

The Digital Divide and the role of NGOs in empowerment of disadvantaged groups via ICT in Hong Kong

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Introduction

How serious is the Digital Divide problem in Hong Kong? This is not an easy question to answer. Hong Kong continues to stay on top of the scale in nearly all international measurements of information society. Comparing to the rest of the world, Hong Kong provides the most affordable and efficient Internet connection. A family would pay US\$25 a month for an 8M broadband connection with unlimited connection time and dataflow (pricing of early 2006). Given the median monthly household income is around US\$3,400, one would not be surprised by the high penetration rate of household computer usage (70.1%) and household internet (64.6%)

On another angle, according to the 2003 figures from World Bank, Hong Kong also has a very high score of 0.518 on Gini Coefficient, the measurement on income disparity. The divide between the have and the have-nots seems not to have been narrowed by the advancement of information technology. On the contrary, evidence indicates that there is an obvious emergence of an information underclass. While 70% of households are ripping the fruits of ICT development, the life chances of the other 30% are diminishing. The following example indicates how disadvantaged groups could lead a more desperate life in the information age.

In 2001, a few leading banks jointly announced their promotion of e-banking. The main propaganda was to urge users to switch more towards internet banking and the use of automatic teller machines. At the same time, announcement was made that traditional transactions at service counters would be charged a fee. The situation had quickly scaled up to a social debate when branches at remote areas populated by low income groups and senior citizens were closed down and replaced by automatic teller machines. Obviously, this scenario implies that those who are richer and more capable would pay less for banking service while those who are weaker and less capable would pay more. From a social justice point of view that would be certainly unacceptable. From a market point of view it is most logical simply because service over the counter is more costly and the users ought to pay. On one side, NGOs argue on corporate social responsibilities and the needs (and rights?) of the “underclass” for

banking service. On the opposition side, the banks stressed their need to strive for efficiency, so that they could compete globally. Finally, the banks agreed to some induction courses for needy groups in using automatic teller machines. The machines were also promised to become more wheel-chair accessible and display larger fonts. The branches were closed. And Hong Kong remains as the most free-market city.

E-banking is only one of the little battles to fight in a war. As the internet continues to become more and more a major aspect of daily living, the effect of it, or the effect of not being able to access it, will be even more apparent.

The latest statistics from the government indicate that some groups within the 7M+ population in Hong Kong are having least access to the Internet and therefore are excluded from participating in the information society. The elderly group, the least educated, the low-income group are amongst the most obvious. The situation of people with disabilities in using ICT is not reflected in government statistics.

Government Intervention

The e-government strategy of Hong Kong seems to have been defined quite narrowly. According to the Digital 21 document, the major information and communication technology policy paper, e-government refers to the range of attempts in adopting technology from within the government, and delivering services to the public via electronic methods. That includes for instance the many processes involved in tax payment, on-line renewal of driver licenses, and the use of smart identity cards at immigration counters. The offering of internet option for government services are generally referring to as the “e-government initiatives”.

It is the tradition, as well as stated government policy to abide by the principle of “positive non-intervention”. Depending on the market force to act as a major catalyst for social development, the Hong Kong government sees refraining from intervention as the key to economic success. Government regulation is reduced to a minimum across the board in most policy areas. The e-banking issue mentioned above best illustrates the neutral position taken by the government. While proclaiming the importance for government not to intervene business decisions, the government publicly advised banks to consider the needs of the underprivileged. The guiding principle of “laizze-faire” is the main philosophy of the governance.

Nevertheless, to tackle the digital divide, there was a range of activities that

government has taken on. In fact, in the Digital 21 strategy document (2004), there are 2 existing programs and 4 new initiatives mentioned about the tackling of digital divide, covering two pages out of a 44-page document. Despite the fact that most of the initiatives in the past have been discrete and patchy at best, the government attempted to make available e-services of the government to as many people as possible, including for instance the visually impaired. Therefore at one stage the government had experimented on applying to all governmental websites text-to-speech technology on Cantonese, the local Chinese dialect spoken most commonly in Hong Kong. Although the experiment was not too successful due to technological hurdles, all government websites follow an accessibility standard.

