address the needs of marginalized groups.



SDNP Bangladesh: Nodes

Overall, in many countries SDNPs can claim to have brought connectivity *earlier* to many users than would otherwise have been the case. Yet SDNP also knew that simply providing internet access on its own could achieve little. Internet use *per se* can improve the efficiency and reach of sustainable development actors, and can even make a qualitative difference among excluded communities. But wider impact can only be achieved by influencing the content being exchanged, between whom and towards

Box 1: Innovations in international connectivity

Until well into the late 1990s, poorer countries - from Guyana to Malawi to Pakistan - used store-and-forward or telephone dial-up for email and data. Access outside cities was non-existent and only the better off could afford to connect in urban areas. Making access available at affordable rates was thus critical.

Several SDNP Centres operated dial-up internet services nationally, dedicated to civil society organisations (CSOs) in both urban and rural areas. The problem was in establishing external links internationally. The SDNP central team in UNDP New York stepped in and offered a fully-automated telephone-based file-sharing service that enabled centres to link to the internet internationally, allowing uploading and downloading 24 hours a day – a temporary solution that in the case of the Pakistan SDNP (SDNPK) continued for many years.

With this head start, the Pakistan centre went on to become the county's largest ISP at one point, with four national nodes and over 20,000 subscribers, enabling the subsidisation of the centre's other activities with the surplus capital generated. The original target was only 500 users. The centre went to considerable lengths to provide services in remote and rural areas, and offered low cost access to CSOs and other sustainable development stakeholders.

Bangladesh SDNP successfully lobbied as a member of ICANN (the international internet domain name register) to secure funding for poorer countries to participate in its activities, and was instrumental in securing the .bd domain for Bangladesh (previously claimed by a pharmaceutical company). The SDNP in Guyana also secured the administration of several key .gy domain names.

SDNP was additionally active in establishing national internet exchanges, saving poor countries the cost of routing all internet traffic – even including national traffic – through the United States.

what ends.

In the early days of the internet, before the web emerged - or while it was still too demanding of bandwidth - key networking services beyond email included electronic bulletin board systems (BBSs). Accessed by dial-up connections to servers in SDNP Centres, BBSs allowed users to form live chat groups, newsgroups and mailing lists, and to access archives and stored files. These were widely used in the early SDNP Centres to enable group discussions, interaction and ongoing exchange and collaboration (and information storage) in thematic areas of concern to different groups of SDNP users. In Pakistan, for instance, over ten thousand users accessed the BBS, organised around numerous themes, from dial-up phone lines around the country.

Box 2: Cyber café, training/capacity-building and ICT service activities

The SDNP in Mauritania created a CSO cyber café called CyberForum. In a country that had not long before been opposed to any internet access, and which lacked a tradition of consultation, this was a major achievement. Dozens of CSOs set up accounts at low cost, and CyberForum was managed by users themselves.

In the north of Benin, SDNP set up a community telecentre at Malanville. The goal was to create a critical mass of users in rural communities and urban neighbourhoods. It provided community access to the internet, as well as online learning, a youth and community centre, business and agriculture resources, and a training facility.

In Jamaica, six cyber centres or community focal points were established across the country which worked with local partner organisations and community interests. In addition to internet access, training and web services, the centres helped communities build their own knowledge bases. Each typically received three computers with peripherals, training and internet connections.

In Pakistan, three cyber community centres were opened in remote towns and villages, with the first opening in March 2001. (Note that SDNP also separately supported the development of District websites in each.) Built in collaboration with local organisations, they offered access to computers and the internet at reasonable prices, and some were catalysts for the arrival of cyber cafés in previously unserved areas. Services targeted groups that were often excluded, such as women, and illiterate people - and communications were written down and translated in both directions. Sustainability was central, and was based on linking with grass-roots activities and community-based organisations.

The use of electronic bulletin boards was further facilitated by most SDNP Centres through the provision of free training and support on computer and basic internet use for email, news groups and BBSs. This differentiated them from the increasingly numerous commercial cyber cafés (see Box 2). As users became more sophisticated, advanced training - in computer maintenance, web design and content development - was also targeted to sustainable development actors, especially to CSOs, as well as

many government, institutional and education sector staff. SDNP Centres frequently recognised the value of these tools long before government and other institutions, which were often suspicious of change in general and information-sharing tools in particular.

