

# Navigating neoliberal networks: Transnational Internet platforms in sport for development and peace

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## Abstract

Internet platforms are increasingly becoming strategic tools for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) involved in international development to collaborate, share information, and gain legitimacy. Drawing on the literature on neoliberalism, sport for development, globalization and networking through communication technologies, this article examines the interpretations of staff working in Canadian and Swiss sport for development and peace (SDP) NGOs on the role of the Platform, while also exploring the challenges and benefits of the Platform for each NGO. Qualitative research methods were utilized, including a content analysis of documents on the Platform and the two NGO websites, along with interviews with staff from both NGOs. The findings revealed, on one hand, that staff for both NGOs were concerned about the Platform's potential to support collaboration amongst organizations that: a) are frequently in competition with one another – a feature of NGO culture in a neoliberal political environment; and b) commonly adopt divergent approaches to SDP work. On the other hand, both NGOs acknowledged that the Platform and the UN-endorsed International Year of Sport and Physical Education were at times useful for disseminating and legitimizing SDP globally, although the potential of new media technologies has not been realized because of inequalities within and around the NGO community. Implications of the findings along with ideas for future research are discussed.

## Keywords

Internet platforms, neoliberalism, NGOs, sport for development and peace, transnational networks

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On 3 November 2003, the United Nations General Assembly adopted resolution 58/5, which proclaimed 2005 as the International Year of Sport and Physical Education. In doing so, the UN formally recognized the idea that sport has the potential to support international development work, a recognition that has fuelled an already growing sport for development and peace (SDP) movement. In an attempt to consolidate the movement and its goals, those working on the International Year (referred to hereafter as 'The Year') saw the need for a UN-hosted Internet-based platform, a website that would 'increase the visibility of sport's development potential among the target groups of the Platform (information and advocacy); contribute to improving sport and development practice (effective programming); and encourage dialogue and partnerships/facilitate strategic alliances' (SDC, 2008). The official launch of The Year featured the introduction of this new site under the name International Platform on Sport and Development (housed at [www.sportanddev.org](http://www.sportanddev.org) and referred to hereafter as the 'Platform'). The Platform's mission is to act as a 'hub for sharing knowledge, building good practice, facilitating coordination, and fostering partnerships between and within the different stakeholders' (SDC, 2008).

In this article we report findings from a study that considers the role this Platform plays in achieving the goals outlined above. This topic is pertinent at a moment when there are frequent calls for more and better functioning transnational collaborations among a range of sport for development stakeholders including policymakers, donors, sport federations, athletes, practitioners, multinational corporations, researchers, volunteers, and intended beneficiaries of development efforts. It also comes at a time when the value of communication technologies, especially the Internet, for promoting the sorts of collaborations being called for is oftentimes taken-for-granted. We acknowledge that optimism about the potential of new media supported networking tools like the Platform is not without justification, as researchers have consistently shown over the last decade how relatively inexpensive, accessible, and interactive online communication technologies support the formation and functioning of social movement groups (e.g. Wilson, 2007). We argue, however, that the Internet is an integral part of competitive neoliberal environment that protects and promotes the interests of business savvy NGOs that are often better positioned to leverage relationships through online networks. This leaves groups with less expertise in using communication technology at a notable disadvantage, especially in terms of mobilizing funding and building partnerships (Wilson and Hayhurst, 2009). We therefore suggest that there should be skepticism about the assumption that communication technologies designed to promote social justice and peace-related initiatives will unambiguously do so.

With this background, the purpose of our research was to examine the Platform's role in supporting SDP by exploring how NGOs based in different countries interpret it, while also broadly considering the challenges and benefits of the Platform for each NGO. The study was based on interviews with members of two SDP NGOs (one headquartered in Canada, the other in Switzerland) that are part of the network of organizations the Platform is intended to support, along with an analysis of related documents. This research was designed to build on the preliminary work done by Wilson and Hayhurst (2009) that illustrates how new media technologies do not necessarily lead to superior SDP related outcomes. It was also a response to Leonard's (2009: 11, 12) call for more

research on the ‘significance of new media technologies on global sporting cultures’, with a particular focus on ‘activism in and around sport’.

We begin by providing background on NGOs in the SDP movement and identify the state of research on the use of communication technologies to support international development work. Next, we discuss literature focused on NGOs in relation to networks, neoliberalism, globalization, the Internet, and the ‘development industry’. The methods utilized are then outlined, and key findings are subsequently reported upon and discussed. We conclude with suggestions for future research.