Since 2001, the government had initiated an IT awareness programs to expose the community to the importance of information technology. Groups in the community were given free introductory computer classes of a few hours. Feedback from the community was that while the exposure was meaningful, it raised the expectations of the audience and yet failed to induce a sustainable learning path. The government has started to rethink if raising awareness is still the most appropriate focus.

The government also introduced free internet access points at libraries and community centres. Feedback was that those access points provide merely the necessary hardware and software and there were little arrangement to support learning. For instance, elderly people would not be able to obtain enough encouragement to even approach the machines there, not to mention soliciting support when encountering technical problems or other difficulties related to the use of computers.

A government operated “Super Cyber Centre” was equipped with more than 200 computers to provide the necessary training facilities and support for public users. The centre was closed after two years of operation. A government funded computer help desk hotline program aiming at supporting IT use in the community was established. The program, called “IT Easy Link”, operated by the Hong Kong Computer Society received quite a lot of support from the community and yet, due to withdrawal of funding from the government, will terminate its free-of-charge operation in 2006.

The lessons learnt from these stories are very clear. Programs solely depending on government intervention lead to two major short-comings. First, the government structure, bound by its red tapes, has been and will continue to be slow in responding to community needs, both in terms of content and format. It basically lacks the

flexibility and robustness required in eliciting social change, and promoting community participation. Second, being still the major funding body of NGOs in Hong Kong, the lack of government support, both financially and in spirit, would decrease the chances of success of community programs. How to sustain the commitment of the government in promoting Digital Inclusion, without violating the over-riding Laizze-faire principle it must hold onto, becomes the major challenge. How to solicit the support and funding from the government while releasing innovation and allowing for flexibility at the community level becomes a major question to ask.

Strategies to Influence the Government

The Hong Kong Council of Social Service (HKCSS), being an association of 313 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in social service sector, has the mandate to advocate for social justice. The Council has been a major driving force for social development of Hong Kong since it was established in 1940s. It is obliged to capitalize on its long existing network of NGOs to influence government policies, in tackling social problems related to the development of information society. Although sometimes the Council would be of antagonistic views to ideas of senior officials in the government, it managed to maintain a reasonably efficient working relationship with government departments across the board. There were frequent exchanges of views over a wide spectrum of issues both with the government and within the Council's membership network.

The main strategy adopted was to ride on the international agenda of World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) to push for local changes. That was a multi-step approach:

Step 1: Bring to the government's attention the global agenda of building a more inclusive information society

Via participating in prep meetings, regional meetings and electronic communication with civil societies groups involved in WSIS, the Council managed to relate information of WSIS back to the appropriate departments within the government. The Office of Telecommunications Authority (OFTA), which was a member to International Telecommunication Union (ITU) represented the Hong Kong Government to participate in WSIS. But due to the segregation of duties, another department, namely the Information

Technology Services Department (ITSD), later restructured to Office of Government Chief Information Technology Officer (OGCIO) was the subject office for digital divide. The Council actively brought the issue of tackling digital divide to the notice of ITSD. The government has gradually developed a deep concern about how Hong Kong, as a world first class ICT city, would appear on the result slips of WSIS in tackling digital divide. The Hong Kong Government was unsure in late 2003 about their participation in WSIS Geneva Phase. It was because for UN events, Hong Kong Government has to subsume under the leadership of Beijing. Allegedly, there was neither indication nor instruction received from Beijing regarding HK's participation at WSIS.

