

A network of ideas - development 2.0

How the participative Web 2.0 challenges development cooperation - and why this is a chance for development organizations

Adyaka, a village in the heart of Uganda, needs a new trade school. None of the 4,000 inhabitants have the necessary skills to develop a business plan and the government has not been of any help at all. So the citizens of Adyaka have had to come up with a plan. With the help of the Internet they petitioned, literally, the whole world and asked for support for their village. Via the global neighbor network nabuur.com, volunteers worked in conjunction with the villagers to set up a business plan. Adyaka is not alone in its quest for support. 10,000 volunteers, who provide their skills and expertise, are available to help up to 150 communities. This web-based global neighbor network allows people from all over the world to discuss basic approaches, develop concepts and receive immediate feedback regarding the difficulties and the success during the implementation process.

Nabuur is just one of many platforms with innovative players which have emerged in recent years. The plurality of their approaches has one thing in common: each and every one is using the internet to promote and advance new development ideas. The traditional development cooperation is being confronted with a new, and so far, unfamiliar dynamic. The concept of 'help to self-help' defines the roles of the participants in an entirely innovative way: The borrowers pick the lenders.

The internet, since its breakthrough ten years ago, has been the subject of constant change. More than a Billion users have transformed it into a complex and multi-layered social network. The catchword "Web 2.0" allows internet users to create new individual realms within networks, users swap their knowledge and work together to create concepts and develop solutions. How can biomass be used to generate energy? The answer is provided by Howtopedia, a platform for applied knowledge, which supplies simple sets of technical instructions. The technology is secondary -- the main motors of this spontaneous Internet movement are openness, transparency, networking and a focus on innovation. Cross-national project ideas are developed uniting a wide range of experts, interested parties and above all people in need of support. Cooperation develops via the peer-to-peer principle, directly, world-wide and very casual. In the past past, users exchanged songs in decentralized networks, now they are exchanging concepts for African villages. Organizations are working together with civil societies, individuals and groups form ad-hoc alliances across borders. [Charles Leadbetter](#), author of the book "[We Think](#)", sees an unlimited creative potential in these flat self-organized networks that are no longer in need of a classical organization. A new generation of social entrepreneurs, activists and volunteers are on their way to establish their own definition of international understanding.

This also opens the door for new and innovative approaches of the entire foreign aid field. Globalgiving.org is a platform that guarantees investors that 85-90% of the investment will be used locally and that the project will get off the ground in less than 60 days. The implementation, the successes and failures can be tracked through the entire cycle of the project -- available to the public via the internet. A network of ideas, a global exchange for social and innovative projects, has been created. Benefactors are often rich philanthropists who have access to large sums of money, however, small donations still play a role. The main players of these networks are small teams that rely on individual, direct help and the ability of people to volunteer their time. At Kiva.org, anybody willing to do so can participate in financing a fish booth for a woman in Ecuador directly from their home computer. Micro-lending between the lenders and the borrowers is a direct result of the popular micro-financing in the worldwide fight against poverty. Kiva.org has disbursed 13 Million Dollars with an over 99% rate of repayment. The cooperation within local organizations aided in the development of an effective and transparent approach which questions the status quo of traditional foreign aid organizations. The lender will personally get his update from the woman owning the fish booth regarding the progress of the project. The consequences of these networks are highly underestimated, even though the approach has its own dynamic and will change development cooperation.

These platforms have been developed mainly in the North. In the South however, innovative social networks, which are directly connected with the local needs, have emerged. In Egypt, for example, the opposition movement has successfully [established a network via the Internet](#). Human right activists use weblogs to discuss the current political situation, and also a homegrown Arab public forum has been developed alongside the state-controlled press. Activists use the newest innovative instruments for their campaigns such as posting photographs taken by mobile phones in order to document the manipulation of Egyptian elections. Even the Diaspora is using the internet quite extensively in order to develop and propagate ideas regarding business and common public interest. Mukuru.com, for example, is a platform where one can buy products for relatives living in Zimbabwe. As the internet in Africa has been getting connected with mobile phones, articles, such as presents, can be bought by SMS. The migrants do not only support their own country with money transfers, but they also use the internet strategically to turn acquired knowledge into support for development projects. This sort of 'brain gain' results not only in innovative business practices, but also in political change. And so is the case of Mzalendo.com, who has "An eye on the Kenya Parliament". The process of change does not only depend on financial support, but also on the commitment and dedication and the successful networking capabilities of all people involved.

