The SIPDER Newsletter team asked Tim Unwin to share some thoughts about the role of bilateral donors in ICT4D practice. We are sure that his provocative response below will elicit considerable feedback, and we hope that it will encourage ICT4D practitioners to play an even more active role in advocating for the value of their work in the international development arena.

Making a case to bilateral donors for ICTs in development practice

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Between 2001 and 2004, I had the privilege of working within the UK’s Department for International Development (DFID), at a time when there was widespread enthusiasm amongst donors for the potential that ICTs could contribute to development practice, and indeed help to reduce poverty. Since then, along with many other donors, DFID’s explicit focus on ICT4D has diminished considerably (although see its ICT4D Research and Capacity Development Programme with IDRC, http://www.research4development.info/news.asp?ArticleID=50085). Why have so many bilateral donors largely withdrawn from supporting ICT4D initiatives, and how should those within the ICT4D community respond?

In 2005, the OECD’s Development Assistance Committee highlighted five key donor strategic orientations with respect to ICT4D:

• The creation of an enabling environment to encourage private sector development in ICT4D;

• International cooperation because of ICT4D’s cross-border character;

• Encouraging private sector support for infrastructure;

• Helping ensure an appropriate policy environment to enable private sector investment; and

• The role of governments and civil society in ensuring that the poor benefit from ICTs.
These emphasise very clearly that one of the main reasons why many bilateral donors have reduced their attention to ICT4D is quite simply that they see much of this work as being best delivered by the private sector. Only when it comes to the poorest, do bilateral donors envisage a role for governments and civil society. In such a conceptualisation, the role of donors thus becomes primarily that of helping to shape the international and national policy environments to enable ICTs to be implemented effectively in the context of so-called knowledge societies. There are many other reasons, though, for this shift away from direct involvement in delivering ICT4D initiatives: the emphasis among some bilateral donors on budget support mechanisms as the optimal means of delivering development assistance; a lack of expertise and understanding within donor organisations about how to implement pro-poor ICT initiatives; and a lasting suspicion amongst many left-wing staff in donor organisations of the interests of the private sector. However, the failure of many ICT4D initiatives, and the inability of their proponents to show how they can go to scale, be sustainable, and really help the poor, is also profoundly important in shaping donor attitudes and approaches. If appropriate monitoring and evaluation studies of successful ICT4D initiatives had been undertaken, then there now would be a body of evidence that proponents thereof could argue the case. Unfortunately, all too often high profile ICT4D initiatives, such as NEPAD’s e-Schools Demonstration Project or the One Laptop per Child, have actually been shown to be highly problematic in their implementation (Farrell, Isaacs and Trucano, 2007; Kozma, 2007).

So, how can those of us who believe in the value of ICT4D change the attitudes of donors? Below, I highlight five things that might make a difference:

• **Working together to develop a shared agenda.** There have been numerous global initiatives on ICT4D, from the ICT Task Force, to WSIS, the IGF (http://www.intgovforum.org/) and GAID (http://www.un-gaid.org/). Yet, many bilateral donors have remained largely disinterested in these initiatives. To give but one example, of the 60 participants in the
recent IGF’s Multistakeholder Advisory Group Meeting in May 2008, only one was from a bilateral donor, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in France. Bilateral donors are likewise notable by their absence from most GAID meetings. It is therefore crucial that those of us committed to ICT4D should work more closely together, to develop shared agendas that are indeed of interest to the donors. The field of ICT4D has tended to be characterised by a proliferation of competing organisations, research institutes, international bodies and agencies, and has lacked real leadership in bringing these together to make an impact on the lives of poor and marginalised communities. If we are going to influence the agendas of bilateral donors, we need to be more willing to work together, and to engage actively in political advocacy, encouraging donors to participate on a more regular basis in our activities.

• **Implement more effective monitoring and evaluation.** Much donor policy is increasingly being determined through evidence-based decision-making processes. We therefore need not only to show that we are indeed implementing effective monitoring and evaluation procedures, but also that ICT4D initiatives are actually delivering on poverty objectives. Despite widespread acceptance of the importance of monitoring and evaluation in ICT4D, it is remarkable how few systematic and rigorous examples there have been of effective ICT4D monitoring and evaluation. This is all the more surprising since there are now several good practice guides available (see for example Wagner *et al.*, 2005). If we have the evidence to show bilateral donors that ICT4D really does have an impact on poverty, then our case will be very much stronger than it is at present.

• **Create learning multi-stakeholder partnerships.** The private sector has indeed been at the forefront of many ICT4D initiatives, and it is therefore not surprising that many bilateral donors see them as the ‘natural’ agency for their implementation. However, there is much evidence that the diversity of expertise necessary to implement such initiatives effectively requires that they be shaped and delivered in multi-stakeholder partnerships between governments, civil society, research institutes, international agencies and a diversity of other stakeholder communities, not least the poor people and marginalised communities that are
intended to be beneficiaries thereof. Moreover, a huge amount of learning needs to be done by the various different partners involved. It is remarkable how little about the private sector many staff working in bilateral donors really understand, and likewise how much the private sector still needs to comprehend about development processes and practices!

**Actively seek to engage bilateral donors.** There is little point in bemoaning the lack of attention that many donors pay to ITC4D if we are not prepared actively to involve them in the delivery of our initiatives and proposals. Some donors, notably the Canadians, Dutch, Swedes and Swiss, are indeed continuing to support ICT4D programmes, and there are some noticeable efforts to engage yet more donors, with the work supported by SPIDER being noticeable in this respect. We need actively to work with and support those enlightened bilateral donors who understand and see value in ICT4D, and engage them much more frequently in our work so that together we may help shape effective ICT4D agendas.

**Shift the development focus to equality issues as a balance to the economic growth agenda.** The global development nexus is currently dominated by economic growth agendas, which will actually never eliminate poverty (Unwin, 2007). At last, there is beginning to be wider recognition in some quarters at least that much more attention needs to be paid to issues of equality than has been the case heretofore over the last 20 years. Even the recent Report of the Commission on Growth and Development released in May 2008 concludes that growth must be inclusive ([http://www.growthcommission.org](http://www.growthcommission.org)) - this is a welcome step in the right direction. More substantially, though, we need a fundamental shift in balance of the ICT4D agenda away from issues to do primarily with economic growth, and instead focus much more on the needs of the poorest people and most marginalised communities. Our challenge is to identify ways in which ICTs can be used truly to empower those who will be left behind in the growth agenda that the private sector is in any case already delivering. Here, there is a clear role for bilateral donors, at least
for those who see their task as truly being to make the world a fairer and better place.

These suggestions are merely a starting point; much more needs to be done if we are indeed to involve bilateral donors more actively in building an effective global coalition of interests in using ICTs effectively to empower the poor. However, if we begin by paying more attention to the five agendas noted above, then hopefully we can encourage more bilateral donors to recognise the significant benefits that can be derived from incorporating ICT4D more systematically in development practices.

References