



## Case Study

# Ecuador

## NGO Sustainability in a Networked World

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This is an account of an Ecuadorian NGO struggling to become sustainable while its country and core institutions were scarcely sustainable themselves. These are the lessons distilled from that NGO's search for a new vision in times of deep social and financial uncertainty. They center on employing information and communication technology (ICT) processes and applications to promote organizational strengthening, renewal, and sustainability. Those who have been involved in the early reality-testing of ICTs will be able to recognize the experiences that inspired these lessons. For those who have not, the lessons are presented to describe the potential of ICTs for improving organizational reach, efficacy, and even purpose, as well as to highlight the challenges involved in trying to do so.



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## CEPAR

The Center for Population and Social Development Studies (CEPAR) is an organization based in Quito with an impressive record of achievements. The organization has depended, as so many other NGOs in poor countries, on donors' support to accomplish its work. CEPAR undertook this project to advance its organizational development objectives with the help of ICTs. Before the project began, CEPAR had not experienced the communications potential ICTs can

enable. Nor had it grasped the relationship between sustainability and ICTs. For these reasons, some CEPAR staff were confused by project goals and said:

*"We are a social development organization. We serve others. We will never be able to become sustainable. This idea makes no sense."*

*"Next month, as we struggle to survive, we will have more computers than people left here. Should we open a telecenter perhaps?"*

Strengthening  
Organizations  
Ecuador

CASE STUDY  
2

Box

## CEPAR

1

Since its inception in 1978, CEPAR has promoted informed policy dialogue on population, health, and social development matters. It has accomplished this by conducting field and analytic demographic research and by engaging in information, education, and communication (IEC) activities, particularly for health and population authorities and social leaders. Historically, the organization was associated with population and family planning studies, and its acronym reflects this initial focus on "responsible parenthood."

Over the past 20 years, in association with international partners, CEPAR has conducted 25 surveys, three national demographic studies, and 130 case studies on health, population, communication, and social policy topics. It has hosted nearly 1,000 professional development and networking events for over 90,000 participants, ranging from symposiums, panels, and round table discussions to specialized courses, workshops, and high profile conferences.

Among its information resources are several Ecuadorian demographic databases, most notably SICEPAR, as well as a specialized documentation center and a press clippings archive. The technologically advanced Informatics unit pioneered massive data entry, processing, and statistical analyses, and its Communications department published a quarterly magazine and newsletters and offered advice on developing communication plans and training materials.

Through its different units and cadres of professionals, CEPAR has collaborated with and provided services to the Ecuadorian Ministry of Health and other public institutions, international and regional groups, and academic, research, and civil society organizations.

CEPAR's continued and influential work has been recognized both nationally and internationally. In 1991, CEPAR received the Worldwide Population Prize from the United Nations. Ecuadorian authorities also have honored CEPAR for its contributions to research and analysis of health and population policies.

Yet CEPAR had to find new ways to expand its products and services and enhance its outreach and communication ability to survive financially. USAID, a long-term, major donor in the country, was phasing out its support for many health, family planning, and microenterprise activities and organizations—including CEPAR.

USAID had played a key role in many development sectors in Ecuador, advancing poverty alleviation strategies and economic growth and micro-enterprise activities. Its support also prompted policy and legislative dialogue and reforms and contributed substantially to health, population, and child survival programs. In the late 1990s, however, USAID began shifting its programmatic focus to the environment and biodiversity, judicial reform, anti-corruption efforts, and border activities resulting from the Ecuador-Peru peace accord. "USAID is working with Ecuadorian private and public sector institutions to: 1) increase sustainable economic growth for a broad base of the population; 2) reduce levels of mortality and fertility; 3) strengthen sustainable democracy; and 4) manage the environment for long-term sustainability

LearnLink<sup>1</sup> was asked to work with CEPAR in September 1997, because USAID wanted to help CEPAR become sustainable in light of the planned closeout scheduled for September 2000.

LearnLink's collaboration with CEPAR came at a time when the organization was starting to redefine its vision, mission, and core activity areas—at the particular organizational moment when CEPAR was developing detailed strategic plans that addressed crucial sustainability issues. In hindsight, this ICT intervention could not have come at a worse time—or a better one.

