The Web Sites of

New Zealand Non-Governmental Development Organisations

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ABSTRACT

New Zealand Non-Governmental Development Organisations (NGOs) are facing challenges in areas of accountability, effectiveness, efficiency, and communication and sharing of information, both internally and externally. The technology of the World Wide Web has the ability to assist organisations in facing these challenges. This study examines the Web sites of NZ NGOs and evaluates them against accepted best practice criteria to see whether the sites are effective in meeting the challenges and enhancing the activities of the organisations. Looking at how NZ NGOs are currently using the Web and comparing their efforts with current 'best practice' will help organisations understand how establishing and maintaining a Web presence can best address the challenges.

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GLOSSARY & ACRONYMS

Browser	A computer program which allows a person to read hypertext (qv). The browser gives some means of viewing the contents of nodes (or "pages") and of navigating from one node to another. MS Internet Explorer, Netscape Navigator, NCSA Mosaic, Lynx, and W3 are examples of browsers for the World-Wide Web.
Hit	A request to a Web server (qv) for a Web page (qv) from a Web browser.
Home Page	The top-level entry point web page relating to an individual or institution, or possibly a subject area.
HTML	Hypertext Markup Language: A Hypertext document format used on the World-Wide Web.
Hyperlink	A reference (link) from some point in one hypertext document to (some point in) another document or another place in the same document. A browser usually displays a hyperlink in some distinguishing way, e.g. in a different colour, font or style. When the user activates the link (e.g. by clicking on it with the mouse) the browser will display the target of the link.
Hypertext	A collection of documents (or "nodes") containing cross-references or "links" which, with the aid of an interactive browser program, allow the reader to move easily from one document to another.
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
Internet	A set of interconnected networks
ISP	Internet Service Provider. A company which provides other companies or individuals with access to, or presence on, the Internet.
IT	Information Technology
META Tag	A facility in HTML for storing information about the HTML document (such as keywords used, author etc). Such information can be extracted by servers/clients for use in identifying, indexing and cataloguing specialized document meta-information.
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation: independent, not-for-profit, altruistic voluntary organisations involved in international aid and development work
NMIT	Nelson Marlborough Institute of Technology
Search Engine	A remotely accessible program that lets you do keyword searches for information on the Internet. There are several types of search engine; the search may cover titles of documents, URLs (qv), headers, or the full text.
Search Result	A list of Web sites displayed by a search engine in response to a search request.
URL	Uniform Resource Locator: A draft standard for specifying the location of an object on the Internet, such as a Web site. URLs are used extensively on the World-Wide Web. They are used in HTML documents to specify the target of a hyperlink, which is often another HTML document (possibly stored on another computer).

Visitor	A person accessing a Web site (qv).
Web Page	A block of data available on the World-Wide Web, identified by a URL. In the simplest, most common case, a Web page is a file written in HTML, stored on the server. It may include references to images that appear as part of the page when it is displayed by a Web browser.
Web Server	A process running at a Web site which sends out Web pages in response to requests from remote browsers.
Web Site	A computer on the Internet running a World-Wide Web server process.
WWW	World Wide Web: An Internet hypertext distributed information retrieval system

Technical definitions have been adapted from "The Online Computer Dictionary" (www.instantweb.com/d/dictionary/).

INTRODUCTION

New Zealand Non-Governmental Development Organisations (NGOs) are facing challenges in areas of accountability, effectiveness, efficiency, and communication and sharing of information, both internally and externally. The technology of the World Wide Web has the ability to assist organisations in facing these challenges. This study examines the Web sites of NZ NGOs and evaluates them against accepted best practice criteria to see whether the sites are effective in meeting these challenges and enhancing the activities of the organisations. The impetus for the research came from a conversation with the chief executives of two leading NGOs, during which they raised concerns about how much money they were spending on Web development and whether they were receiving value for money from the developments.

Two areas of research are relevant to the arguments presented in this thesis: the role of Non-Governmental Organisations, and the use of the World Wide Web. I examine the current position of NGOs, and then the possibilities of the Web to affect the way organisations operate in the modern world.