## Literature review

### *Development, (inter)networking,<sup>1</sup> and the sociology of sport*

SDP programs target groups such as women, refugees, people living with HIV/AIDS and youth living in impoverished conditions. These interventions aim to facilitate social, economic, environmental, and political change through structured physical activity and sporting-based activities. SDP NGOs are part of a transnational social movement that has been endorsed by the UN, the International Olympic Committee, private philanthropic foundations, transnational corporations, governments, as well as hundreds of high profile celebrity athletes (Levermore, 2009). Current estimates suggest that over 400 NGOs are implementing SDP interventions in disadvantaged communities around the world, the majority of which are taking place in the Two-Thirds World<sup>2</sup> (Donnelly, 2007).

Responding to this phenomenon, researchers are beginning to consider issues around sport and international development, with attention being paid to topics like conflict transformation (Sugden and Wallis, 2007), gender issues (Saavedra, 2009), the impacts of sporting mega-events in disadvantaged communities (Cornelissen, 2009), and the colonizing influences of SDP NGOs (Darnell, 2007). Of particular relevance to this article is research by authors like Burnett (2009) and Coalter (2008, 2009) which recognizes the role SDP networks play in bridging and linking different stakeholders in the SDP movement, along with the tensions that pervade such relations. Burnett’s (2009) study of multilevel and diverse stakeholder SDP networks throughout South Africa demonstrates that quality, effectiveness, and collective goal achievement are important factors that may enable SDP networks to succeed. However, Coalter (2009) focuses on the sometimes problematic relationships that exist between donor groups and SDP recipients. In particular, he (2009: 72) discusses how many SDP NGOs based in the Two-Thirds World feel pressured by donors to tie their funding applications to external ‘outcome-based approaches’ (as opposed to focusing on more process-oriented and participatory approaches to monitoring and evaluation). These authors broadly argue that network relationships are complex, contradictory, and not always productive – an argument that serves as an important departure point for our study. No studies that we are aware of follow-up on their work with in-depth explorations of the role of networking for NGOs in the international SDP community.

It is only in the work of a few sociologists of sport studying collective action and social movements that examples of research related to the Internet and sport-related (global) networks can be found. Sage’s (1999) study of a powerful Internet-driven

transnational advocacy network that coalesced around the Nike anti-sweatshop campaign is perhaps the best known example. Also noteworthy is Lenskyj's (2002) investigation on how anti-Olympics movements leveraged the power of the Internet to enhance their campaign tactics. Additionally, Hayhurst and Wilson's (2009) research on SDP NGOs examines how the Internet influences the abilities of these entities to compete for funding and donor support. Wilson (2007) also offers a theoretical discussion of the ways that sport-related globally focused social movements utilize the Internet for social resistance purposes. In doing so, he explores possibilities for highly developed, activist-driven transnational networks in a neoliberal era, possibilities that exist because of the technology-enabled pathways that have opened up (ironically) to promote and support economic globalization. Harvey et al. (2009) briefly discuss the potential of the Internet in their recent study of 'alterglobalization' movements, where they cite the ways that Internet activists were involved in protests leading up to the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. Besides these contributions, however, there is little research that specifically examines sport-related transnational networks and Internet communication, and no work that explicitly deals with SDP NGOs in relation to Internet platforms.

### *Neoliberalism, (inter)networking, and UN-endorsed 'Years'*

Research by Keck and Sikkink (1999) led to conceptual developments in terms of understanding how networks are used by NGOs to lobby for particular international issues. Specifically, they coined the term 'transnational advocacy network', defined as 'those actors working internationally on an issue, who are bound together by shared values, a common discourse, and dense exchanges of information' (Keck and Sikkink, 1999: 89). The numerous actors involved in transnational advocacy networks, particularly NGOs, are crucial for gaining leverage over powerful institutions and governments (Keck and Sikkink, 1999). Hudson (2001) suggests that the increasing success of transnational advocacy networks has led to NGOs becoming more influential on the global stage. Others contend that the Internet has played an integral role in driving transnational movements and NGO activist-related work (Henry et al., 2004). Shumate and Dewitt (2008) are notable here because their research describes how the use of information communication technologies has dramatically influenced the international NGO sector, and they identify social inequalities in and around the connections enabled by these technologies. For example, these authors illustrate that NGOs from the One-Third World are more often cyber-linked to other Northern-based NGOs, and less often to NGOs from the Two-Thirds World (Shumate and Dewitt, 2008).