### **Ecuador: Country Context**

Ecuador is characterized by a mix of cultures and recent urban migration. Among its 12 million people—55 percent mestizo and 25 percent indigenous—most live equally divided between the highlands and coastal areas. Half the population now lives in urban areas, with few living in the rainforest. Quito, the political capital, is a cosmopolitan city with a small town geniality. It is also rich in history and culture, and the cityscape is dotted with cathedrals and museums of Baroque and religious art. The country's diversity is reflected not only in its culture

but also in its geography. Though land area is small, Ecuador has one of the highest levels of biodiversity in the world.

Despite its rich culture and geography, Ecuador is also a land of widespread poverty, afflicting nearly 70% of its population. Continued poor economic performance over several decades has exacerbated the situation and limited growth in social development. Recently, Ecuador went through dramatic macroeconomic crises, subsequent political crises, and, concomitantly, a cultural "loss of hope." It is only in the last couple of years, after substantial setbacks, that the country is gaining ground on the economic and social development track.

Civil society organizations and NGOs were not at all immune from these events—the strands of generalized poverty cut across them, too. NGOs in Ecuador—and there are thousands of them, big and small—have been indispensable actors in social change and development, and most have consistently relied on the support of cooperating and donor agencies. In return, they have delivered valuable development processes and results. Several NGOs are highly specialized in services or target groups and areas while others are relatively isolated from each other and, in some instances, in competition for resources.

### **The project's focus**

While CEPAR already had an Informatics unit that used computers for certain functions—and some staff who were quite proficient at managing electronic databases and statistical programs—the organization had not realized the full ICT potential. It was unaware of the potential benefits of larger networking, interactive communication, and information collection and dissemination capabilities. USAID hoped that introducing the organization to this potential and supporting the integration of ICT tools into the organization's operations and service provision would strengthen its prospects for self-sufficiency.

In general, LearnLink's task was to help CEPAR use ICTs to improve its effectiveness and catalyze sustainability efforts, improve networking with similar NGOs and institutions, and expand its information, education, and advocacy reach and influence.

The project objectives included assisting in the creation of a CEPAR web site and designing an online version of CEPAR's "*Correo Poblacional y de Salud*"

magazine. Since CEPAR's staff are already familiar with information technology applications, at least partially, the project's specific aims were to:

- expand the organization's electronic information options and services;
- enhance its electronic networking capabilities and services among health and population-related Ecuadorian NGOs and institutions; and
- help develop a similar networking capacity within the Andean region.

From the first day, however, the overriding concern was for CEPAR's long-term relevance and sustainability. Thus the USAID task order was not only about creating and sustaining a web site CEPAR could call its own or about developing Internet and networking capabilities within the organization and its partners. It was really about developing new organizational skills, which ICT tools could facilitate.

From past work, CEPAR was well supplied with computers and software applications. Before 1997, however, CEPAR had not ventured into the communicative aspects of ICTs, nor taken a proactive role in networking. While CEPAR did have ICT components and functions—prerequisites for a meaningful transition towards the full use of modern technology—it had not taken advantage of the internal or external communication potential of the computers they had. While, over time, they had instituted a shared drive of information for common use, email was not used, the Internet and World Wide Web were not accessed, and, simply put, there was no notion of how to use ICTs as a communications medium or as a means to access, share, and disseminate information.

The strategy and scope of activities that LearnLink developed and implemented, with significant CEPAR participation, set an ambitious, long-term navigational chart. CEPAR's internal perception that computer activities were short-term, however, limited the broader impact of the technical assistance, provided by the Intercultural Center for Research in Education (INCRE). Moreover, as the country started to slide into its most severe economic and political crisis of the century, the relevance and efficacy of planning a long-term ICT strategy was challenged, but the products were completed despite some mishaps and delays. The larger issue of survival and relevance is an ongoing challenge. Some key lessons emerged from this process.



CEPAR Magazine

## Box CEPAR CD-ROM

2

An example of how complicated it is to create a change in perspective about ICTs came about at CEPAR's public event to showcase its new "e-capabilities," which were unfamiliar to many of the invited NGOs. LearnLink advised CEPAR staff to bring in all the physical documents that they had managed to squeeze into their first CD-ROM and then to add up what buying all those publications would amount to. The results were staggering. Two very heavy boxes of valued CEPAR publications were not enough to balance the CD-ROM's embedded intellectual weight. Of more interest, however, was the result of the pricing. To approach the revenue of the individual print documents, the CD-ROM would have to be sold at about 100 times its special sale cost! And even if they sold it at such a low price, would not other organizations now have at their disposal, almost for free, the product of so much hard work over the years?