Step 2: Urge for local response to the global WSIS agenda

Roundtables of NGOs were held at the Hong Kong Council of Social Service in 2003 concerning digital divide in general and a joint request for Hong Kong Government to participate in WSIS. Subsequently, a request was made to the Legislative Council of Hong Kong to hold a public hearing on Digital Divide and Hong Kong's participation in WSIS. The hearing was participated by a great number of NGOs, explaining their views on digital divide directly to the Legislative Councilors. HKCSS and other NGOs submitted their views to the Legislative Council in written form. At the public hearing, the government managed to announce that they would participate at WSIS Geneva Phase as part of the Chinese Delegation, as their request has been listened to by Beijing. During the hearing, Councilors also asked about the measurement of digital divide; the effectiveness of government programs in tackling the issue and plans of the government in sustaining digital inclusion initiatives. Government officials at the hearing pledged to follow up after the hearing.

Step 3: Suggesting solutions

Under the coordination of the HKCSS, HK NGOs sent an unprecedented delegation of around 10 persons to participate in WSIS. During the Summit, further exchange of views between government and NGOs regarding follow up actions had been most fruitful. The government is accountable to the Legislative Council. To help answering the questions of Legislative Councilors, HKCSS put forward two basic ideas which had been accepted

readily by the government at the end.

Firstly, HKCSS suggested that a large scale research aiming at constructing a Digital Inclusiveness Index should be conducted. The research should help to establish yardsticks in measuring the degree of digital inclusion of disadvantaged groups. It should also investigate how effective digital inclusion programs in the past have been, so as to inform further actions. The Social Work and Social Administration Department of Hong Kong University was selected to conduct the research. Researchers would be presenting their findings in early 2006.

Secondly, suggestion was made to set up a fund to finance digital inclusion initiatives at the community level. The buzz word Digital Solidarity Fund (DSF) was borrowed from the WSIS to name the fund. The government readily accepted this idea. The following sections of this article will deliberate on the insights gained from the formation of the fund. The performance of the fund and difficulties encountered.

Digital Solidarity Fund – Purpose

One key element of the WSIS declaration for constructing a more equitable information society, is multi-stakeholderism.

NGOs have been keen in running programs. They have a close connection to the needs in the community and the necessary skills to conduct program but are usually constraints by inadequate funding. They require a flexible and supportive funding source for digital inclusion initiatives.

As mentioned earlier, regarding bridging the digital gap, government has refrained from too much direct intervention. Therefore government initiatives had been patchy and non-sustaining, despite the intention to help the most needy in society. The low tax rate and the way the taxation system is structured reflect an adherence to the non-interventionist approach. There are very few incentives for companies to donate, to provide employment for disadvantaged groups, or to encourage staff to volunteer themselves for community service.

Nevertheless, the commercial sector has been playing an important role in supporting community services out of altruism. Support in cash and in kind have become even

more important in times of government budget cut-back. Traditional donation, however, had hit a challenge when feedbacks received from donors indicate that merely cheque-writing and visiting is not going to sustain charity intention. It would create an alienation to the charitable act and is therefore not satisfying. By participating in community services at multi-level, from operation to management to strategic planning, commercial entities would be able to contribute a range of expertise, in terms of connections and knowledge, to their charitable acts. In the context of bridging the digital divide, the e-banking experience mentioned above had been enlightening. More involvement from the commercial sector is necessary. So is effective communication between government, the commercial sector and the third sector of civil society organizations. It has become apparent that there needs to be a multi-stakeholder platform to involve as equal partners, all the three sectors in the discussion of long term strategy for digital inclusion.

The DSF was designed to create such a platform. It has two objectives:

1. To secure financial support for digital inclusion programs in Hong Kong
2. To engage different stakeholders in designing and implementing digital inclusion strategies for Hong Kong

Borrowing the buzz word from WSIS, the fund was chosen to be named Digital Solidarity Fund, so as to reflect the commitment of engaging different stakeholders in community to tackle the problem of digital divide.

Digital Solidarity Fund – Formation

The DSF is established from within HKCSS. Legally the Council has full ownership and responsibility in managing the fund. In practice, DSF is managed by a committee with members from different sectors and backgrounds. The DSF committee members were appointed (invited) by HKCSS. HKCSS is responsible for providing the necessary secretariat support to the committee.