Following this argument, Alzouma (2005: 352) identifies a 'digital divide' in terms of access to communication technologies and describes how 'technological opportunities are unevenly distributed, particularly in African nations, where a small elite holds power, economic resources, and knowledge . . . [and those] who are deprived of technological means are at risk of being marginalized'. Alzouma's (2005) assertions are supported by other research on the digital divide (e.g. DiMaggio et al., 2001), and hold important implications in terms of the unequal distribution of communication technologies across the globe. That is, although the Internet may be touted as an important element to the

formation of thriving networks, social movements and NGO coalitions, one might assume that the digital divide remains a pertinent threat to the transnational and collaborative character of the Platform and of SDP more broadly, particularly in terms of connecting practitioners from the Two-Thirds World to the One-Third World (and vice versa). These observations support recent contentions by development scholars pertaining to the unequal power relations embedded in transnational development networks (McFarlane, 2006). The argument here is that networks focused on international development issues are not homogenous and develop unequally across space and place, where some actors are able to build strong global connections and partnerships that tend to prioritize the needs and ideologies of the West over subaltern knowledge (Cumbers et al., 2008; McFarlane, 2006).

A subtext to much of this work is the concern about the impacts of neoliberal globalization in fostering an environment where various non-state actors congregate to promote market-oriented approaches to development. Research has shown many NGOs are becoming increasingly professionalized as a strategy for competing for scarce resources and funding (Sell and Prakash, 2004). They accomplish this by delivering services at 'private-sector levels of cost control' (Brinkerhoff et al., 2007: 62) that are managed in a hierarchical form, are preoccupied with efficiency, and remain accountable to those funding their projects in lieu of ameliorating the conditions of the marginalized communities they aim to serve (Ebrahim, 2009). In this context, Cooley and Ron (2002) describe the 'marketization of aid funding' which from a neoliberal standpoint is assumed to increase efficiency, enhance the quality of NGO programming by creating competition, and control corruptive NGO practices. The critique here is that the marketization of aid actually mobilizes philanthropic or seemingly benevolent ventures that promote capitalism. For example, Bono's (PRODUCT) RED™ campaign supports a consumer-based philanthropy model whereby individuals are able to participate in the market, while simultaneously 'helping' HIV/AIDS patients in Africa. In essence, such acts successfully 'depoliticize the relationship between the market and the negative impacts it has on human well-being' (Nickel and Eikenberry, 2009: 974). In an ironic way then, although many NGOs form transnational networks in order to mobilize resources and manage the environmental uncertainties of neoliberal times (Hudson, 2001), the competitive nature of their work makes true collaborative efforts difficult (Wilson and Hayhurst, 2009).

Some of these ideas have been picked up by sport management and sport sociology scholars. Armstrong (2004), for example, has described how some NGOs indulge in market-centered approaches to development, arguing that certain NGOs are more focused on signing sport celebrities to their cause than they are on using sport as a tool to facilitate development. Other research has documented the competitive approach adopted by some SDP NGOs (Kidd, 2008), particularly in efforts to secure funding from national sport organizations (Hayhurst and Frisby, 2010).

The underlying problem is that UN endorsements of transnational networks or 'UN theme years', which are intended to increase the legitimacy of the SDP movement, may be undermined by these sorts of neoliberal approaches to global relationships (Smith, 2008). A key concern is that relationships formed in the spirit of competition are oriented more around profit and survival, and less around the social concerns that these organizations are mandated to address (Smith, 2008). Butcher (2006) alleges that UN theme years

ignore local needs and knowledges, and instead support the philosophies and perspectives on NGOs and other self-appointed 'experts'. With these issues in mind, it makes sense to consider how and the extent to which the goals of an Internet Platform as a device to support collaborations amongst NGOs with 'diverse organizational cultures, sectoral interests, and ideological orientations' (Cullen, 2005: 72) are achieved.