Strengthening  
Organizations  
Ecuador

CASE STUDY  
2

## ICTs for Sustainability

As part of its sustainability strategy, CEPAR conducted a strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis while it simultaneously revised its core mission. Shortly after, LearnLink facilitated a SWOT focused on communication, ICTs, and CEPAR's future, plus a staff survey that focused on CEPAR's communication capabilities and flows. These participatory exercises engaged all of the staff in the challenge and provided a dual benefit: it was a collective learning experience that shaped ensuing tasks, helped locate discrete interventions within the organization's ongoing programs, and identified its core concern: achieving sustainability, somehow.

Nevertheless, some expected that ICTs, or a web site, would readily produce income. This notion was then extended to the products and services CEPAR might provide to partner NGOs, some of which, in the end, did generate income. Unfortunately, when discussing ICTs' role in sustainability, a common mistake occurs in ignoring the time frame. ICT contributions to sustainability over short periods are small. Just as in the private sector, ICT effects are long-term. While ICT up-front costs are usually taken up by donors, operating costs are not negligible for an NGO, and an e-network cannot be expected to be cost-efficient during the initial, low-coverage reach and impact period.

Moreover, far too much importance may be attached to the technological instruments as such, rather than to the people who actually make sustainability with ICTs happen. For CEPAR, the added value of the ICTs was not just that the NGO had some new tools for serving other entities, nor that it could offer cheaper e-services. Ultimately, ICTs have an increased chance to contribute to sustainability when they are enmeshed into the organization's own, substantive work. This means that the issue is not merely financial, but organizational, which implies a concurrent strategy: Invest in strengthening the staff and the organization's capacities to integrate ICTs into its work.

When an NGO is committed, collective capacity-building works wonders. If the support is merely lukewarm, the focus should be on motivated individuals, with or without an ICT background, that push the ICT value forward.

Another lesson learned regarding the value of ICTs for organizational sustainability has to do with

visioning. This presents a dual challenge. Not only must the organization provide a vision for the specific ICT intervention, but also ICT activities must be integrated into the entity's broader vision of itself. The link to sustainability is that, in the end, being sustainable is just a valid means for a higher end: the entity's continued relevance.

### Assessments, Visions, and Project Designs

NGOs that are not up to speed on ICT facts and trends do well to start with an assessment of their understanding and capacity. This does not mean an external, number-crunching, expensive exercise. It does mean group commitment to honest, in-depth democratic discussion and incisive questioning. An outside professional facilitator can help move the process productively. This should be a participatory learning exercise, an opportunity for exploring and strategizing the future on firm ground.

Assessments, however, need both a vision and an ensuing action plan. While the full set of CEPAR assessments were instructive about needs and wants and status and prospects, the organization's integration of ICTs for sustainability was slow. In general, the organizational adoption of ICTs is not immediate, and its ripple effects on efficiencies and effectiveness take considerable time to flourish as organizational and personal barriers are overcome.

Slow integration is not surprising in an environment where ICTs for development are not the overriding concern and where communication connections are poor. Skepticism about ICT value abounds, fueled, in part, by immediate operating expenses. In the end, CEPAR adopted some ICT-enabled survival strategies and actions, but they did not correspond to the Task Order timeline. Moreover, they were adopted at a time when CEPAR was reinventing itself. The organization was shifting from a well-known and recognized past experiential tradition (population and health studies and policy dialogue) into a valid but far more diffuse vision of 'social development' generally, into which myriad competent NGOs provide their contributions. Finally, the exercise took place just as CEPAR found itself facing national crises, the imminent end of USAID's support, and the loss of its Communication and Informatics department heads and their specific technical leadership.

Integrating ICTs into the already challenging vision-



and-mission activity, along with the efforts to develop coherent long and short-range work plans, affected the outcome in practical ways, e.g., what the web site would be about, whether the online Journal should change its focus, who the prime audiences and users-to-be of the new online existence were, and so on.