The government sees DSF as an effective way to engage the community without violating the non-interventionist principle. Instead of directly engaged in conducting digital inclusion programs, or directly provide funds to the NGOs in the community, the government donates to DSF and become one of the members in the DSF committee. Support from the government amounts to US\$125,000. Although the government is the biggest and first donor to DSF, it has refrained even from taking up

the chair position of the committee. Instead, HKCSS has invited a businessman with public face to the chair. There are two government departments involved in DSF committee. The OGCIO, subject office of digital divide within the government and also the Social Welfare Department (SWD) that is responsible for the well-being of the underprivileged in society.

It was important to appoint a chairperson who had little prior engagement with the HKCSS. The Council has to stay impartial because the fund would be opened to all non-profit organizations in Hong Kong, including members and non-members of the Council.

Support from the government had been important in many ways. It demonstrated the commitment of government and increased the credibility of the new fund. Government officials have also contributed in offering their own networks to appeal for support from the commercial sector. That subsequently resulted in another US\$100,000 being raised from companies.

Members of the committee are from various backgrounds. Besides government officials, they include professional bodies and business associations of ICT industry, welfare organizations, disadvantaged group members, representatives from major donors and independent persons. Two sub-committees were formed under the DSF committee. They were namely the fund raising sub-committee and the vetting sub-committee. The former was responsible for on-going fund raising activities for the Fund and the latter was responsible for deciding on the selection criteria for incoming applications, conducting interviews and short-listing the applications for the DSF committee to make final decisions on grant.

Both the vetting sub-committee and the DSF committee were very serious about the discussion of selection criteria. After much deliberation, a two round selection process was adopted. That was mainly of the expected large volume of applications. The first round aimed at short-listing all applications to a manageable number, based on the information prescribed by the application form. The criteria were namely coverage, effectiveness, innovation and creativity, impact and capacity of the applicants. The second round of selection would look deeper into criteria such as urgency, competency, sustainability, prudence and evaluation method. During the second round selection, all potential applicants would present their project ideas and be interviewed afterwards.

The seriousness in selecting projects had by no means compromised the flexibility in the use of the fund. Since the fund was set up as an account within the Council, it only had to follow the internal audit procedures of the Council, which is much straight forward as compared to the government bureaucracy. Moreover, DSF committee members had been very supportive and open to innovation. As long as the applicants could provide adequate rationale for how the fund could be best used to accomplish project goals, approval was usually granted. DSF committee members had decided not to micro-manage the projects. Operation of the projects was left solely to the responsibility of NGOs. Another flexibility measure was the negotiation of payment terms. Backup by a careful assessment of the track record and capacity of the NGOs involved, DSF committee had adopted an aggressive approach in payment terms. As a result, NGOs could acquire some seed money out of the project grant sum at the beginning of the project, instead of waiting for reimbursement at the end. This arrangement is especially crucial in engaging smaller but more dynamic NGOs to conduct digital inclusion programs.

Feedback from members especially from the donors in the ICT industry was highly positive. Their direct involvement in interviewing the applicant organizations was in itself an educational process. It also provided opportunities for those coming from the ICT industry to share their expertise in different areas related to the applicant's program. Moreover, the corporate donors were able to participate in the programs by sending their volunteers to suitable activities. For fairness sake, all the interviews were conducted on the same day, making it necessary for the vetting committee members to continuously conduct interviews for 8 hours. The commitment was certainly high. Allegedly the experience was very meaningful and rewarding to them. In the past there was a belief that engagement of volunteers, especially corporate donors should be done in a mild way so as to avoid too heavy a work load. The experience of DSF was that as long as the process was engineered carefully the involvement could be done in a more demanding way in terms of money, effort and time.

The fund raising committee, apparently less demanding, met for a couple of times to discuss the promotion and fund raising strategies. Due to their contribution and established networks, the DSF was launched with good publicity coverage. There is a detailed scheme for fund raising. Fund raising strategies planned included a major dragon boat event where able bodies and people with disabilities will row together for digital inclusion.

