

A personal statement for the United Nations Volunteer position with the LDC Initiative

By Tariq Mohammed, October 4, 2002

John Gage, Chief Scientist at Sun Microsystems eloquently states that “access by all to ICTs enables new bonds to form between individuals, communities, villages, regions, families and institution; these emerging bonds are the substance of how information and communication technologies (ICTs) affect development.”¹ My job at one of the hottest research programs focusing on eDevelopment is where I gained excellent exposure to cutting-edge, action-oriented projects that aimed to foster such bonds. This opportunity familiarized me with the major strategic issues surrounding networked readiness through the research, management and outreach activities of the Information Technologies Group in Cambridge, MA. However while working at Harvard there was a significant gap in my understanding.

While conducting an informational briefing for South African government officials about our latest research, one of the delegates posed a question. He asked, “What does your group think about South Africa’s universal access policy and its implications for rural telecom access?” At the time, I was preparing South Africa’s country profile for a report to be published by Oxford University Press so I felt obliged to share my opinion. Soon after responding it became obvious that I lacked the context to be able to give an “expert” opinion. This was a humbling moment. Moving beyond the stories of the “phone ladies” in Bangladesh or the LINCOS shipping containers in Costa Rica was difficult for me. I wanted to be able provide real insights not just anecdotal evidence. Consequently, my current goal is to gain hands-on field experience to learn about the impact of ICTs before returning to graduate school.

South Africa was one of several African country profiles² I worked on for the *Global Information Technology Report 2001-2002: Readiness for the Networked World*. I chose to learn more about African countries partly to understand why they weren’t able to effectively grow their economies and to also assess the role of ICTs in improving livelihoods. In preparation for these research tasks I subscribed to list-serves such as, South Africa’s ICT community list, Tanzania’s eThinkTank list and Malawi’s civil society list to become better acquainted with the latest thinking. An opportunity arose to attend the *Africa IT Workshop* in October 2001 sponsored by the U.S. Department of State in Washington, D.C. It was at this workshop when I was excited by the energy and enthusiasm around African eDevelopment issues, particularly after meeting Mike Jensen renowned for his own country profiles.

My job title at Harvard was misleading in that I had to do more than just research. Some of the tasks I performed were those of an event planner, advocate, project manager, website administrator and public relations executive. All of these tasks involved working with the senior

¹G. S. Kirkman, editor, *The Global Information Technology Report 2001-2002: Readiness for the Networked World*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2002

² To read the published South Africa profile, as well as others visit <http://www.cid.harvard.edu/cr/profiles.html>

management team and collaborating with a host of departments and external groups thus allowing me to gain 2 and half years of solid program coordination experience. I was often described to visitors as being “the operations center” for the program. All in all, I thrived on being given such a wide range of responsibilities.

Based upon our conversation, Erin Walsh at Cisco Systems described how Phase II of the LDC Initiative requires better coordination; more informed dialogue and improved cooperation between the foreign program partners and the domestic constituents. Erin suggested that they need a reliable, motivated individual with leadership capability to serve as a United Nations Volunteer in Uganda.

If offered the UNV position, I could draw upon my research and analytical skills to create a marketing information system for the nationwide roll out of CNNP. In addition to performing country analyses and identifying market segments, I could provide market intelligence by scanning the Ugandan ICT sector, conducting literature reviews and organizing focus groups depending on the program needs. I believe I could help strengthen the business systems and management and skills in Uganda by implementing feedback mechanisms for the program to identify bottlenecks, assist in planning an advertising and marketing campaign to reach out to future Cisco customers and create an incentive system such as a “Student-of-the-Month Award.”

I imagine that the UNV position will require a sufficient amount of teamwork given the various groups involved in the LDC Initiative. I feel I have had significant team building experiences. While working at Harvard I was selected to be an instructor at the 2001 International Youth Leadership Conference in Prague. During the leadership exercises, I was able to hone my communication and organizational skills by giving lectures, practicing advocacy techniques, and managing a group of international students. In addition, I have had prior experience with group dynamics as an Assistant Squash Coach for Harvard’s squash program. Coaching student-athletes had a profound effect on me such that I went on to become a certified squash coach. These experiences have taught me how to motivate, engage and support people towards achieving a specific goal. Similarly, I believe I could help strengthen the leadership skills in Uganda by acting as a coach/mentor to instructors and students at CNNP, leading workshops on interview and resume preparation and organizing site visits to local IT companies for informational briefings.

Having lived, studied and traveled in both developed and developing countries during my formative years, I have acquired a sensitivity to the inequities in the international system. As an Indian-American born in the United Arab Emirates and educated in the United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia and India, I have a global mindset with a strong belief in the value of international cooperation. Whether working with Ugandans, Egyptians or Jordanians, I strive for well-spirited collaboration. One of the reasons for my commitment to working in the international development sector is the desire to continually experience the joy of diverse groups coming together around a common purpose.

To that end, the LDC Initiative stands out as an innovative private sector-driven project that addresses the critical issue of human resource development. Giving people ICT skills to create a competent base of ICT professionals is undoubtedly a key approach should Uganda wish to become the next India, Israel or Ireland. I strongly believe in the mission of job training, skills development and overall empowerment. Being based in Uganda for a year would be a challenge I would relish. I also believe that I would gain insights to the needs of those at the “bottom of the pyramid” thereby being able to have a more concrete understanding of international development before entering graduate school.

Finally, John Gage pushes us all by saying “our test is to show at the end of each project we undertake, each reform we implement, each report we write, each conference we hold, a new bond is created between individuals, a new link that did not exist before.” I hope that by serving as UN volunteer, I can pass this test.