

# **At issue: The Development Gateway: Biased, unaccountable and overpriced?**

***A study prepared for the Bretton Woods Project has found that the Development Gateway, an internet portal on development issues initiated by the World Bank, presents a biased picture of development debates, lacks independence and is inefficient when compared with other similar initiatives.***

The Gateway seeks to promote sustainable development and poverty reduction through knowledge and resource sharing. Initially conceived and designed by the World Bank, it commenced operations as an independent not-for-profit organisation in July 2001. However, its launch and operations have been dogged by controversy as civil society organisations have objected to the Gateway's links with the World Bank and its potential for disseminating the World Bank's vision of development at the expense of more diverse and pluralistic views. They have suggested the initiative is ill-conceived and biased, leading to the further marginalisation of southern knowledge, and the crowding out of other knowledge aggregators.

Two evaluations of the Gateway have been published. The first was a broad evaluation of the World Bank's overall knowledge sharing policies and practices conducted by the Bank's internal Operations Evaluation Department (OED) in 2003. The evaluation claims that the Gateway has delivered "credible and high quality content" without providing any basis for this conclusion. It ignores the numerous criticisms by civil society organisations, saying that "the controversy that accompanied early plans for the Development Gateway has declined". The second evaluation was commissioned to a private consultant, Louise Walker Consulting, by the OED the same year. While this is specific to the Gateway it is based on a three week limited desk review during which 14 Bank staff and external individuals were interviewed and "a range of documents from the Development Gateway and the Development Gateway Foundation" were examined.

Given the limited scope and questionable independence of these evaluations, the current investigation was undertaken in light of both the initial criticisms and generally accepted knowledge sharing principles. The study is based on a review of existing documentation (from both the Gateway and external sources) coupled with analysis of the Gateway website and consultations with development professionals.

The focus is on the governance of the Gateway, the relevance and role of the Gateway, and the quality of content in terms of its comprehensiveness, uniqueness, diversity, organisation, usability, and cost-effectiveness. It is limited to the topic pages and, to a lesser degree, the country-specific sections known as 'Country Gateways'; it does not address the sections on consulting opportunities (dgMarket) or donor activities (AiDA). Three other development portals are studied as comparators: civil society portals OneWorld and Choike and research portal Eldis.

## ***Lack of independence***

Out of the 35 current topic areas, 24 are managed by World Bank or Gateway staff. Six of the twenty board members are current Bank employees, while another two are former employees. A \$6 million a year service agreement for providing operating staff and services to the Gateway was won by the World Bank - apparently without

competitive bidding. Clearly, the Gateway has a long way to go before it could be considered independent of the World Bank.

There has been a lack of accountability and responsiveness to civil society, and as a result a lack of trust among the Gateway's intended users and 'beneficiaries'. Key documents regarding the establishment of the Gateway are no longer available on the website, nor are the two existing evaluations. For two months, there was no response to requests for such documentation. Furthermore, despite the limited evaluation of the Gateway so far, there are no plans to commission an independent examination.

Many of the criticisms leveled at the Gateway echo those made of the World Bank as a whole. In particular, the tendency to ignore local circumstances and alternative viewpoints in favour of 'best practice' solutions is a common criticism of the Bank that manifests itself in the Gateway. It is unlikely that these criticisms will be addressed if the Gateway continues to be linked to the Bank.

*"What the Gateway has done is to divert an enormous amount of funds intended to support development-related internet activities from the content providers in the South to a highly centralised operation in Washington DC."*

Roberto Bissio, Director, Instituto Tercer Mundo

## ***Biased knowledge***

The editorial policy, under which designated 'topic guides' select relevant content that demonstrates methodological rigour, severely disadvantages information from southern sources. A detailed analysis of the privatisation and trade topics showed that more than 80 per cent of the resources were from northern sources, and 96 per cent were in English. Telecommunications liberalisation was the single most popular theme, which brings into question whose interests are reflected in the choice of content. Under privatisation, 41 per cent of all resources were sourced by the World Bank or its affiliates. Both internal evaluations pointed to inadequate attention to local circumstances as a key concern. This was supposedly addressed by the Gateway through expanding the pool of topic guides and partners. However, only three out of 35 'topic guides' are from the south.

Encouragingly, there is no evidence that the Gateway has cannibalised other independent development portals. However, Roberto Bissio, director of Instituto Tercer Mundo, believes that this is "not because the Gateway has not tried to position itself as the major portal, but because they have not succeeded!". Bissio expresses concern that the Gateway has "diverted an enormous amount of funds intended to support development-related internet activities from the content providers in the South to a highly centralised operation in Washington DC."