Internet, in developing countries, promote the discussion of political, economical and social change. Often bloggers act as citizen journalists. They shed light on poverty and criticize

policies of governments, even the role of donors. Citizen journalism develops in a multitude of ways and in its own pace, but it is, overall, becoming more and more professional. The [Nata Village Blog](#) is painting a vivid picture of the daily fight against AIDS in a Botswana village. Due to its local importance, a blogosphere has developed entirely in Swahili. And then there is the worldwide blogger portal [Global Voices](#) which is being translated by volunteers in numerous different languages. The press agency Reuters supports the freedom of the press of [Global Voices](#) and posts its content on their own website. The rule among activists is that transformation has to come from the inside out, and one's own initiative is the main force in the process of change.

The formation of these new social networks for change represents a great opportunity for development organizations: participation in these networks opens up opportunities for a common dialog on development political issues. The World Bank just launched its third blog titled "[How to end Poverty in South East Asia](#)". The United Nations, together with the leaders of the World Trade Organization (WTO), Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and other organizations, have opened [up a dialog with development experts and the public](#). Pierre Jacquet, Chief Economist of "Agence Francaise de Developpement" (French Development Bank, FDB), spoke out on the press conference for the launch of the blog: "The heads of development organizations are sometimes portrayed as inaccessible bureaucrats, who decide among themselves on the faith of the world's poorest nations. Through this blog the members will openly share their ideas, their doubts and even their frustrations manifesting their interest for dialog with other development professionals, students and the broader public." These networks open up a previously unused potential in terms of voluntary commitment and expertise. Development organizations such as the [Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit \(GTZ\)](#) can increase the efficiency of their work through targeted participation in these networks. The authors of the book "[Wikinomics](#)", Don Tapscott and Anthony D. Williams, believe that only those organizations, which follow the path of networking, change the culture of their communication and benefit from this productivity potential, will survive.

Whoever is willing to contemplate the genuine complexities of project work cannot fail to see the need for a broad range of expertise and an interdisciplinary approach. The public, cooperative development of project initiatives via Wiki websites, whose text can be edited by every user, is technically simple. However, it calls for a new culture of knowledge exchange. The recent report of the [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#) (IPCC) demands cooperative work due to the complexity of the problems, as well as the potential benefits to be gained from an opening up of organizations and companies. Many enthusiasts of the new web believe that the approach of free and open source software of freeware opens up a new way of problem solving. This goes hand in hand with efforts of the '[open access](#)' initiative to supply valuable sources of information, like the [Conservation Commons Initiative of the](#)

[World Conservation Union](#) (IUCN) and its [database about biodiversity](#) with the help of numerous organizations. The question is how development organizations will benefit and take advantage of those new resources and how much they will contribute in order to achieve their goals more efficiently.

The cycles of change on the internet are fast; the opposition, in light of this dynamic, significant. The additional benefit must constantly be under investigation since there is the possible danger of a cacophony of discourses. No one today can say whether the theory of the [Long Tail](#), which sees the niche as a driving force of the Internet, can be successfully applied to cooperative development work. Another question is if the transparency of the internet is adequate protection from financial fraud.

An obvious challenge is the lack of participation. The cost alone for access to the internet in many African countries is higher than the costs in Europe. The lack of technology is just one of many problems; the qualifications of the users another. The mobile telephone plays an important role, providing a bridge to the Internet with Africa and displaying the highest growth rate of any continent. But still only a small number of the citizens in developing countries have access to the internet. However, it is the social entrepreneurs and non-governmental organizations in Africa which have been quick to make use of the new opportunities, developing a range of initiatives and ideas. Development organizations are slowly joining them and they can learn a lot from the horizontal dialog. As Pierre Jacquet remarked at the opening of "[Ideas4Development](#)": "This blog is in your hand let's begin the debate."

Published in the [Internationale Politik](#) magazine in December 2007.

This article does not fall under the creative commons license. All rights reserved.