More generally, the question was, “How, precisely, can ICTs be used as instruments to sustain an NGO whose vision and mission merit its continuance in similar or enhanced roles? It is well known that a sensible, proper use and dosage of ICTs can enhance the quantity and quality of an organization’s reach, the efficacy and eventual impact of its activities and results, and the efficiency with which the above two are obtained. The trick is in actualizing such potential.

If there is no in-depth discussion and agreement on what an organization is, what it does (or will be able to do, provided “a,” “b” and “c”), then the mere usage of ICT artifacts, as expressed in a web site or an email distribution list, will neither convey nor generate an adequate image of the new organization. The medium, in this case, is not automatically—and does not substitute for—the message.

On the other hand, whatever is presented, promoted, and communicated through ICT instruments—web sites, email, CD-ROMs—does indeed create an organizational presence and image. For most users, the online entity perceived is the only face of the entity they will ever get to know, and the “real” and the “virtual” must match.

ICTs are crucial instruments that can express what the organization is about and strives to achieve, or they can entirely miss the chance. Three ways in which ICTs can contribute to enhancing an organization’s *raison d’être* were derived from the CEPAR experience: the web site, e-services, and e-networking. Ideally each of them nurtures the other two.

### 1. Web site as a Communication Challenge

One of the most significant outcomes of the intervention occurred in the process of developing the web site. The development of the web site involved a careful, step-by-step exercise that had most of CEPAR’s staff working side-by-side with INCRE professionals. First, input for the design, focus, and content of the site was generated via in-depth consultations with all CEPAR content providers, regardless of their roles as trainers, communicators, or population researchers.

Subsequently, the technical staff from CEPAR labored to get the web site up and running. CEPAR staff had no previous web site experience and found constructing a web site involved many content and architecture decisions. The web site ([www.cepar.org.ec](http://www.cepar.org.ec)) is operational and has been redesigned twice. As with all web sites, it needs regular updates and revisions including links to other web sites.

As a web site evolves, the skills the staff develops and their ability to share those skills with others are very important. These are not just technical skills—but communication skills in conveying exactly what the organization stands for and does. Web site development, updating, and growth need to advance in parallel with the entity’s own growth. It is important to continue to invest in staff development for ICT competencies.

To enhance their identity, social value, and strategic repositioning, ICT-endowed NGOs such as CEPAR need their web sites to evolve. Typically, these tend to start as mere online mechanical replications of the real organization, but they easily can grow into much more. A well-developed web site can help the organization evolve into an enhanced, value-added online entity and resource center, and, perhaps, into an access and training source for similar-minded organizations that lack ICTs.

The most strategically relevant lesson, however, is to treat the web site as a communication challenge. A web site is the main message the institution can convey, worldwide, and it is worthwhile employing one of the growing number of tools that can be adapted to analyze, design, build, and test a web site for its communicative potential.

### Marketing ICTs as a Communication Challenge.

Understandably, information technology people are less attuned to communication theory. A paraphrase from one staff member explained that, “I am much happier and comfortable talking about switches and routers with this expert you sent us than attempting to understand what a web site has to do with communication. We have a communication person here.” But the organization had a strong tradition in information, education, and communication activities, events and products, and seeing ICTs as a new communication challenge beyond wires was important.

Communication issues discussed with CEPAR included

- Who are—or should be—the prime target audiences for the web site? What will compel them to come in, enjoy the experience, tell others, and then come back regularly?
- What exactly will the audience take away from the web site? What messages, impressions, and signals about the organization are conveyed? Are they good or bad? Are they accurate?
- More practically, if you were a potential user of the web site's resources, what is there that helps you, your work, and/or the people and NGO you work with? What can you find in there that is not otherwise available, or is more conveniently available, e.g., free, or in Spanish, or immediately?
- Who are the key users and stakeholders you must invite to the web site party; i.e., those who really must get the CEPAR message? Then, how do you guarantee that they do?

One key lesson was that putting a message online is not enough. A web site cannot just “be there” to say a result is achieved. It needs to affect users somehow—they like it or not, they get information, they interact, find a useful tidbit or a wonderful piece of advice, and then they move elsewhere through a good link. Subsequently, the results of the visit may impact another activity or person. An online presence is the beginning, not the end of the journey.

