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INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATIONS FOR DEVELOPMENT

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Collective Intelligence and Poverty

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1 COMMENT

The World Bank's mission is to fight poverty with passion and professionalism for lasting results. Over the coming years the locus of poverty will increasingly shift to urban areas. Two thirds of the world's population will be living in cities by 2025, and a third of these residents are likely to be poor. By 2030, the urban population in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa – the world's poorest regions – is expected to double. The Bank in keeping with its inspiring mission will necessarily have to focus more energy and resources in tackling the problems of urban poverty.

It is well known that the key challenges of urban poverty revolve around issues like employment, living environments, housing, services, violence, crime, social protection, health and education. Some of these are in the nature of "wicked" problems and are not easy to solve. However, as we tackle these challenges locally, there are exciting possibilities of engaging with people from across the world to contribute innovative and creative ideas to deal with them.

Information and Communication Technologies potentially offer a powerful means of connecting global knowledge, expertise and resources to deal with problems of poverty. Community mapping of slum environments can then allow architects and urban planners from around the world to collaborate on plans to improve the physical spaces that constitute slums, in active dialogue with local residents. A good example is the case of ArcBazar.com that helped connect 70 architects from around the world to make competitive submissions for redeveloping an abandoned school area in Somerville Massachusetts. The local residents selected the best design. Platforms like ArcBazar could provide a low-cost alternative for obtaining architectural design services, and helping poor communities to rapidly develop and improve their physical environments. I recently spoke with ArcBazar's CEO Dr.Imdat As, who is keen to see how architects could also collaborate, rather than merely compete, to deal with the spatial dimensions of urban poverty and decay.

Dr.Vijay Govindarajan of the Tuck School of Business has successfully used an online platform Jovoto to launch a global challenge to design a $300 house for the poor. Similar platforms could be used to have the world's best engineers work on Dean Kamen's (inventor of the Segway) design of a water purification device Slingshot – that can produce clean water (250 gallons daily – good for 100 people) from almost any source and costs between $1000 and $2000.

Hackathons present another example of tapping global expertise to address problems of development. The recent Water Hackathon organized by the World Bank convened software developers to address real life water, sanitation, irrigation, flood and water resource management challenges.

Analytics will become an important tool for confronting the problems of development. "Analytics as a service" can be sourced from anywhere in the world, provided there is reliable network connectivity. The

Santa Cruz police force uses analytics for predictive policing to counter violence and crime. Analytics can also be used to plan better education, health and other services for the poor. For example, anonymized locational data from mobile phones could provide insights on the frequency of patient visits to health facilities, the time spent in the facilities, the distance traveled – information that could then be used to improve health services. Similarly tracing mobility patterns related to slum dwellers could help design better public transportation systems for the poor.

That Crowd-funding can work on a global scale has been demonstrated by the likes of Kickstarter and Kiva. There are innovative possibilities therefore, of tapping new funding mechanisms for addressing poverty.

While it is clear that ICT tools today can potentially help connect people from across the world to deal with poverty, we still need to figure out the precise modalities of how to do this on a scale, and in a manner that is truly transformative. The MIT Center for Collective Intelligence has conducted research on the elements that can make a success of crowdsourcing approaches. The research by Thomas W. Malone, Robert Laubacher, and Chrysanthos Dellarocas on 'Harnessing Crowds: Mapping the Genome of Collective Intelligence' offers interesting insights. According to their findings, clearly defined Goals (What), Incentives (Why), Structure/Processes (How) and Staffing (Who) are key to the success of crowdsourcing initiatives. This is a valuable framework while engaging with experts (well-known and not so well-known) from civil society organizations, academia, private sector and governments for making a difference in the lives of the poor.

Nothing brings as much focus as trying to solve a concrete problem. Let us therefore identify two or three cities in the world with active and committed leaders. Leadership is the most important ingredient of success. Let these cities be our labs for developing and designing participative methodologies that can bring the world's best thinking to focus on the poor. Let us engage collectively to clearly identify the issues that we will tackle over the next four years. Let us then work with Foundations like X-Prize, academic institutions like the MIT Center for Collective Intelligence, organizations like OpenIdeo and Facebook and others, to figure out how we will consult, engage, and involve people from across the world to work together, in the true spirit of partnership. The Rockefeller Foundation has launched an innovation challenge which includes "How will you use data to create change that improves the quality of life of poor or vulnerable communities in cities?" The winners will be provided with $100,000 to develop or implement their ideas. We should work with all such stakeholders and follow the approach of engage, execute and evaluate.

The World Bank has established a number of "Knowledge Platforms" aimed at connecting the world's best knowledge and expertise with the problems of development. Issues of urban poverty represent a clear overlap in the Bank's Platforms on ICT, Urbanization, Green Growth, Nutrition and Jobs. Collaboration across the Knowledge Platforms could collectively have much greater impact - a fact that is increasingly becoming obvious.

If we take up the challenge, we may succeed or we may not, but I am sure the experience will inspire and transform us all.

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