More on Vetting Criteria

The development of the criteria has been an evolutionary process. At the beginning members only had a very vague idea of what constitute successful implementation of programs. References were made to the selection process of some existing Funds. Debates were conducted amongst members to ensure that all relevant dimensions raised were considered.

In the end, the first round selection, during which applications were judged by the merits of their proposals, focused on the likelihood of successful delivery and the likelihood of casting significant impact on society. As a consequence, the criteria on effectiveness and impact were most heavily weighted. Committee members were hopeful that the DSF would need the first batch of projects to become showcases.

The second round selection involves five equally weighted criteria, and is conducted by a different subcommittee to the first round. Projects that had survived the first round screening basically were all worth supporting. Therefore projects at the second round screening were merely considered on relative terms. For example, projects that are more sustainable in the long run and which tackle relative more urgent social needs would be given a higher priority. The relative competency of the project owners, prudence and method of evaluation of the project would all affect the final marks.

Digital Solidarity Fund – Results

A total of 59 applications were received in this first batch of DSF announcement and 10 were short listed for interview. Amongst the 10, only 6 were chosen to be granted. All projects were chosen according to their own merit. Competition was very keen and the decision was a difficult one. The DSF Committee was of the opinion that since the first batch of projects will become the basis for further promotion, it would be important for them to demonstrate to the public the effectiveness and importance of DSF. For these six projects, a sum of \$940,653 was allocated. They have project durations ranging from five months to two years. Among these projects, two of them serve senior citizens in all districts of Hong Kong. The rest of the four were targeted towards serving a multiple audience including youth, children, women from poor families in deprived, remote areas. These six projects were carried out in a wide variety of formats, from digital centers, outreaching trainings, and computer recycling to the matching of youth and senior citizens, and the provision of technical support and workshops. Altogether a total of 45,395 persons would benefit from these six

projects. The six projects were all having different timelines. A brief description of the four projects is given below.

1 E-angel - Cybersenior Network Development Association

Senior people who are computer users have almost doubled in number in two years. By early 2005, there were about a 4% of 65+ who were reported to as computer users, amounting to a population of around 40,000. Research indicated that one of the most common hurdles of senior persons learning computer was that their speed of learning a new technique was in general lower than younger learners. They also had a greater need for encouragement and technical support when they hit a usage problem. The idea of doing a one-to-one match of relatively computer literate teenagers with senior computer learners had been experimented in a small scale manner in the past and received a very successful feedback.

With the support of the DSF, the E-angel program was launched in May 2005 with a target to have 100 pairs of youth volunteers and seniors matched so that the senior learners/computer users would obtain the support they needed via the matched young person, the E-angel. In order to encourage more youth volunteers to join this program and understand more about how seniors learning the use of computer, 12 basic computer classes were conducted in July 2005. Some interested youths were also invited to participate as teaching assistants in the classes.

After a series of promotion, there were 81 elders and 89 youths recruited and they were grouped in pairs or small groups according to their living districts as well as their IT knowledge and skills. Three briefings were given to the participants in three different residential districts respectively. Each pair was requested to meet at least three times during the summer. A total of 19 sessions at different computer venues were arranged for the seniors to practice their IT skills with their youth volunteers. Besides the arranged practice sessions, the youths and the elders were encouraged to meet at the elderly centers / youth centers or public libraries themselves according to their own convenience. In mid August, some sharing sessions were arranged for the youths and the seniors to share their opinions and views on this project, some valuable comments were collected during such sharing meetings.

A Graduation Ceremony was held on Saturday, 3 September 2005. Government officials and corporate donors attended the ceremony as guests of honor. Certificates were presented to all the participated youth volunteers and the elders. Moreover, 12

outstanding youth volunteers were selected and each was awarded with an outstanding volunteer certificate. Some selected digital works created by the participants was uploaded at cybersenior portal (www.hk1001.com) so as to encourage more seniors to learn using ICT.

