The Pacific Islands Internet Project (PIIP) in UNDP, Suva

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Abstract

The Pacific Islands Internet Project (PIIP) aims to expose interested parties to emerging technologies by creating initial, core national Internet-based information systems, and by training users on how to take advantage of such systems for sustainable development purposes. PIIP works closely with Small Islands Development States Network SIDSNET (http://www.sidsnet.org) and Asia and Pacific Development Information Programme APDIP (http://www.apdip.net), both UNDP initiatives in this field. The Target Beneficiaries are 15 countries in the sub-region including Tuvalu, Niue and Tokelau which are still without Internet access. PIIP will assist these three countries in their connectivity needs and all other countries in other components of the project. Priority is given to the smaller island states. There are four components to the project. These are: Connectivity (WWW access for Tuvalu, Niue and Tokelau); Training and Awareness (through national seminars and training programmes); Internet Applications (in areas such as telemedicine, distance education, SIDSnet and other fields in the private sector); and Policy (work with telecom and regional organisations in facilitating national telecommunications policies that provide a basis for development of an ICT strategy). Some of the progress made since the inception of PIIP are covered in this paper

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Introduction

The urgency of computer and information literacy at this stage of global evolution cannot be over-emphasized. Although some sectors have been using computer technology for a long time (banks, industry), the vast majority of public sector employees, from the managerial level down, have not yet been completely exposed to the use of the computer "as an information centre" and as a means of exporting vital information relative to a given country to the global community. The exposure to technologies such as the Internet is of fundamental importance to the smaller countries and the urgency in doing so comes from the fact that these countries have fewer development opportunities. This is the only opportunity these countries ever had to be in part with all the bigger countries with the ability to have global exposure at much less expense than traditionally needed. To do so these countries must be able to master the technology and UNDP is in an ideal position to provide such assistance, at the same time making sure that the technology will benefit the whole country in their people's social and economic development

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In particular, problems facing Pacific Island Countries that can be addressed through technology today include, in order of importance:

1. Difficulties created by distance, isolation, dispersion and national budget constraints in designing and implementing sustainable human development programmes in the region.
2. The need to receive and even more important, transmit, information relative to each Country's sustainable human development needs
3. The need to create revenues and employment by advertising products and services to the global market
4. The need to participate in the global dialogue to leverage information systems thus evening out the differences between larger and more developed countries and PICs.
5. The need to create a capillary national information infrastructure with outreach to outer islands for the purpose of distance education, telemedicine, data shar-

ing for governance and private sector evolution, etc.
6. The importance of recognising and respecting the key role of traditional practices, cultures and the subsistence economy in many PICs and the stresses on them caused by population growth, social evolution and rising material aspirations.
7. The need of better co-ordination amongst government ministries to avoid duplication of effort and improve an efficient use of resources.
8. The need to inform and involve citizens, in decisions affecting the allocation and management of local resources.
9. The need to minimise "brain leaks" to other countries and to train and attract an educated workforce ready to take the challenges of the transition into the next century.

The Pacific Islands Internet Project (PIIP) will focus on those countries that have not yet benefited by the full impact of new information technologies, the Internet and its suite of communication tools. The project aims to expose and sensitize interested parties to these emerging technologies by creating initial, core national Internet-based information systems, and by training users on how to take advantage and leverage such systems for sustainable development purposes.

PIIP works closely with SIDS NET and APDIP, both UNDP initiatives in this field.

Small Islands Development States Network (SIDS NET *http://www.sidsnet.org*)

An important related development in terms of networking for PICs is the establishment of an information network (SIDS NET) contained in the Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States (SIDS) endorsed by heads of SIDS governments at the Global Conference for SIDS in Barbados. The recommendation for a SIDS/NET is based on the same needs that gave rise to Sustainable Development Network (SDN). the sharing of information and experiences among SIDS (in the Pacific, Caribbean and the Indian Oceans), greater access to information from around the world, and the development of clearing house capability in SIDS.

Asia and Pacific Development Information Programme (APDIP *http://www.apdip.net*)

This is a project which started in April 1997. The goals are: (1) to harness ICT for development facilitation in host countries; (2) to co-ordinate existing and future UNDP'S ICT initiatives in the region, and; (3) to support the expansion of the SDN Programmes on a national, sub-regional, and regional level. Through this project, it is envisaged that a functioning regional development intranet will be established among key national and regional counterparts and country level UNDP offices, and that SDN Programmes in the region will be expanded.

Target beneficiaries

Among the 15 countries in the sub-region (Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Republic of the Marshall Islands, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu), the 3 following were the latest to access the Internet: Niue, Tokelau, Tuvalu. Niue have had an email forwarding facility and will have internet soon. Tuvalu had Internet by early 1999 through PIIP assistance and Tokelau later in 1999. PIIP assisted these three countries in their connectivity needs and all other countries in other components of the project. Priority is given to the smaller island states.