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An unclear definition of stakeholders and beneficiaries has been acknowledged by both internal evaluations of the Gateway. This is identified as a major problem in the context of customising the content for actual users. This is in conflict with the knowledge sharing principles espoused by the World Bank, that state clearly that the point of knowledge sharing programmes lies in the application of knowledge, not the mechanics of sharing. The Gateway has built a de-contextualised repository of development knowledge, without any clear idea of how this knowledge will be used. This is also reflected in the fact that the goals of the Gateway are framed in mechanistic terms such as achieving five million page views a month, rather than in terms of outcomes. Both existing evaluations found that the Gateway does not provide any strategic uniqueness.

Portal	Number of re-sources / cost (\$) per resource	Number of visits per month / cost (\$) per visit
developmentgateway.org	41,959 \$408	131,195 \$4.85
oneworld.net	59,415 \$87	244,105 \$0.66
eldis.org	16,000 \$57	64,000 \$0.53
Choike.org	3,984 \$105	50,990 \$0.26

### ***Questioning content***

Despite the expenditure of vast sums, the Gateway is not the most comprehensive web portal for development knowledge. The global civil society portal OneWorld and research portal Eldis provide as much or more content than the Gateway for social, political, and environmental topics, while the Gateway tends to be strongest in economic topics, and more specifically information technology related topics. This technological bias is also reflected in the categorisation of topics, with five out of the 35 Gateway topics allocated to information technology, and none dedicated to health, education, rural development, debt, labour, or conflict.

Other development websites can provide broader coverage by serving as true portals - pointing to the relevant information regardless of where it is located. This was clearly demonstrated by searching for specific information across all the portals. Out of forty search terms, the Gateway returned the highest number of hits for just four - broadband, ICT, internet and microfinance. Choike, by far the smallest portal, provided access to more resources than the Gateway for as many as 21 out of the 40 selected search terms. OneWorld and Eldis also provided more resources than the Gateway for 21 and 29 search terms respectively.

Access to country-specific information is chaotic, with different portions of the Gateway website giving access to wildly different numbers of Country Gateways. The OED may claim that the Gateway's content is credible and of high quality, but this analysis suggests that it is poorly organised and lacks comprehensiveness.

### ***Who pays the bill?***

The Gateway is significantly less cost-effective than the other portals. Total Gateway expenditures up to mid-2003 were \$23.4 million. In contrast, total costs incurred up to mid-2003 were \$4.6 million for OneWorld, \$0.9 million for Eldis, and \$0.4 million for Choike.

Dividing these costs by the number of resources created by each portal provides a measure of total costs incurred per resource provided.

This was found to vary between a low of \$57.50 for Eldis to a high of \$407.88 for the Development Gateway. An alternative view of cost-effectiveness was obtained by looking at usage of each website. Dividing monthly costs by the monthly number of visits gives the cost incurred per website visit. This ranges from \$0.26 for Choike to \$4.85 for the Gateway.

### ***Ways forward***

The Gateway has consumed more than \$30 million of mostly public funding since its inception and is currently raising another \$40 million. This without having achieved many of the goals it set itself and with major question marks over its ability to deliver. We urge a full, properly independent evaluation, expanding on the work in this study, before any more money is spent.

Some of the steps needed to resolve the problems identified in this study include:

- Re-open the dialogue with civil society and official development partners to redefine the mission and priorities for the Gateway, clearly identifying the distinct categories and needs of users;
- Establish an ongoing monitoring and evaluation system;
- Undertake immediate action to diversify the board and staff to reduce the influence of the Bank and better reflect the needs of users;
- Terminate the World Bank service contract and develop alternative service partnerships;
- Launch an initiative to increase content from the South, through increased partnerships with southern civil society organisations, universities, media, or web portals;
- Improve transparency to all stakeholders in development, through provision of key documents, performance statistics, and consultation results on the website. Provide a forum on the website for an open discussion of the Gateway itself; and
- Restructure existing content by rationalising the taxonomy and rectifying the bias towards technology at the expense of important social and political issues.

### ***Postscript***

The study was sent to the Development Gateway for feedback at both the draft and final stages. Their response to the draft simply disagreed with the report overall without addressing any of its specific findings. Karen Lynch, the Gateway's Communications Director now suggests that they are "in the advanced stages of addressing the recommendations of the report". Accordingly, they plan to end the World Bank service contract by June 2005. Diversification of partners is an "ongoing goal" (though Gateway staff take issue with the basis for the study's statistics on usage and content). They concede problems with the organisation of the content and are working to improve it.

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For a full copy of the report by Jha, Seymour and Sims, see:

[www.brettonwoodsproject.org/doc/knowledge/Gatewayreport.pdf](http://www.brettonwoodsproject.org/doc/knowledge/Gatewayreport.pdf)

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