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(Notation: The World Bank Institute was formerly called the Economic Development Institute (EDI), as reflected in some text)

The Global Knowledge '97 conference was held in Toronto from June 22-25, 1997, to address issues surrounding the role of the 'information revolution' in the development process. The conference had several objectives, including: the sharing of understanding about the role of knowledge and information in development, and the changes wrought by new technologies; sharing strategies, experiences and tools in harnessing knowledge for development; and building partnerships and international dialogue on these issues, including a strengthening of the knowledge and information resources of developing countries. A large number of conference activities were organized to pursue these objectives, including plenary meetings, working sessions (such as seminars, working groups, etc), an exhibition space, a 'cybercafe' (on-site computer network), open space events, a video festival and videoconferencing/internet discussions. The conference was attended by over 1,750 persons from over 100 countries. The evaluation of the conference was conducted by a consultant to the EDI Evaluation Unit, Dr. Janet Billson, from Group Dimensions Research, and it drew on a number of data sources. These were: questionnaires completed by participants at the start and end of the conference; participant 'suggestions' forms; formal interviews and focus group meetings with samples of participants; informal interviews of a number of participants; participant observation; and questionnaires completed by exhibitors and session organizers.

- GK '97 successfully brought together a very diverse range of participant. Conference participants and sponsors reported significant gains in learning, new information and building partnerships. Participants also gave the conference above-average ratings for its overall effectiveness (with a mean rating of 4.1 (on a 6-point scale from 1 = minimum to 6 = maximum), and judged it highly relevant to their work responsibilities (with a modal rating of 6 on the 6-point scale). The effectiveness of the conference would have been enhanced, however, if its structure had included more breathing room for dialogue, and if it had facilitated informal partnership-building.

- A number of other aspects of the conference were also judged successful. These included the opportunity to hear the views of international leaders, and many participants were both stimulated and impressed by this. Participants were generally enthusiastic about learning practical ideas which they could use in their own country. The enthusiastic support and involvement of a broad range of sponsors was another notable feature.

- Two objectives achieved in designing the conference were a high level of stakeholder involvement and broad sponsorship.

- The internet discussion (ie, the 'virtual conference') preceding, during and after the conference provided a highly positive experience for many participants and for those who could not attend the conference itself. It allowed meaningful discussions of case
studies, practical aspects of implementing information and communication technology, as well as substantive discussion of how and when this technology can enhance development and benefit the world’s poor. Many participants regarded this as very useful for learning, sharing ideas, and networking. Perhaps one reason why this feature of the conference was viewed as so useful was the limitations of the physical conference (discussed below).

- The conference was also successful in producing other significant outcomes. These were: the success in putting the issue of the role of information and communication technology on the international development agenda; the fostering of working relationships between public and private sector participants; and laying the groundwork for concrete plans for further action.

- There were also a number of less successful features of the conference. A key one was the emergence of a ‘talking heads’ model for both plenary and working sessions -- communication tended to be one-way, and sessions were overloaded and over-structured; this was a greater problem for the plenaries than the working sessions. The result was that little time was left for synergistic exchanges and this constricted dialogue, participation, and the building of relationships -- these were important deficiencies.

- A useful suggestion for improving future conferences was that there should be either smaller numbers of participants or a less structured and congested timetable, to encourage and allow networking and partnership-building.

- Many presenters, especially in the plenaries, spoke too long, or seemed to miss the point of the conference themes, and some were simply ‘bad’ speakers. Many participants questioned the seemingly blind assumption expressed by some speakers that information communication and technology is unambiguously good for developing countries and that it will not increase the gap between the haves and have-nots. The conference did not provide early opportunities to acknowledge, debate and perhaps reconcile these differing perspectives; it did not devote significant attention to understanding the role of knowledge and information in development.

- While there was some limited success in integrating information communication and technology into the conference’s own structure and processes, participants judged that technology was underutilized. Participants characterized this as ‘an ironic situation’ and ‘a missed opportunity’.

- The difficulties which were experienced were exacerbated by some organizational problems with the conference itself. The physical layout of the conference in three separate hotels discouraged interaction, as did the lack of gathering places where people could meet and discuss issues. Problems were also experienced with travel and lodging arrangements, with the under-representation of women, and with a perceived over-emphasis on Africa at the expense of other regions.

- These difficulties do not detract from the many successful features of the conference. Global Knowledge ’97 was a successful conference that provided participants with new knowledge, practical information, and access to technologies many had never experienced. The vast majority of participants looked forward to similar meetings -- both actual and virtual -- in the future.