2. The Mobile IT Service – The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hong Kong

NGOs in Hong Kong varied in their capacity. There are roughly a total of 2500+ physical units throughout the territory delivering services at the community level. For those NGOs who see the need for delivering computer training courses to their constituency but lacking the expertise to do so, it is important for them to solicit help from other more capable and experienced NGOs. The challenge is that NGOs in the community scatter in different locations, and that the set up cost of a fully furnished computer training room is quite high. In order to manage such initiative in a more cost effective way, the idea of having a mobile training facilities powered by portable computers and networks were explored.

The Mobile IT Service is a one-year project which aims at supporting different service units in the community to organize IT training courses to elderly, new arrivals, and other deprived groups. From July to August 2005, the community workers have been busy in building up the ground work of the project. That includes organizing the course structure, purchasing hardware and software, employing tutor, volunteer training and organizing publicity for the program. A total of 1600 letters and leaflets had been sent to all elderly service units, integrated family service centers, community centers, district board members. Positive response from 60 centers had been received. The first batch of training was held on early September 2005.

3. Digital Colorful World, Elderly Sharing Project – Caritas

Research indicates that when senior citizens engaged in ICT activities, they would best be supported by tutors who were senior citizens themselves. That was because a tutor of similar age, who had experienced similar technical and psychological difficulties, would be able to provide the learners with the appropriate encouragement and support.

The project was launched on 29 July 2005 at Yuen Long Town Hall. Yuen Long is a distant area occupied by a large volume of low income persons including new migrants. The project involved the establishment of a Community Internet Centre,

provision of free and low cost computer training courses and training of senior citizens as voluntary digital ambassador who will help other senior citizens with the learning of ICT skills. The project also promoted the collection of recycled computers in the community to support low income families in using ICT. It reached out to residential institutions such as elderly homes and hostels to promote the use of ICT amongst the seniors. (http://www.caritasse.org.hk/dsf_29_7/01-2005.htm)

4. *Enjoy in the Internet - Digital Inclusion Project in Tin Shui Wai*
--CTU Education Foundation Limited

Youth unemployment is very serious in Hong Kong. At the moment, it is estimated that there are around 40,000 unemployed young people. The unemployment rate of young people is almost double that of the general unemployment rate. One way of helping young people to unleash their potential and escape from the poverty trap is self-employment. The CTU had conducted a “Youth Self-employment Support Scheme (Computer Repairing)”. The group of graduates from that training course applied for DSF to build up their business in the community by supporting the disadvantaged population to access ICT. DSF committee considered the application as particularly meaningful because it would help both the service provider side (unemployed young people) and other disadvantaged people on the service recipient side. The project also involved the provision of recycled computers for those families that were in need. The youth group appealed to both private and public organizations for computer donations. In a month’s time, 50 computer sets were received and refurbished.

5. *Digital Community Concerning Project - MKKFA Chan Hing Social Service Centre*

Mong Kok area is right in the heart of the commercial centre on the Kowloon peninsula. It has the most advanced, artistically designed shopping malls and hotels and yet a couple of blocks away dwell the poorest population. Poverty is inherited in this area. To provide kids in this area with the necessary access to ICT so that they could compete in the mainstream society on less unequal ground is a significant strategy. Used computers were recycled and given to poor families. However recycled computers also come with more technical problems than new ones. Resources had of course never been adequate to fully address the ICT support and maintenance need. The Chan Hing Social Service, being one of the oldest social service organizations in that area, had established a small volunteer group to provide free ICT maintenance

and support service to poor families. The DSF Committee had decided to boost up this important service.

In June 2005, a total of 31 volunteers attended two briefing sessions during which the program content was introduced. In July and August 2006, trainings were conducted for 50 volunteers on technical support knowledge and skills. Currently, the support and maintenance service is being provided to the people and families in need in the community. Evaluation is being conducted so as to provide information for further service improvement.

