Innovating for every woman, every child

This is a transformational time in global development. Dramatic changes in the economic outlook in many parts of the world with stagnation in high-income countries and rapid growth in low-income and middle-income countries are forcing us to reconsider long held assumptions about development. At the same time, new technology and business models have spearheaded an explosion in connectivity that has linked many of the poorest billions of people to the global economy. With this new narrative, an equally fundamental change of development assistance must emerge. The report Innovating for Every Woman, Every Child, published online by The Lancet (see webappendix), attempts to capture what these changes might entail to improve the health and wellbeing of the most marginalised women and children around the globe.

To capture the new opportunities that arise from this narrative a change in mindset is required. The fundamental assumption in assistance is that there is a failure of supply. However, delivering missing supply, while essential in emergencies, does not necessarily produce wealth, growth, or a path to sustainability. The path to sustainability is the creation of self-sustaining supply-demand systems that ensure local demand is understood, appreciated, and locally solved. This is where democratising technologies like mobile phones can show the way. Through new business models mobile phone companies are able to create self-sustaining supply-demand systems. According to conventional wisdom, the public sector needs to provide the infrastructure that the private sector can exploit. In the case of mobile phones, the private sector is providing the infrastructure that represents a great opportunity for the public sector to exploit for better health of its people.

These new opportunities are being captured in various small projects. As is outlined in the Innovating for Every Woman, Every Child report, 50 project proposals were received in only 2 weeks in response to a call from the Every Woman, Every Child Innovation Working Group early in 2011.1 Similarly, the first Grand Challenge for Development called Saving Lives at Birth2 supported by the USA, Norway, the World Bank, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and Grand Challenges Canada received almost 600 proposals this year.1 The immediate challenge is to translate this energy and opportunity into improved health for women and children through self-sustaining supply-demand systems.

The key is that we must assess the potential for sustainability as a requisite for scalability and not the other way around. This approach requires a deep understanding of the business models so as not to undermine or overburden them with financial and other demands. Furthermore, a rigorous assessment of costs and benefits at scale to all parties is needed, alongside a clear understanding of the beneficiaries on the demand side: households, health systems, and/or the private sector itself. The Innovating for Every Woman, Every Child report provides examples in each of these categories.

To tap the opportunities at hand will require new roles and new partnerships. As the private sector is increasing its long-term investments in poor countries, sustainability becomes of utmost importance. This requires new understanding among partners as new partnerships are formed between government, donors, civil society, private sector, entrepreneurs, and customers. The UN Secretary General’s initiative Every Woman, Every Child3—a global strategy to improve the health of women and children and to accelerate progress towards the Millennium Development Goals—has the key building blocks required to make this happen. First, the fundamental commitments in Every Women, Every Child come from leaders in the 49 poorest countries,
of whom more than 40 have made concrete financial, policy, and technical commitments in less than a year. Second, Every Women, Every Child is a multistakeholder strategy in which public sector, private sector, nongovernmental organisations, academia, professional groups, and the UN all are included, engaged, and making explicit commitments. Third, the active participation of parliamentary groups with democratising technologies provides strong links to local political processes. Fourth, a strong culture of accountability is being fostered through an Accountability Commission that in less than a year developed a series of bold recommendations that are now being implemented. Fifth, innovation is given very high priority, especially through public–private cooperation facilitated by its Innovation Working Group.

To facilitate these developments governments need to develop well-regulated conditions for local and global entrepreneurs’ innovative zeal to be constructively unleashed. Appropriate marketplaces where individuals from different constituencies can meet virtually—and sometimes physically—nationally and globally will be needed. A network of knowledge-generating centres, often university based, will be an important component. At this transformational time, we have an unprecedented opportunity through innovation to foster true global development to make the world a better, healthier, secure, and prosperous place through the participation and contributions of its most marginalised people.

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