## **Methods**

To address the purpose of our research, we carried out two case studies, one with a Canadian NGO, another with a Swiss NGO. We were interested in the perspectives of members working in these two groups (instead of just one group) for a variety of reasons. First, this design provides varying perspectives of the same network and Internet platform from two SDP NGOs located on different continents with significant experience executing SDP programs, which provides an opportunity to examine the 'extensive interconnections of sport and global processes' (Giulianotti and Robertson, 2007: 108). Second, uncovering the conflicts and tensions involved in Platforms formed around social-justice oriented NGO-based transnational networks has been shown in previous research to be an important step in improving and sustaining NGO communication and collaborative efforts so that longevity, policy influence and mutual benefits can be achieved (Cullen, 2005). While generalizing beyond the case studies examined in this research is not possible (Sanyal, 2006), we are building on the work of other sport scholars by examining cases in different countries (Houlihan, 1997), which has been beneficial for understanding how those working within 'different political systems face similar problems' (Hayhurst and Frisby, 2010: 77).

We interviewed staff members from each NGO in order to understand and compare their viewpoints and beliefs as they related to the Platform and the network of organizations it supports. Interview questions focused on the following three areas: 1) how each interviewee identified their positions and roles in the Platform, 2) the benefits and difficulties they saw in participating in the Platform, and 3) their offline and online collaborations.

### ***Background: Canadian NGO***

The Canadian NGO we studied initiated its SDP program in 1993. They frame sport as a language and catalyst for nation-building, reducing crime, enhancing education, strengthening communities, addressing social issues, and improving the health and well-being of people, particularly with regards to HIV/AIDS prevention. Their SDP programs are located in 20 countries throughout Africa and the Caribbean and were directed towards marginalized people living in poverty or challenging situations, particularly youth living in impoverished communities, women and girls, and persons with disabilities. The Canadian NGO is primarily sponsored by government agencies and corporate donors, and is also involved in a network of other like-minded SDP NGOs with head offices in the UK and Norway.

### ***Background: Swiss NGO***

The Swiss NGO was founded in 2002 with the purpose of using sport as a tool to overcome cultural barriers and to enhance mutual understanding, particularly for street children

living in impoverished areas of Africa and Switzerland. The main projects they deliver focus on facilitating intercultural experiences, where sports camps and sports days are used to educate youth about cultural diversity. The Swiss NGO dismisses the competitive and performance-driven agendas embedded in sport by arguing for participation, inclusiveness, and communication. The organization is financed by annual membership fees as well as private and public donors. The Swiss NGO partners with elite national sport organizations and international sport federations, and maintains a close relationship with the nearby UN Office on SDP located in Geneva.

Interviewees for both organizations were concerned about having their identities and organizations' names revealed. For this reason, all participants and organizations included in the study remain anonymous.

### *Research protocol*

Documents from each NGO's website and the Platform website were analyzed including: input papers from meetings, mission statements, partnership agreement statements, policy documents, and press releases. The goal of this stage of research was to attain a better understanding of the culture, systems, rules and policies of each NGO in relation to technology use for transnational network collaboration.

Interviews with four key staff members from each of the two NGOs (four females and four males) were then conducted. The positions of Swiss NGO interviewees were: President, Senior Officer, and Project Officers.<sup>3</sup> The positions of the Canadian NGO staff were: Director of International Programs, Senior Regional Officer, and Regional Officers. Most interviews lasted for approximately 45 minutes to one hour, although some continued over two hours.

Interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim from tape recordings. Data coding and analysis was conducted using ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data analysis programme that enables researchers to categorize quotations from interviews under themes that emerge in the data. Using these themes, a coding scheme was developed which is reflected in the discussion of the results.

## **Results and discussion**

### *Network dynamics: Competition and a lack of cohesion*

Many interviewees, especially those with the Swiss NGO, felt the goals for the Platform were not being fully realized. The main reasons offered for this had little to do with the structure of the Platform itself, and more to do with problems inherent to the SDP NGO network. For example, the Canadian NGO participants felt the SDP network was an informal group of online organizations that did not necessarily share the same vision offline. It was this lack of consistency that made collaboration difficult and at times undesirable. As one Canadian Regional Officer observed, many of the organizations in the Platform seemed to have 'different approaches, different values, and different priorities'. A Canadian Program Officer opined that some NGOs weren't being 'honest about what their agenda is' and were 'partnering for the wrong reasons with donors'. While some NGOs were more interested in sharing information on best practices or collaborating

on toolkits designed to disseminate sport-for-HIV prevention programmes, others viewed such cooperation as potentially threatening to their existence.