6. Digital Equality Project - TWGHs Yu Mak Yuen Integrated Services Centre

This project aimed at providing a comprehensive scheme for inducing the use of ICT in Shamshuipo, the poorest area in Hong Kong. A fully furnished “Digital Resources Centre” with 16 sets of computers was open for public access. One special feature of this project was that all volunteers recruited were directly from private companies, ranging from ICT industry to property management. A curriculum called “Digital Project-based Learning Program” was specially designed for disadvantaged kids in the area. The purpose of the program was to encourage kids to learn via conducting computer projects. Moreover, the voluntary tutors will participate as Digimentors for the participating kids, answering queries online via a regular roster system. Deatails of the program could be found on their new website “Borderless Digital Zone” (www.digiland.org.hk).

Difficulties encountered and the road ahead

- 1) The issue of digital divide has to compete for attention with a wide range of social problems. Digital divide is not a concept as easy to understand as issues such as poverty and unemployment, despite the fact that it is related to poverty and unemployment to a large extent. Promotion of such linkages of concepts has to take place in a more intensive pace. Appeal to the government, the private sector and general public has to continue with a more carefully structured strategy. The DSF has launched a successful start. How to sustain it with a more powerful propaganda is going to be a challenge.
- 2) So far there is no territory wide target for combating digital divide. In the past that

was due to the lack of measurement. On completion of the Digital Inclusion Index which would reflect the severity of the digital gap, it would become possible to establish concrete performance indicators for digital inclusion. It would however, require the courage from the government side to bear political risk because failure and success of programs would then become more apparent. The DSF Committee could continue to serve as a buffer but the government still has to be accountable to the public for its contribution to DSF.

- 3) On another angle, given the track record of the government in withdrawing its support for even well conducted digital inclusion programs, it is uncertain whether it would continue its commitment with DSF in a long run. To increase the sustainability, digital inclusion must become an integral part of the general policy framework of anti-poverty. For instance, access to ICT must be acknowledged in social security payment as an essential expense for daily living and that there should be provision for disadvantaged groups such as the disabled to suitable equipment to access ICT. Such policy changes would certainly go beyond the mandate of only one single department within the government.
- 4) Looking at the work of the DSF Committee so far, the focus has mainly been placed upon the fund raising and grant making processes. It has not evolved into a real platform for discussing digital inclusion policies and strategies yet. How to push for the other 50% of its mission is going to be difficult. DSF certainly has a good ground to combine the practical tasks (selection of projects based on some missions and beliefs) with a wider macroscopic perspective, and become a major advocate for digital inclusion in Hong Kong. External stimulation, such as exchanging experience with international counterparts might catalyze that desired evolution.
- 5) The spectrum of the six supported programs at the moment covers mainly the area of accessibility and training. Services will be provided to enable individuals to gain access to equipments and learning opportunities. Whether accessibility alone would be empowering is doubtful. Real inclusion in information society should be related to usage, to the opportunity of using internet to communicate; the opportunity to use applications to solve daily problems and to express oneself. The notion of “application divide” had been raised during the course of project selection. At the moment, there are initiatives struggling to use internet for the creation of cyber-communities for disadvantaged groups such as senior citizens and people with disabilities. How to transform these initiatives into more

sustainable programs could well be the next focus of DSF.