What is put on the web site matters, but it also matters that people come to the site and use it. Aggressive promotion of the site is needed. In the case of CEPAR, the promotion was performed through the NGO's real life partners and friends. As part of a social marketing strategy, CEPAR's two events were held to introduce the web site, its other e-products, and the capabilities of the NGO. Marketing stresses the importance of carefully identifying desired audiences and consumers and delivering effective messages to the right buyers and users. While this is not an “ICT matter” per se, it is a valid concern for web sites, and the project encouraged CEPAR to scrutinize its mailing lists, events participants, and so on, and then target information that would interest them.

## 2. Adding Value Through Easily Achievable e-Products and e-Services

While CEPAR's “Correo” quarterly magazine is now published online, the print publication was discontinued because its distribution was financially unsustainable. Not only did the staff produce the online magazine on their own, but they also produced, with no further help, the first-ever CD-ROM in CEPAR's 20-year history. CEPAR also advised other, smaller NGOs on ICT uses.

Some of CEPAR's activities, such as demographic and health research analyses and results, are now available online or on CD-ROM. Until recently, regular emails of CEPAR's bulletins and special alerts reached a growing, but still restricted, list of subscribers worldwide. But NGOs like CEPAR urgently need to increase the quantity and quality of electronic products and move toward more sophisticated offerings, such as discussion lists, online events, and even some manageable distance training opportunities.

A lesson here is that expanding e-services and products can begin with simple, low-cost strategies and activities. The first CD-ROM, for instance, took advantage of already completed work, and the value of the product and the experience were enormous. Recovery of CD-ROM costs was possible because the development costs already had been covered.

Producing information is one thing; marketing it to relevant users is another. In this case, as USAID suggested, cooperating agencies and public and private entities were a potential market for this CD-ROM, considering the amount of quality information and analysis they packed in.

Many NGOs such as CEPAR already have vast, archival research resources, publications, or educational or development materials that can be made available online or in electronic formats. Of course, considerable work is required to digitize the rich collections of materials that organizations have produced.

Additionally, many NGOs have resources in languages other than English, as was the case for CEPAR. In some cases, too, the resources may be from the perspective of the local cultural milieu, contexts and populations, a comparative advantage sometimes lacking in the work of international or Northern NGOs. Smaller, more resource-deprived local NGOs may partner with a more resource-favored entity to digitize existing materials.

Indeed, an NGO already possessing ICT capabilities can help smaller NGOs and community-based organizations (CBOs) develop in this area. In the case of CEPAR, the project proposed that the organization serve as “an incubator of electronic products and services,” which could be achieved in three concurrent ways

1. by “adopting” NGOs and CBOs within its own web site, which could evolve into a portal. Such entities could be smaller, with fewer resources, or simply some that were not yet prepared to want an independent online presence but could benefit from being visible on the Internet.
2. by providing preparatory and ancillary services and product development to similar entities, including training, tutoring, and production and co-production of e-materials.
3. by incubating and growing e-networks themselves. This was a particularly strong possibility for CEPAR, given its pre-established capabilities in creating, leading, or supporting real-life networks.

The lesson for similar NGOs is that organizations having competencies in both social development and in uses of ICTs for development, as well as skills in producing ICT materials such as web sites, CD-ROMs, and distance learning modules, have a competitive edge. Applying ICTs to education or development matters involves more than technology.

In the suggestions LearnLink made to CEPAR, two concurrent action lines were indicated for increasing range, quality, and reach of e-services and products: The first was to expand the supply of e-services or offerings, and the second was to expand core users and captivate audiences. To have a sustained, useful, and relevant presence and influence, NGOs going online should embark on a deliberate effort to conquer the right audiences and retain the core, strategic users.

### 3. A Network Is Not a Link — Real Networks Need e-Networks

By the end of the project, other NGOs—mainly smaller groups with which CEPAR had a prior relationship, such as the provincial Health Network—had begun to benefit from CEPAR’s expertise in web

site design, CD-ROM production, and e-communication. It was hoped that a far more expanded effort would ensue after the organization’s final promotional outreach.

Unfortunately, while Ecuador seemed at a standstill due to its economic and political crises, there was a hiatus in organizational networking among institutions. Lack of adequate connectivity conditions was a very real impediment to being online, as was the cost of equipment and connection fees. Perhaps, it was thought, such an investment should wait for better times, especially since others locally were not getting connected, either.