NGOs took on a major role in humanitarian aid, and from this their ability to reach the poor more effectively than governmental agencies was recognised. By the end of the 1970s it had become apparent to Governments and donors that NGOs' usefulness extended beyond disaster relief to ongoing development skills, and they were increasingly supported and funded (Smillie, 1999, p8). However, NGO activities are now being questioned by commentators such as Michael Edwards and Michael Fowler (Edwards 2000, Fowler 2000), particularly regarding NGO capacity to assist in development. The initial questions to be answered by this research are what are the problems facing NGOs, and in respect of these problems, has the Web anything to offer NGOs – put simply, should they bother building a Web site, and if they do, how should they use it? I argue that NGOs can benefit from having a Web presence, but that there are certain practices that should be adopted if the investment in building a Web presence is to deliver value for money and be effective in meeting the challenges discussed above.

I first review the position of 'northern' development NGOs before considering the technology. Too many information systems projects result from finding a technology, then looking for a problem which it might solve, rather than looking at problems then trying to find an appropriate solutions (McFadden 1999, 312). While there are definite advantages to developing a Web presence, there is a danger that NGOs will spend time and effort driven by a feeling that a Web presence is necessary, without fully understanding how to ensure that this effort advances the organisation's goals.

I then review the use of the World Wide Web. Firstly I review opinions on the usefulness of the Web and show that opinions vary widely, from neo-luddites who would shun the Web and advanced technology in general, to the neo-futurists and 'Web evangelists' who believe that the Web is the solution to most if not all world problems. "Only connect"… is their catch cry (Rheingold 1993).

Having looked at the theoretical attitudes to the Web and concluded that the Web does indeed have positive aspects for NGOs (if managed correctly), I turn my attention to the more specific aspects of what constitutes 'good' Web design, content and usage. I present a set of widely accepted guidelines that can be applied by NZ NGOs, then use these guidelines to evaluate current Web sites of NZ NGOs. This section refers to work done by Marina Buonocore Boyd and Nicola Wilson at the Nelson Marlborough Institute of Technology during 2001 as a research project conducted to meet the requirements of a Bachelor of Commerce degree majoring in Information Systems.

Definitions:
The study will use some terms that should be clarified.

Information Technology (IT) and Information and Communications Technologies
Information Technology (IT) and Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) are taken to mean "electronics-based technology which can be used to collect, store, process and package information and provide access to knowledge" (UNCTAD 1995).

Non-governmental Development Organisations (NGOs)
While there is considerable debate about the definition of Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs), as defined by Michael Edwards they are

a subset of civic organisations, defined by the fact that they are formally registered with government, receive a significant proportion of their income from voluntary contributions (usually alongside grants from government), and are governed by a board of trustees rather than the elected representatives of a constituency (Edwards 2000, 8).

A slightly wider definition is postulated by Najam (2000), based on an earlier definition by Brown and Korten

The broad spectrum of voluntary associations which are entirely or largely independent of government and are not primarily motivated by commercial concerns.

However, neither of these definitions is entirely suitable for the group I chose to study, namely the members of the Council for International Development (CID) as listed in Appendix A. CID subscribes to the definition of NGOs laid out by the Commonwealth Foundation in its Code of Good Practice, namely that NGOs have four major characteristics: they are independent of government, they are voluntary, they are not profit-driven, and they have a set of values that extend beyond self-interest (Commonwealth 1997).

The definition I use in this research is that non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are independent, not-for-profit, altruistic voluntary organisations involved in international aid and development work.

The World Wide Web

The World Wide Web is one of many facilities offered by the Internet, and its definition is discussed in more detail below. In order to keep this study to a reasonable size I have chosen not to examine the use of email or other Internet facilities, although from personal observation email in particular is widely used in the NGO community. There is a clear distinction between the low cost involved in establishing an email presence, and the potentially limitless costs involved in building and maintaining a Web site.