Project components

There are four components to the project. These are:

Connectivity. Ensure that the smaller PICs will be able to participate in the Internet driven information revolution by facilitating connectivity that will ensure reliable email and WWW access for Tuvalu, Niue and Tokelau. With the local Telecommunication company as the local partner, PIIP will hire the implementation team (includes training of administrator) and purchase the equipment for Internet connectivity.

Training and Awareness. Through *national* seminars and training programmes, assist the private sector, government and NGOs to participate effectively in the web and thus enhancing their own effectiveness. PIIP will assist in the organisation of national seminars on basic awareness of the Internet and its applications and provide training in web-publishing and email use. Funds permitting, media and NGOs may be provided with Email start-up funds which will pay for a modem and 1 year email account. The organisations may want to include this in their budget for subsequent years once they realise the advantages it offers.

Internet Applications. Work with other regional programmes and organisations to ensure target countries are able to participate in applications relevant to their country such as telemedicine, distance education, SIDSnet and other fields in the private sector.

Policy. Work with telecom and regional organisations in facilitating national telecommunications policies that provide a basis for development of an ICT strategy relevant to national interests. Considerations will include: viability of Internet connectivity, concerns on loss of revenue from fax and telephone services, potential growth of Internet market, client cost of Internet connectivity, tariffing and billing, issues of censorship, legal structures, taxation issues and sale of country domain names. UNDP may also take the facilitative role in bringing together all parties involved in IT in the region

Activities to date

PIIP has generated awareness of the potential of the Internet Technology on a number of occasions including the Forum meeting in Cook Islands, the PINA annual conference in Vanuatu and a number of Telecommunications and Internet related Workshops. With UNDP funding, ITU was asked to carry out consultancies for Kiribati (in identifying the requirements for Kiribati to go online) and Tuvalu (in analysing proposals received by the government for administration of the .TV domain). Through APDIP funding, PIIP has selected participants from Fiji, Kiribati, Solomon Islands, Tuvalu and Vanuatu for participation in an Internet Routing workshop in Kuala Lumpur). PIIP has provided technical assistance to the Ministry of Commerce in Solomon Islands (http://www.commerce.gov.sb) in web-authoring training and the Pacific Islands Broadcasting Association (http://www.undp.org.fj/piba) in web-site development. Pipeline activities include assistance to Tuvalu (through SOPAC expertise) to get access to the Internet and a study for Tokelau to assess the requirements of Tokelau to have internet access. PIIP is also trying to gather support from different organisations and agencies active in the Pacific for a proposal for a Pacific Internet Mobile Show.

The Pacific Internet Mobile Show

A number of internet-based tools are being built by a number of organisations and agencies active in the Pacific. All these agencies need to promote these tools and instruct users on the use of these tools. To do so, awareness and a basic knowledge of the Internet is a requisite of all these entities. If all these organisations were to conduct training sessions in all these countries in their subject matter, the cost would be prohibitive. They also all realise that regional workshops do not address all (or the right) people interested in the subject area.

The Pacific Internet Mobile Show is being proposed as a possible solution to these difficulties. Besides being an attractive way of bringing the Internet to everyone's attention, it will make use of a single state of the art exhibition and a series of presentations which will tour all the countries. However the most important element of the mobile show will be the presence of top resource persons in their field from the Pacific Region, who will conduct workshops on their particular thematic area. The mobile show will remain in each country for three days and specialised workshops and activities will run in parallel.

In each country, a national organisation will coordinate the programme, venue and other logistics in advance. These national organisations will also be entrusted with follow-up activities, and assisted to do so effectively.

Participating countries

Any one of the following countries will be invited to participate: Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu.

Participants

The workshops are meant to attract and involve all sectors of society: students and teachers, IT persons, communicators, media people, business people, NGOs, medical and paramedical staff, government ministries and departments etc.

Themes

Thematic areas to be covered may include: E-mail and information retrieval through the Internet, Technical issues (IT routing, server-side technologies), Web-publishing, E-Commerce (including tourism, trade, on-line transactions and security), Distance Education (+ USP net), Internet for NGOs, Internet for the Media, Telemedicine (PACNET and WPHNet), The Small Islands Development States Network, Teleworking & time-zone opportunities, Intranets (particularly for Government Ministries/departments), Gender issues, Environment Issues, Reproductive Health issues.

Partners

The proposal has been discussed with a number of partners and has generated interest from SIDS NET, Secretariat of the Pacific Community, Fiji School of Medicine (Telemedicine Programme), PeaceSat Programme (East-West Centre, University of Hawaii) and Pacific Concerns Resource Centre.

Provisional funding is being provided by SIDS NET. UNDP's Asia-Pacific Development Information Programme may provide other funding and/or technical assistance. Part-funding from SPC is being considered. Other funding avenues will be welcome.

Other potential partners for this venture are: the national telecom companies in each country, Forum Fisheries Agency, TCSP, SPREP, SOPAC, USP NET, WHO, UNFPA, National NGOs, PINA and PIBA, other donor agencies and voluntary groups.

Final note

This proposal is still under development. Any comments and further ideas are very welcome.

References

Available from the author on request. □