

Roger,

Thank you for letting me read this very interesting Strategic Plan for the Fogarty Center's next five years. I wish you all well!

What follows are some thoughts from my own empirical adventures in the ICT field in Africa over the last 18 years.

The ICT section (Goal IV, first Strategic Priority) applies a theoretical model that doesn't yet have an actual equivalent in scientific research in sub-Saharan Africa. Versions of this model have been set forth many times as what technology can/should do in Africa, so it needs more strategic thinking if it is to be considered more than same old, same old.... The reality of getting technology to work on the ground, serve the specific needs of the local population, and then inspire them to connect with others requires many skills, talents, and disciplines, not to mention motivation, innovation, and enthusiasm. Humans and human nature work hand in hand with technology in very peculiar ways. Of course, this ties in completely with your concept of implementation research.

Might be worth FIC stressing sustainability and how it can be achieved. As you well know from your experience in the early days, quality work doesn't always require high level IT. We've also seen how easy it is to get too tied up in IT or install too much too soon. The "S" word – sustainability – will be key in the long run, no matter how flashy the technology gesture of the moment – i.e. a certain medical school we both know received PDAs for all of their first year students from a well-intentioned donor. The gift appears to have come unattached to any program or goal of the school. As far as I've been able to discover, the students just use them to surf the 'net and send e-mail – whether or not these devices have made any substantial difference in their medical school education is anyone's guess. On the other hand, if the PDAs had been passed out to kids on the street, there might be small flourishing businesses today. Technology works in weird ways!

"Support the development of research hubs in low and middle income countries:" FIC folks might want to talk with Stephanie James and Ayo Oduola about MIM's experience in trying to effect something similar with the African Malaria University proposal.

"Bolster the development of expertise and use of ICT....." In my experience, I see that training is needed not just on how to use the technology but on how to access information, based on what researchers are trying to do. Here in Uganda, when I am involved with training masters students in accessing NLM databases, I make a point of saying that these are not just nice tricks to know but are critical to becoming a part of the international scientific community. In one class I worked with, about one-third had heard of Medline or ever tried to carry out a Medline search; they had never heard of Clinicaltrials.gov, MedlinePlus, Bookshelf, PubMedCentral. Most did not know about HINARI. For my money, "Expanded ICT initiatives linked with research hubs will translate into informatics cores able to supply ICT training for all research teams at an institution" is a bit too lofty.

On sponsor development of FIC alumni networks – might want to find a successful model on developing an electronic network of alumni. What are the incentives for alumni wanting to talk with one another. I have found that people don't form networks just because the capacity is there – there must be some other compelling reason.