Swiss NGO staff also thought the Platform's goal of supporting collaboration was being undermined by an SDP NGO environment that prioritized competition for scarce resources. The President of the Swiss NGO made this point when he commented that the authenticity of his organization's programs would be threatened if they shared knowledge with other NGOs.

Even between NGOs, you say, 'ok let's work together', but then you don't exchange anything because you are scared that the other one is taking away all your materials and all your knowledge. I want to meet people, I want to share ideas, I want to feel that this is not only about promotion, about money.

One of the Swiss Project Officers supported this view when he said the following about the Platform:

It is just a huge website and it is only used by about 35 organizations worldwide. It's really actually not that useful, it's not that used. We were talking about all the possibilities the Platform has. It was created two years ago, and I think the networking is something that is not really well done, it's not working. I don't see a big exchange between NGOs who are on this Platform. Sometimes you even find more that NGOs are pulling back their information.

These findings suggest that SDP NGOs are forced to work within unequal relations of social, economic and political power that prevent SDP groups involved in the Platform from collaborating through, for example, sharing resources, information and experiences.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, other studies on transnational development networks discuss issues related to power and information dissemination, where the 'free flow of information' is often constrained by global social relations that are focused on a 'westernized, and elitist, vision of globalization' (Cumbers et al., 2008: 188–189). Since decision-making power within development-related networks most often resides with elites in the West (Cumbers et al., 2008), less attention tends to be paid to local political economies and subaltern knowledge (McFarlane, 2006). Smith's (2008) related assertion that networks struggle to control the actions of their participants unless there is a strong leader to inspire communication between conflicting network members is also pertinent to the SDP network which has no democratically elected leader in place to build solidarity and trust among SDP NGOs. This suggests there are barriers that a Platform cannot by itself overcome.

What we argue based on these findings is that politics and power relations within and around the SDP NGO sector are revealed by examining the utility of a communication technology intended to support network collaboration. In a related way, we suggest that the context and environment these NGOs work within where competition and organizational survival are prioritized, may undermine objectives related to social justice best realized through collaborative efforts (see Wallace, 2003). When NGOs in a network are experiencing inequalities in terms of access to resources including knowledge, this will significantly detract from the ability of network members to form a cohesive front (Smith, 2008). Underlying this concern about inequality and the Platform are issues around access to the Internet. Some Swiss interviewees, for example, mentioned that



the youth participating in their projects in the Two-Thirds World were unaware of the Platform's website, and even if they were, they had no way of accessing it. This concern aligns with the literature that speaks to the 'digital divide' that exists around access to Internet-related resources (Alzouma, 2005; DiMaggio, 2001; Shumate and Dewitt, 2008).

### *Connecting to legitimacy: Creating links with the UN and governments*

Although, for the most part, interviewees did not feel the stated goals for the Platform were being reached, there were ways that it was considered to be potentially helpful. The Canadian NGO in particular, while acknowledging many of the limitations noted above, indicated it was a valuable online database of organizations they could collaborate with. The Regional Officer for the Canadian NGO cited their group's membership in this community as critical for furthering linkages to increase potential partnerships in the future. With this in mind, members of the Canadian NGO described how the online network functioned to enhance their pre-existing relationships with international sport partners who also managed SDP projects primarily based in Africa. In fact, the NGO signed a 'memorandum of understanding' with sport organizations based in the UK and Norway who were also part of the Platform. According to a Canadian NGO's Senior Regional Officer, this memorandum developed into a smaller network consisting of a few entities within the larger SDP network, and was viewed by other group members as an exemplary relationship between three seemingly compatible organizations. Canadian NGO interviewees felt their partnership with these groups allowed them to collaborate on funding applications, share technical support, and inspire joint coordination of meetings, seminars, and conferences.

Although Swiss NGO staff members were less enthusiastic about the role and potential of the Platform and The Year, they did acknowledge that both entities helped to disseminate the SDP concept globally to address a variety of social problems.

The Platform has to say 'look here's a project in Iran – they do sport to work on child trauma. Look here's a project in Addis Ababa, they take street children and put them into schools. Look here is a project in Rwanda – they are going to try to do sport against the crime on the streets' . . . Because of the Platform, all of these projects become linked.