As technology advanced, the chief legacy of SDNP efforts was in strengthening and/or building communities of practice in different aspects of sustainable development. There are numerous examples of sustained interaction between civil society and other stakeholders locally, nationally and even internationally, instigated for the first time on these platforms. This kind of networking often led to more formalised opportunities for ongoing and sustained communication.

Content production and the web

Early on, SDNP Centres were often at the forefront of technological advances, though more by necessity than by design. Where able, centres equipped themselves with the latest technologies and offered advanced training in their use, while at the same time reaching out to the sustainable development community using the most accessible and affordable means available.

SDNP Cameroon

As the internet became more commercial, major companies began investing and internet access generally became more widely available and affordable. As this happened, SDNP Centres began shifting their emphasis away from technology and basic access to focus more firmly on content. Where technology promotion and innovation continued, it was usually to support the use of free and open source software (FOSS). The development benefits of FOSS were recognised from SDNP's inception; all servers and databases at the centres utilized FOSS, and many centres lobbied and pursued practical actions encouraging its use. Beyond this, SDNP Centres were content to exploit the growing opportunities afforded by wider and more affordable internet access.

Chief among these was the World Wide Web, which by the latter part of the 1990s was greatly enhancing the ease and sophistication of information generation, storage and sharing. With the rapid extension of internet and web access in most developing countries and building on the BBS-based networks, SDNPs turned almost entirely towards capacity building, content production and facilitation, and improving the quality of interaction and decision making.

The early use of web pages by government, CSOs and commercial entities tended to be directed towards simply creating a presence in cyberspace with static websites. The centres assisted many groups to do this, but later the demand was for more sophisticated support. In fact, there were tangible benefits that accrued to sustainable development organisations from this enhanced support involving new or better service delivery and networking, as well as cost savings and generating revenue. Thus designing, developing, hosting and maintaining web pages or training users to do so for themselves, as well as offering more sophisticated information sharing and networking capabilities, became a staple of most SDNPs.

Box 3: Generating and hosting content

The specific goals and objectives of a few centres involved a limited role in relation to the provision of online information. For example, the SDNP in Romania focused almost exclusively on supporting the creation of a multi-stakeholder National Sustainable Development Strategy. Others SDNPs specifically linked to the information and networking needs of Agenda 21, the main agenda agreed at the Rio Summit.

At the other end were a number of web portals that corralled together a broad range of information on sustainable development in forms suited to different stakeholders, sometimes with significant interactive possibilities.

The portals in Pakistan and Bangladesh were comprehensive by any standards. Bulgaria, Colombia, Guyana, Honduras, Jamaica, and Philippines were among the many SDNP Centres (and their successors) that hosted websites, and offered significant amounts of updated information and systematic links to national and other resources. And other SDNP such as India established interactivity through its on-line query system covering twenty six different themes and directly linking with grass-roots activities and community-based organisations.

Motivating the support for website and content development was SDNP's goal of getting more information into the public domain in an accessible and affordable manner. Another important way to do this was to get existing databases from government and other public agencies up on-line, and to collate and process other available but dispersed information resources. The goal here was to enhance transparency and improve decision-making – both recognised as political components of sustainable development. This demanded proactive effort by SDNPs, and more than offering technical support, it often involved lobbying, negotiation, and other kinds of assistance and resources. Sometimes the challenge was to overcome institutional or cultural resistance to sharing information, such as where information is linked to power and the procedural default is to withhold information unless otherwise instructed by superiors. The institutional positioning of SDNP in their ability to exert relevant influence was often critical for achieving success in opening information, and in many cases SDNP's efforts resulted in the release of significant volumes of information for general use by

stakeholders and the public more widely.

Many SDNPs concentrated on specific themes in sustainable development, and a few succeeded in generating, aggregating and presenting information for Sustainable Development portals. Work on developing portals often meant collaborating with information providers who delivered data, while SDNPs offered hosting facilities, training and technical expertise. Other partnerships were also pursued, in the area of service provision.

There is no doubt that the *volume* of information generated, 'liberated' and circulated by SDNP was huge. But what was the return in terms of contributing to sustainable development?

Box 4: Parnership approach

An approach frequently taken by SDNP was to engage in and facilitate the development of partnerships between different sustainable development stakeholders.

Based on content and utilizing ICTs, various actors were brought together by the SDNPs around mutually beneficial goals, and these collaborations were sealed in the form of contracts or Memoranda of Association. Application areas included local government information systems and service provision, geographic information services for sustainable development, e-commerce, telehealth and telemedicine, and the promotion of open source software.