- 6) Another missing piece within our range of applications is about the tackling of 'content divide'. Disadvantaged groups such as senior citizens and people with disabilities need to acquire content relevant to them. Having access to information related to the services government is providing for them serves as a good start but certainly not the end. Initiatives to tackle 'content divide' must come from the community instead of being government-led. The setting up of cyber-communities, as indicated in the last paragraph might help to initiate a forum where the needs could be reflected. At the same time, the forum would serve to tackle another dimension of the 'content divide', i.e. the need for the disadvantaged groups not only to acquire relevant content but also to produce the content. We have heard that some community groups are beginning to teach senior citizens in the usage of blogs. We are looking forward to funding applications in the second batch related to the alleviation of 'content divide'.
- 7) Set up as a tool to engage the business community in digital inclusion, DSF has only been able to attract donation from big cooperates so far. It is important for it to extend its donor base to small and medium size enterprises, given SME in fact make up the major portion of the business sector in Hong Kong. To this end, there must be a new scheme to involve smaller companies, in which donation in kind and in cash would both be acknowledged and that direct engagement of supporters and donors in digital inclusion programs remains. The fund raising committee has designed a list of programs to execute in the coming year.
- 8) Finally, there is the issue of volunteer maintenance. The recruitment of volunteers has never been a problem. To retain volunteers in digital inclusion programs is not an easy task. That would require a detail analysis of tasks involved, the clarification of expectation via well designed induction programs and the on going support for volunteers. A lot of NGOs are still lacking the resources for proper volunteers training and support, resulting in the improper engagement and low sustainability of volunteer input. Funding body including DSF should look at support for volunteer as real human capital investment instead of merely exploitation of cheap labor.

Concluding remarks

Digital divide in Hong Kong is unlikely to be solved by NGOs alone. DSF is an

attempt to engage the government and the private sector as equal partners in tackling social problems. It has therefore implications far beyond the realm of digital divide. It seems that with the government demonstrating a commitment towards social development issues, the contribution of the private sector in various manners could well be orchestrate towards outcomes desired by the community as a whole. And NGOs, having the knowledge of the subject matter and staying close to the needs of the community, could best play the main role of program execution. While DSF seems to have accommodated effectively a multi-stakeholder approach at this beginning stage, whether it will evolve into a sustainable social venture capital fund depends heavily on the good will of all the stakeholders involved; the capability of our expertise in providing hand-holding and other advisory services; as well as the performance of the first six projects it funded.

Out of the six projects funded only 1 had been completed by the time when this article is written. According to the plans submitted, all projects will be completed by mid 2007. Although their long term impact would not be known upon their completion, evaluation reports then would constitute the beginning of a digital inclusion program knowledge base. It is envisaged that in the long run, digital inclusion practitioners in the community would not only solicit financial support from the Fund but would also be able to learn from, and contribute to, a growing knowledge base.

Appendix:

1st round vetting criteria

1. Coverage (15%)
 - number of clients served
 - types of clients served
 - duration of project
2. Effectiveness (30%)
 - per dollar output
 - To what extent would the project achieve its stated purposes effectively?
3. Innovation and creativity (15%)
 - Has similar project been conducted before in Hong Kong? (inverse parameter)
 - Creativity of projects in terms of modality?
4. Impact (30%)
 - To what extent would the project induce sustainable behavioral change to service recipients?
 - To what extent would the project generate an impact in society in terms of bridging the digital gap?
5. Experience, capacity and productivity (10%)
 - Has similar project been conducted before by the same NGO?
 - To what extent is the NGO being perceived as capable of delivering the project?
 - To what extent is the NGO being perceived as capable of handling the contingencies involved in the project?

2nd round vetting criteria

Equal weighting

1. Urgency
 - Is it necessary that the service should be provided by the organization?
 - How urgent are the community needs?

2. Competency
 - Does the project critically address the community needs and strengthen the community's capacity?
 - What are the strengths of the organization to run the project?
 - Does the track record of the organization give it credibility to handle the project?

3. Sustainability
 - How the organization ensure the sustainability of the project?
 - If this project is a long-term project, is the sustainability plan reasonable?
 - If this is a time-limited project, will the impact be sustained?

4. Prudence
 - Is the proposed budget reasonable given the size of the project?
 - If there is a cost cut down on budget, will the organization still go for the project?

5. Evaluation
 - Does the evaluation plan effectively measure the performance of the project (output and outcome)?
 - Will the evaluation be an ongoing process?
 - Will all stakeholders be involved in the evaluation (staff, volunteers, participants and etc)

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