Canadian staff members noted other benefits as they felt that if all organizations in the network combined their knowledge about SDP, then the movement as a whole would be strengthened. Staff members argued that partnering with like-minded groups enhanced their ability to mobilize resources in a more creative manner, and also improved their capacity to take their projects to more Two-Thirds World countries. The Canadian NGO's Program Officer articulated the benefits created through network partnerships in this way.

The whole premise behind [partnerships] was that we're working in Southern Africa and in Eastern Africa, we work in very similar countries, similar mandates, a little bit different, but what can we do to effectively come together as a group, and make things easier for our partners to work with, but also to make a bigger collective impact. It makes more sense from a regional

approach because we don't work everywhere and neither do any of the other organizations, but we can create links across countries by building on this partnership. And if we go as a partner then we're also louder on an international stage and I think that we're setting an example for organizations that are operating on their own. If they want to form their own partnerships, or if they want to become involved in our partnerships, they're very welcome.

The NGOs agreed that by being associated with prominent organizations in and through the Platform such as the UN, their organization was able to mobilize outside sources of funding and increase its legitimacy in the eyes of the Canadian government. This finding is akin to Smith's (2008: 231) observation that in neoliberal networks, attempts by organizations to cultivate strong ties with the state in order to enhance legitimacy and 'transform the state for their purposes' are common. According to the Canadian NGO Project Officer, this legitimacy meant the Canadian government would take more notice and realize: 'what we're doing isn't just peanuts stuff. It really is making a global impact.' Similarly, by working with SDP organizations based in other countries, the Canadian NGO was able to secure attention from the government as this Regional Officer explained.

We partner with those other organizations. They're in touch with their governments. When everyone meets at an international conference, there's already some linkages made, or bridges that have been built through our partnerships that can extend to our government officials. For example, the [UK sport organization] tells us that their Minister will be at this conference and we invite our Minister to the same conference. Then we can mutually enhance their comprehension of sport for development. It's a growth opportunity that eventually trickles back into what happens in Canada.

The document analysis confirmed these observations. For example, in the final report written by the Sport for Development International Working Group, it was noted that there is 'the belief that governments can exercise a unique influence on other governments . . . advocacy is, therefore, a critical function' (SDP IWG, 2006: 64).

These findings speak to the ways the Platform and SDP network it supports contribute to what Keck and Sikkink (1999: 12) describe as a 'boomerang pattern' whereby 'domestic NGOs bypass their state and directly search out international allies to try to bring pressure on their states from outside'. They argue that fortified partnerships within such networks are crucial in order to activate this pressure. They also suggest that strong partnerships within networks between NGOs and Two-Thirds World stakeholders provide the latter with 'access, leverage, and information (and often money) that they could not expect to have on their own' (Keck and Sikkink, 1999: 13). In contrast, northern groups are supplied with necessary legitimacy in the eyes of their domestic governments as international contacts are needed in order to 'amplify the demands of domestic groups, pry open space for new issues, and then echo back these demands into the domestic arena' (Keck and Sikkink, 1999: 13). The President of Swiss NGO felt it was essential to generate a global awareness about SDP by working within the Platform, which he felt would generate a domino effect 'creating awareness with our own government'. Similarly, a Swiss Senior Officer said the online presence of the Platform was central to bringing SDP supporters across borders together within a common domain.

To be in that network that's on the Internet, to be one of the organizations which is in the UN Year of Sport, we are doing a sport project, and it had big advantages. Because it's seen on international levels – a Japanese is going on the same homepage as a Swiss and seeing that it's the UN Year of Sport.

Through the global reach of the Internet, Swiss NGO staff felt supporters of various nationalities would encounter the Platform website, view the vast array of SDP projects taking place in a multitude of countries, and understand the transnational scope of the SDP movement.

### *Sustaining legitimacy*

In a similar vein to the Canadian NGO, Swiss staff members appreciated the publicity created by the Platform as well as The Year. However, many also worried about the sustainability of the network after the Platform dismantled and the UN initiatives ended. One of the Project Officers suggested the Swiss government mostly took a special interest in showcasing the Swiss NGO's programs because they were under pressure by the UN to promote SDP. Swiss staff members at times felt exploited by the government who used the NGO's projects to demonstrate the success of The Year, but thereafter denied requests made for funding to support these very same projects over a longer term.