The range of SDNP capabilities and services were brought to bear on existing sustainable development settings. From e-commerce tools to sell organic cheese in Honduras, to Cameroon's SchoolsNet Programme, to Pakistan's partnership for blood donors, such collaborations flourished and yielded enduring benefits for all involved.

For a list of some of the SDNP partners, please see:
http://www.undpegov.org/sdnp/partners/

Evidence from the final evaluation indicates that information provided through the SDNPs was widely accessed and used to good effect. Surveys and feedback to centres from CSOs and other institutions suggests greatly improved dissemination and networking interaction in a significant number of cases, while others lapsed into disuse.

Two kinds of direct information dissemination by SDNP Centres performed particularly well:

- **Targeted websites:** SDNP websites dedicated to very specific information with identifiable target users were able to feed into ongoing development processes, providing information on unexpected environmental crises, major national or regional planning efforts, alleviating social problems, or enhancing governance. In these cases, beneficiary groups and civil society

organisations from all social strata were able to benefit.

- **National portals:** Comprehensive national portals that established high profiles and high levels of usage attained status and renown in the information landscape and suggested concrete return for users.

Enhancing peer interaction and more inclusive decision-making

The most ambitious SDNP goal was to widen the circle of decision-making around sustainable development issues and bring it closer to the local level. Facilitating the dissemination and exchange of information does not automatically bring excluded parties closer to the table, though it can be a step towards it. The key issues here are first, how to encourage and/or induce governments to be more inclusive in decision-making, and second, how to bring excluded stakeholders closer to the seat of power.

The process starts first with enhancing interaction and trust and eventually moves to the creation of formal arenas for shared decision-making. In the end, such processes must be institutionalized to be really effective and make a real dent on decision-making processes.

SDNP Pakistan

SDNP Steering Committees were designed to encompass a spectrum of major stakeholders, though in several cases with a bias towards government. In practice, governments, executing agencies and donors had the most influence, and the level of influence strongly correlated with each member's general standing and ability to contribute, i.e. their personal capacity. Where CSOs and other non-contracting parties had significant and constructive inputs, the practice of working together in SDNP did bring about tangible improvements in stakeholder relations.

Collaborations and partnerships around specific issues and joint concerns were the most successful in instigating genuine sharing of responsibility and decision-making within carefully demarcated domains. This especially applied to partnerships between CSOs and governments and/or governmental agencies, but in some cases also included community-based organisations and large private sector concerns. With SDNP leading as an intermediary and partner, mutual interdependence and common goals created conditions in which trust developed, interaction and consultation deepened, and shared decision-making processes became the accepted norm. However, while partners might engage in other mutual activities, such sharing did not generally develop outside the specific area of concern.

In just a few cases, SDNP became involved in creating new nationally-relevant venues for stakeholder interaction, consultation and shared decision-making. In particular, one project Romania focused on developing a national strategy for sustainable development, and subsequently helped deepen the process through a local Agenda 21 plan.

KEY LESSONS FROM SDNP

These results suggest that the SDNP achieved notable - and occasionally rather spectacular - success in some areas, and a degree of success in all of the main goals. Several key questions drive the lessons learned from SDNP's successes and challenges, as follows:

- Is timely and affordable access to appropriate information for stakeholders a key to supporting sustainable development activities?
- Can networking and communication between stakeholders, as well as more open and participatory decision-making, make a significant contribution to sustainable development?
- What role can ICTs effectively play in addressing these issues?

Joint SDNP-Internet Initiative for Africa Workshop, Mozambique, 1997

These questions are as relevant today as they were twenty years ago. Certainly the concept of what constitutes sustainable development has evolved, as has the governance context, modes of access and forms of decision-making. Moreover, the entire ICT sector has undergone yet another major change with the advent of web 2.0 technologies and the ubiquitous presence of mobile technologies.

SDNP Centres successfully brought together stakeholders in a range of contexts, and improved the information flow between them. It influenced the parameters of decision-making on a small scale through partnerships, collaborations and joint projects that had clear goals and were focused on specific sustainable development issues. There are cases where CSOs had opportunities to influence development outcomes that otherwise would have been unavailable, and there is some evidence that this led to broader mutual trust and deeper interaction. For instance, SDNP Centres worked with public partners to provide local government in-

formation, distance education, a blood donation system, telehealth, and GIS systems, and through these partnerships many took on advisory roles and were appointed to official bodies.

