United Nations Development Fund for Women

BRIDGING THE GENDER DIGITAL DIVIDE IN AFRICA THROUGH STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

Background

The Digital Divide is presently at the center of international development concerns. A series of factors, including literacy and education, language, time, cost, geographical location, social and cultural norms constrain women's access to information technology around the world. Africa is an area of greatest concern, as African women have the world's lowest participation rates in science and technology education at all levels. ICTs have the potential to assist poor women by providing information and training on methodologies to improve their productivity and their quality of life. Moreover, ICTs today can offer new opportunities for women to be employed in innovative and non-traditional sectors.

The Digital Diaspora Initiative

In January 2002 in New York, UNIFEM launched the Digital Diaspora Initiative to build strategic partnerships between African IT entrepreneurs in the Diaspora and women's organizations and business associations in Africa. The initiative seeks to undertake projects that empower women economically through capacity building in the use of ICTs, by harnessing the expertise of African ICT entrepreneurs in the Diaspora. The initiative is guided by a Global Advisory Committee (GAC) comprised of African ICT entrepreneurs from the Diaspora, ICT experts and representatives of the private sector and the UN system. The Digital Diaspora Initiative was re-launched in Africa in May 2003, during a Regional Meeting hosted by the Government of Uganda and organized by UNIFEM with UNDP, UN ICT Task Force, UN OSCAL and UNFIP. The meeting brought together the Global Advisory Committee and members of the Digital Diaspora Network for Africa with selected African Ministers and Parliamentarians,

representatives of the NEPAD Secretariat, of the private sector, NGOs and the UN System.
The GAC has developed a strategic framework for action, focusing its work around three priorities:

- Creating an enabling ICT environment for African women - regulatory and infrastructure issues
- Country-level Capacity Building
- Business Linkages and Networking

Based on the framework, a comprehensive programme "Bridging the Gender Digital Divide in Africa through Strategic Partnerships" has been developed, to be initially piloted in nine African countries.

"Bridging the Gender Digital Divide in Africa through Strategic Partnerships"

The Programme seeks to empower African women through innovative uses of Information Communications Technologies (ICT). The overall goal is to create an enabling environment for African women to influence all aspects of ICT use and policy at national, regional and international levels.
The main objectives of the Programme are:

1. To build the capacity of African women's business oriented organizations in the use of ICT in the context of economic empowerment. The Programme will provide training to the management and staff of the selected partner organizations in the use of ICTs. It will also assist them in providing ICT related training, services, and access to finance for their members. The training component will be realized mainly through a technology transfer programme, similar to the TOKTEN programme implemented by UNDP, in which the trainers will be chosen from a roster of African experts in the Diaspora. The programme will also set up business incubators

and will facilitate local mentorship for women entrepreneurs lacking access to the larger business community in their countries.

2. <u>To generate ICT-related training, employment and entrepreneurship opportunities for African women</u>, through the creation of business linkages between African women ICT workers and entrepreneurs and African ICT entrepreneurs in the Diaspora. The programme will create an international mentorship committee, and business roundtables will be set up to facilitate business partnerships involving African women small and medium entrepreneurs. The programme will also include the establishment of a venture capital fund for women's ICT-related businesses.

3. <u>To enhance women's participation to dialogue on ICT policy formulation and implementation</u> at the national and regional level, by building capacity and opportunities at the local level to advocate for gender-sensitive ICT policies. This component will build local capacity for advocacy on gender and ICTs, creating advocacy groups and opportunities for dialogue about ICT policy at the national level. The programme will also implement a media outreach strategy to give visibility to the advocacy groups' work and to encourage a wider debate about the benefits and best practices of ICTs use for development. A database of African women ICT experts will also be established in each country, as a resource for identifying ICT experts to participate in advocacy work and role models for the media outreach strategy.

A sharing of experiences and information through a web-based Knowledge Management Programme about this initiative is envisioned among UNIFEM, beneficiary organizations, implementing partners, as well as other donor organizations. Such information will be of interest to grassroots organizations who are seeking to better support their constituencies in the area of women's economic empowerment through ICTs.

Ongoing Activities

- Partnership with the UN ICT Task Force, Digital Partners and Gruppo Cerfe has been forged in the launch of a complementary initiative, the Digital Diaspora Network Africa (DDNA), a broader Diaspora network for Africa with chapters in North America and Europe.

- UNIFEM supported the creation of a WSIS Gender Caucus, including women's groups

and organizations in the field of ICT worldwide, to catalyze women's rights and organizing around the preparatory processes of the World Summit of the information Society (WSIS).

- UNIFEM is currently executing a multi-donor funded project in support of the WSIS Gender Caucus, "Bridging the Gender Digital Divide in the Information Society", aimed at effectively integrating and reinforcing gender equality perspectives in the Information Society arena, particularly in the preparations and outcome processes of the WSIS. The project will raise awareness on issues of gender and ICTs, build capacity of gender advocates and develop a sustainable network of gender and ICT advocates drawn from all regions of the world. As part of this project, UNIFEM is funding the electronic networking activities of the WSIS Gender Caucus.

- In June 2003, implementation of the first pilot project of the Digital Diaspora Initiative has started in Rwanda. Funded through the Japan WID Fund, the project will link Rwandese women entrepreneurs with ICT trainers and ICT entrepreneurs from the African Diaspora, and build a national advocacy group on gender and ICT issues.

- The Global Advisory Committee Diaspora entrepreneurs are developing a portal to match information technology needs of African women with the resources of the African Digital Diaspora. The portal will be a gateway to information on the Digital Diaspora corps to bring technology transfer to women's ICT-enabled enterprises; to incubators for African women's IT and IT-enabled businesses; and to a venture capital fund to be established by the Digital Diaspora to support African women's IT and IT-enabled businesses.