As if those material impediments were not enough, some CEPAR staff at first understood networking to mean linking, that is, having a web site hyperlink to another entity. But a development network is not just a collection of links

CEPAR had a tradition of facilitating key real-life networks. In Latin America, at least, the notion of networking has been around for decades and had nothing to do with the current notion of “e-networking.” Built on existing relationships—with pre-digital understandings—these real-life networks included existing relationships with groups that shared values, interests, causes, or action fields, even though the groups or individuals only met or communicated irregularly through conventional person-to-person means. Translating these pre-existing networks into the digital realm has been more of a challenge than was originally imagined.

#### Online Visibility

For NGOs that use and depend on person-to-person communication networks, more adequate and effective results can occur by aggressively expanding electronic networks topically, geographically, or socio-culturally. This can be done modularly, with a modicum of technology expertise to manage the obvious ICT requirements. But members must commit to providing the substantive contents that are exchanged and discussed among network partners. With adequate motivation and training, these leader NGOs also can bring other reluctant and technologically hesitant partners into the ICT realm of networking.

Although in e-networking, all postings are theoretically available to anyone, anytime, anywhere, the strategy suggested for CEPAR involved a

progression from the known outwards. Thus, the following realms—each with distinct core partners and key intended users and topics of relevance—were suggested:

- Local, tangible, real networks; real people; and NGOs: The NGOs know them, have met the people, visited their workplaces, and joined them at events. E-networks can take advantage of that familiarity by building upon that trust and on common needs and interests, for example by offering online seminars or follow-up training. Then other entities can be approached, such as local public sector agencies, donors, private sector groups, and other NGOs. These groups may not be online, or, if they are, may not belong to the network. Simply informing some entities regularly that the NGO is there, doing something, is the beginning, though sharing insights, contributions, and reports is even better.
- National level networks: Even if it were not to lead, the NGO should join existing e-networks of relevance created and run by others, which enables staying abreast of what is happening that concerns the NGO and its environment.
- Regional or sub-regional: In CEPAR's case, this meant getting into the Andean region, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking areas or entities. In these cases, there were comparative advantages for networking due to culture, language, or shared problems. To an extent, the foundations for selectively joining e-networks were derived from prior person-to-person and organizational knowledge and trust built through pre-existing, "real-life" networks.
- The world, but focused and one part at a time. Many NGOs play an intermediary role between local partners and the populations they serve, on the one hand, and cooperating agencies and development aid organizations on the other. Such NGOs cannot be absent from the important international networks. They can and should be selective and focused, but they must not be out of those circuits. The advantages of belonging are many. The added contribution the NGO can provide is to serve as a legitimate mediator and to express both its own views as well as the views of those who do not have a means to voice them.

NGOs and other civil society groups and community-based organizations coming into the e-networked world face a challenge when deciding to use ICTs. A natural option may be a minimalist one: use them to improve some internal processes, have a symbolic postcard presence on the Internet, email occasionally, surf once in a while, and leave it all to the information technology staff (many times, just one technician).

There is a better option, parts of which have been outlined here already, but it requires strategic commitments and hard work, most of it offline, in the real world, before and after it is made valuable online.

Given today's globally networked contexts, organizations that do not embrace ICTs—as much as their means allow for—may risk becoming obsolete, marginal, and irrelevant. Those that find a way to wield ICTs as the powerful tools they are, integrating them into major and minor tasks and using them for outreach through online messages, products and services, benefit from being present.

Development organizations today are not just increasingly online. They are conquering those new spaces for enhanced visibility, better outreach, and concerted actions. Social development organizations populate the Internet, though not all are developing, prospering, and growing equally.

While people in developing countries, such as those served by NGOs, will still lack adequate access to ICTs, mediating organizations increasingly have it. Thus, they can use vast numbers of relevant electronic resources to enhance the quality and effectiveness of their conventional, real-world reach and services.

Moreover, NGOs that do not partner with or have a mediating role regarding international development aid are invisible, unfortunately, to donors if they do not have an Internet presence, particularly since another NGO certainly will be found online.

Thus, an inadvertent or deliberate absence from Internet and development-relevant electronic networks, forums, and even plain-vanilla hyperlinks can be problematic. At worst, it can deprive otherwise leading and competent NGOs from having a substantive role in the international development conversations, exchanges and cooperation. For this reason, development aid is—and will continue to be—concerned about supporting organizational capacity-building and effectiveness with ICTs.

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## Footnotes

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