SDNP was most successful when it was integrated with programmes and efforts with similar goals. For instance, in one case SDNP integrated its efforts with the local government's own Agenda 21 efforts, which led to innovation in participatory consultation processes, and ultimately in decision-making.

The evidence also suggests that the enhanced participation of CSOs and community-based organisations, as well as agencies and institutions, did produce a better result. Although based on a limited set of examples, in these cases, the resultant plans, policies and strategies were more robust, decisions were more likely to be acted upon, and the ultimate impact was deeper and more sustained.

SDNP Logos Honduras, Guatemala, Guyana and Nicaragua

The experience of the SDNP in the context of the historical dynamics of the past twenty years can also teach us the following:

1. **Information is valuable when it can be harnessed in the right context.** The uptake of information by local and national stakeholders is most effective when local networks and coalitions are both involved and committed, and local conditions allow for widespread information sharing and dissemination.

The SDNP succeeded where, in addition to simply collating and disseminating information, it engaged in activities that attempted to interpolate information within specific social and political dynamics. For instance, SDNP did this by exploring specific CSO information needs for advocacy, by negotiating and enabling access to governance information identified as useful, responding to crisis situations, and through other activities that allowed centres to relate to ongoing social and sustainable development dynamics via information processing and dissemination. *These actions made the difference* - and not the volume of information *per se* - demanded an understanding of and relationship to the particular political economy context in programme countries. SDNP's success with information provision was underpinned, though not assured, by a number of factors:

- The relative autonomy of centres enabled them to be strategic in detecting the political-economic dynamics from both government and civil society perspectives;
- Institutional arrangements allowing centres to remain relatively impartial gave them credibility with civil society and access to government;
- Centre management was given considerable flexibility in terms of activities and approach which allowed them to respond to specific in-country needs;
- In many countries, the timing of SDNP's launch was ideal since the technology and services they offered stakeholders were either unavailable elsewhere or expensive and difficult to obtain.

Other factors also made a difference, such as critical support from 'champions' in government who shared SDNP sustainable development goals or supported the use of new ICTs in their institutions. In addition, the understanding and support of UNDP was vital, particularly when Country Offices were able to spend some of their 'political capital' to promote SDNP, or at the very least, not undermine it.

However, in a few cases SDNPs even succeeded with little direct support from UNDP Country Offices.

2. ICTs are key catalysts for facilitating information networking and participatory decision-making. ICTs and networking technologies such as the Internet *were critical tools for facilitating information networking and, to the extent that it took place, more participatory decision-making*. SDNP identified the potential of ICTs and capitalised on this to good effect in relation to particular objectives. *Alone, of course, ICTs were not sufficient, but proved to be critical enabling tools when used in the context of broader development goals and programme/policy planning.*


SDNP Bangladesh

Moreover, the decision of SDNP to focus on providing ICT tools that were most *affordable and accessible to underserved communities*, distinct from supporting leading edge technologies often heavily promoted commercially, was important for broadening the constituency of sustainable development stakeholders. Although some centres found themselves at the forefront of internet provision, especially in least developed countries, this was by necessity rather than design, and the main focus remained on how to connect as many underserved stakeholders as possible in affordable ways.

The decade of the SDNP was also the decade when ICTs and applications started to "come of age" as well. While SDNP began with connectivity and capacity building, and

moved to information provision and networking, many centres went further to create a diverse portfolio of ICT applications. They reached outside the role of information in the dynamics of national development, and into the development of applications useful for more advanced interaction and general development purposes.

SDNP Malawi

In other words, the SDNP recognised from the outset that ICTs were the ideal tool to support the goal of information dissemination and networking, as long as people had access. But as the decade progressed, SDNP realized that ICTs had significant additional potential for development more generally. Many SDNPs developed and implemented new applications, ranging from e-services to tele-education and school computer programmes to e-health access. Some of the strongest evidence for SDNP's benefits comes from these innovations, many of which also exhibit strong potential for sustainability in their own right.