With this in mind, one Swiss NGO Project Officer discussed the uncertainties about the attention The Year had brought when she mused: 'I'm always wondering . . . are we going to be interesting still next year?' Previous research has warned that networks commonly assemble for a given issue or cause and then terminate (Perrucci and Potter, 1989), while other authors note that the cessation of networks is more often a lengthy process involving the 'whittling away of strategic partners and the gradual decline in influence of the network' (Hay, 1998: 51). Therefore, the concern expressed by the Swiss NGO interviewees that the SDP network may not be sustainable in the long term is an example of the tensions that underlie relationships and expectations associated with the Platform.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, our findings demonstrate that members of both NGOs had similar understandings of the Platform, although some minor variations were noted – variations that we attribute to the sometimes distinct experiences of interviewees working in the Swiss and Canadian social, cultural, and political contexts. Each NGO suggested it was useful for connecting with NGOs, the UN, and governments, which improved legitimacy and assisted in disseminating the SDP cause on a global scale. Still, some concerns remained as to the sustainability of the movement via communication technologies, particularly given the increasingly neoliberal climate of the development work.

These findings contribute to the literature that discusses neoliberal networks and the realities of using the Internet to promote development at a time when the 'digital divide' is exacerbating inequalities for those on the 'receiving end' of SDP interventions. Although communication technologies such as the Platform aim to promote network collaboration, our results show that unequal power relations and politics can prevent a united SDP front. One might also speculate, then, that NGOs entirely based in the Two-Thirds

World with fewer resources, political connections, and power may experience even more inequalities than the groups studied here. We agree with Cumbers et al.'s (2008: 191) contention that "place-based events or "real space" remains critical in developing trust, understanding deeper affinities, as well as organizational coherence for more sustained translocal interactions between activists'.

Our study also revealed the challenges involved in sustaining transnational network collaborations within a given social movement. As the UN Millennium Development Goals increasingly promote a homogenized SDP agenda (Hayhurst, 2009), it is pertinent for those involved to reflect on the necessity of promoting a transnational, coherent, and unified SDP movement. This raises important questions about how to balance attempts to respect local SDP knowledge with attempts to promote a global agenda (Saavedra, 2009). While communication technologies such as Internet platforms may assist in facilitating dialogue to tackle these challenges, perhaps the time is ripe to think more critically about how SDP advocacy strategies can become more accessible for those groups who are designed to benefit from such efforts.

To accomplish these goals, future research on SDP and new media could benefit from using postcolonial theory and decolonizing methodologies that begin from the perspectives of those at 'receiving end' of SDP programs (e.g. Hayhurst et al., forthcoming) thereby raising new questions such as: how do SDP program participants use and experience new media? That is, how can new media be leveraged so that 'subaltern groups are consciously building translocal solidarities as a means of achieving local aims and ambitions' (McEwan, 2009: 236)? Most of the literature on development-focused transnational networks tends to ignore issues around subaltern knowledge, structure, and agency, and the interface between the global and the local (McFarlane, 2006). In light of this, SDP scholars and activists might consider whether a cohesive movement might neglect issues of colonial histories, domination, marginalization, material poverty, and inequality and should further explore the politics and ethics of transnational networks and Internet platforms used to promote the SDP agenda.

A useful example of a more interactive and participatory-driven Internet form are 'wikis', which are online environments designed to promote collaborative knowledge-building and inclusivity (Ruth and Houghton, 2009). An initial step would be to explore if and how NGOs and program recipients based in the Two-Thirds world use and 'take-up' online resources (e.g. toolkits, monitoring and evaluation manuals, etc.) located on the Platform and on other SDP websites. This is an imperative strategy towards improving programs, practices, and policies for those targeted by SDP interventions.

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## **Notes**

1. Here, we are referring to '(inter)networking' as a term that speaks to the Internet's (presumed) utility as a tool to promote and facilitate transnational networking in international development.

2. Following Esteva and Prakash (1998), as well as Mohanty (2003), we will use the terms ‘One-Third World’ (to refer to the Global North) and ‘Two-Thirds World’ (to refer to the Global South). They are intended to remove ideological and geographical binaries found in other terms (e.g. North/South, Third World/First World).
3. This article draws on data from a larger study, parts of which have been published elsewhere in an article with a different focus (Hayhurst and Frisby, 2010).
4. We would like to thank one of the reviewers for highlighting this point.

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