3. Broadening participation in decision-making is an asset to sustainable development. Decision-making on sustainable development issues is enhanced by the participation of all stakeholders and especially of civil society and marginalized groups, and *building wider avenues into decision-making was a significant asset for sustainable development.*

Yet while SDNP made modest progress developing collaborations and partnerships in specific domains based on shared decision-making, it was generally unable to influence wider decision-making processes. The reasons for this are manifold, but the exceptional cases provide a clue. The conceptualization of the SDNP contained no means for gaining access to policy or strategy development processes. Whereas it could sometimes enhance transparency and support extensive information dissemination and networking, none of SDNP's tools could reach key sustainable development decision-making arenas. Only when coupled with mechanisms such as the Local Agenda 21 could SDNP really make the leap into a decision-making arena and exploit the potential of ICTs in this direction.

4. ICTs for development (ICTD) require appropriate policy, regulatory and capacity frameworks. SDNP was a pioneer in what became known as ICTs for development by recognising and acting on the idea that development goals do not follow automati-

cally from the growth of the ICT sector but rather from their integration horizontally across core development sectors. This in turn requires *the creation of policy, regulatory and capacity frameworks in which meaningful ICT integration can happen.*

SDNP Honduras

From the outset, SDNP insisted that ICTs were means, not ends in themselves. This insight went against the grain of international thinking in the mid-1990s, which was fixated on expanding telecommunications and ICT sectors. SDNP always implicitly appreciated ICTs as transformative tools for development, and SDNP HQ brought this approach to national level applications, collaborative international programming, and to policy support. For instance, SDNP projects that lobbied for appropriate legislation for internet expansion did so in a nuanced fashion. Rather than simply calling for liberalisation and commercialisation of the sector *per se*, the concern was to ensure internet and telecoms access was extended to rural areas and marginalized populations through tariff policies, universal access funds, investment and other incentives. It was driven by needs it identified on the ground in pursuit of its development objectives.

Internationally, the influence of the SDNP approach was felt in the design and implementation of the Internet Initiative for Africa, especially in terms of its emphasis on broad stakeholder participation in strategy development. It also anticipated UNDP's later approach to ICTD.[7]

Overall, the evidence suggests that the SDNP concept was important for sustainable development networking. Enhanced information availability and broader participation in decision-making were, and remain, key contributors to sustainable development, and ICTs were a key tool in achieving these. As implementation proceeded, the potential of ICT applications to contribute to general social, economic and cultural development also became apparent in many countries, and SDNP's approach was well-suited to take advantage of these innovations.

SDNP Logos Lebanon, Pakistan and Jordan

SDNP Logos Bangladesh and China

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Guatemala

Information dissemination and multi-stakeholder networking can enhance transparency and support participatory decision-making. However, a degree of political will is required to ensure these processes are integrated at the local and national level and actually allow people's access to decision-making processes.

Partnerships and collaborations that enhance the capacity of normally-excluded stakeholders to engage constructively in shaping decisions and processes engenders an environment conducive to inclusion in wider decision-making forums. It also builds trust and confidence and reinforces those in power who are predisposed towards wider inclusion and the enhancement of democratic governance.

Information is valuable when activated within a specific dynamic. The challenge is how it can be *articulated to good effect within unique local and national dynamics*. Pivotal turning points in that dynamic must be identified and the means found to get information out there and ensure that it gets into the right hands to make a difference.

ICTs, and networking technologies such as the internet, are critical tools in facilitating both information networking and in enabling more participatory decision-making. But they must be *accessible and affordable to stakeholders,* and be deployed and articulated *within those sectors that contribute most* to sustainable development. These same sectors can then act as "info-mediaries" for other stakeholders who live in marginalized communities that cannot use ICTs for a wide variety of reasons but are willing to have their voices heard in local sustainable development processes.

There is also a strong suggestion that *more inclusive decision-making processes can yield a better result for all stakeholders overall.* From the SDNP experience, the plans, policies and strategies that were developed inclusively appear to have been more robust, decisions were more likely to have been acted upon, and the ultimate impact was deeper and more sustained.

As enabling tools, ICTs are necessary, though not sufficient, and the way in which they are deployed is important. Their utility often derives from being embedded within wider development activities, for instance for sharing critical information and enabling parties to interact. In other words, the benefits derive not directly from people using ICTs in a general way, such as merely accessing the internet/web, but from the applications and services that are tailored for use in specific contexts such as disaster

relief, human rights protection or environmental monitoring among others.

Such effective deployment of ICTs in turn requires *policy, regulatory and capacity frameworks* within which this can happen. This is not the same thing as creating the environment for a competitive telecommunications and ICT sector, though this undoubtedly helps. Rather it means focusing on those components of the framework that encourage and enable the deployment of ICTs in specific development sectors to address concrete economic, social environmental priorities and needs.

SDNP Logos Bolivia, Colombia, Jamaica

There were features of SDNP that enabled the programme to achieve what it did. For sure, the 'institutional space' occupied by the initiative largely determined success or failure. Maximising its effectiveness requires a balance of - and trade-offs between - several factors:

- Deploying technologies and platforms that reach the greatest number of stakeholders rather than those on the leading edge of technological advancement which can, in fact, end up excluding key stakeholders;
- Fostering a multi-stakeholder approach, including governments, by creating fora to bring key stakeholders together who are committed to working collaboratively in relationships of equality and transparency to pursue agreed sustainable development goals;
- Securing relative autonomy from government influence, certainly from direct government control, and from the control of any single stakeholder including the business and CSO sectors;
- Ensuring the legitimacy of the mission is recognized by all stakeholders, including government, and engendering a high degree of trust and goodwill, while reinforcing national ownership which included non-state and non-traditional actors;
- Building in flexibility in management style and programme implementation, in partnerships, collaborations and in the nature and extent of activities pursued;
- Allowing for local innovation and adoption while keeping track of the fast-paced changes that ICTs underwent in ten years or so;

- Positioning ICTs, from the very start, as a means to an end - as enablers for development - thus avoiding a technology-centred vision of the overall programme.

It is critical to match these conclusions and lessons to current governance dynamics and developments in ICTs to effectively support sustainable development programming now and in the future.

Logo and photos from SDNP Philippines

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ANNEX

Sustainable Development Networking Programme main website:
http://www.undpegov.org/sdnp/

SDNP nodes links:

Bangladesh: http://www.sdnbd.org/

Bolivia: http://www.redesma.org/

Colombia: http://www.rds.org.co/

Guyana: http://www.sdnp.org.gy/

Honduras: http://www.rds.hn

Malawi: http://www.sdnp.org.mw/

Pakistan: http://iucn.org/about/union/secretariat/offices/asia/asia_where_work/pakistan/projects/archived_projects/proj_arc_sdnp.cfm

ENDNOTES

1 Officially called the *United Nations Conference on Environment and Development* (UNCED), it was held from the 3rd - 14th June 1992. See: http://www.un.org/geninfo/bp/enviro.html

2 See http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/Agenda21.pdf

3 The paper draws on the final SDNP evaluation undertaken in 2004 when the programme formally ended. See Ó Siochrú 2004. http://www.undpegov.org/sdnp/docs/evals/SDNP-assessment-report-Final.pdf

4 There were also sub-regional components to SDNP, chief among them being SIDSNet (Small Island Developing States Network) that operated with goals similar to those of the national centres, though with a much wider geographic spread.

5 Final disbursement was in 2002 and the figure included about US$2.2 million from the Capacity 21 Programme.

6 This was a partnership agreement with Hewlett-Packard in 1996 - requiring special General Assembly approval yielded a US$1.2 million in-kind contribution of computers, equipment and services, by far the largest received by any UN organisations up to then. This opened the door for the development of innovative public private partnerships in UNDP way before their time. In addition, several national SDNPs were also
able to forge partnerships with the local private sector. This was perhaps one of the biggest SDNP innovations in the areas of partnerships with the private sector.

7 This refers to the approach enunciated in Accenture, Markle and UNDP (2001). Both insist on the deployment of ICTs as enablers of development, distinct from (or alongside) a sector in itself, and emphasize wide stakeholder participation in strategy development and implementation.

The Sustainable Development Networking Programme (SDNP) was launched by UNDP in 1992 with the goal of supporting access to sustainable development information and broadening stakeholder participation in local decision-making processes. Capitalizing on emerging information and communication technologies (ICTs), the programme launched networking centres in over 45 developing countries, several of which continue to operate in independent fashion to this day.

At the heart of SDNP was the innovative idea that new ICTs had the potential of being catalytic enablers to support sustainable development agendas. In this light, the programme went beyond providing access to new ICTs and rather focused on empowering people to have voice in the public sphere and network together on a multi-stakeholder basis to promote sustainable development.

This report analyses the experience of and lessons learned from SDNP, and considers their relevance today as we look to furthering sustainable development beyond 2015.

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