

Sharing Posts and Progress: Youth Push the Boundaries of Partnership

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I've got this friend. He's from Pakistan—a least developed country according to the U.N. Human Development Index (HDI).¹ When we first met, I was sure he was American. His English was perfect and he seemed to know all the ins and outs of U.S. popular culture—even holding his own in a discussion of obscure characters from Walt Disney movies. He could name more U.S. government officials than most Americans that I knew, and spoke knowledgeably about U.S. foreign affairs as if they were his own. In one of our first conversations, he drew on a thorough knowledge of my country, his country, and global economics to articulate a compelling argument that challenged my assumptions about the role of the United States in developing countries. Soon after this discussion, I found out that it was the first week of his first-ever trip outside Pakistan.

He came from a rural region where arranged marriages were not uncommon and grew up in a devout Muslim home that was guarded against Western culture. Upon learning all this, I was anxious to ask how he could know so much about the United States and relate so easily to Americans with only a few days in the country.

“It's globalization, dude,” he said.

Over the past decade, technological advances have given me, my friend, and other members of the Millennial generation (loosely defined as people born after 1982) unprecedented access to communication tools, and with them, information of all sorts. It's everything from news and educational resources to popular culture and social networks. We are the face of an emerging global community—one that sees beyond artificial national boundaries, personal background, language, and development indicators like the HDI. The word community is chosen intentionally, because that is what we are. We share a common knowledge, culture, and language. Though our individual realities may differ immensely, they can now overlap in once impossible ways—ways that build a trust and familiarity. To be part of this community, you only need one thing: Internet access.

Since 2002, the number of global Internet users has nearly quadrupled. The number of public websites has grown even faster in the same amount of time—from 3 million to 555 million.² We can talk to each other virtually any time on Skype and follow each other’s bite-sized updates on Facebook and Twitter. The most recent chapter in this technological tale—featuring smart phones, tablets, and other mobile devices—has only fortified the lines of instant communication. It’s a “24/7” global conversation, with more people joining all the time.

Two Generations Ago

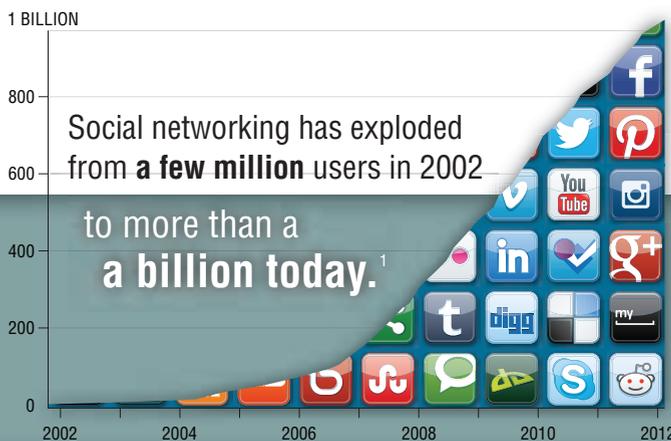
When my grandfather was a 20-something American soldier in the late 1950s, he was sent to what was then known as West Germany to help in what’s often called the earliest phase of modern U.S. foreign assistance—the reconstruction of Europe. At the time, most young Americans understood going “over there” to be a chore and a duty. The United States had a lofty obligation to rebuild a war-shattered society, and the roles were clear: we were the rescuers and they were the beneficiaries.

Grandpa lived on a U.S. base just outside Frankfurt. Like other U.S. bases at the time, it functioned as an American military town that had simply been transplanted in Europe. Most military residents did little

to expand their interactions beyond its comfortable confines into neighboring local communities. The shadow of Nazi Germany lingered heavily into the 1950s—reminding us that the American tendency toward physical and ideological self-containment was neither unreasonable nor unjustified.

During this same period, warning signs of the Cold War only greater strained an already weak international trust. In this time, the unfamiliar easily gave way to the suspicious. The behavior of a nuclear-armed Soviet Union was alarming, especially when a formidable barrier between East and West—the Berlin Wall—was constructed in 1961. Given this context, it’s not surprising that Grandpa has never mentioned making any close European friends during his time overseas.

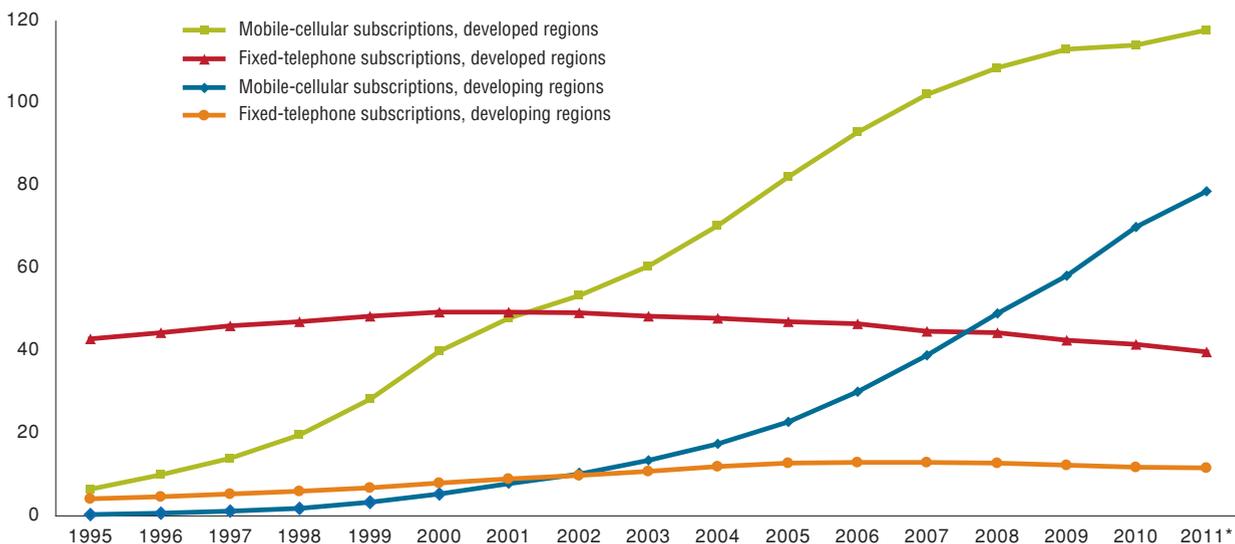
Jump ahead more than 50 years—I am now a 20-something American. Last year, I travelled to Europe for the first time for a semester of foreign language study. I visited the site of the base where my grandfather had lived, now converted to office buildings. While in Europe, I was encouraged to leave my American “bubble” and build friendships with local people. I made the choice to live with a native family, speak their language, eat what my hosts ate, and intentionally seek out cultural differences. It changed my life. I now have friends from across Europe with whom I communicate regularly. The time I spent in Germany, learning from Germans, has unquestionably changed how I view my home and how I relate to a diverse world.



515 million youth (age 15 to 24) live on less than \$2 per day—nearly **45 percent** of all youth.²

Figure c.1 The Extraordinary Rise in Mobile Cellular Subscriptions Continues in the Developing World

Number of fixed-telephone and mobile-cellular subscriptions per 100 inhabitants, 1995-2011



* Data for 2011 are preliminary estimates.

Source: United Nations, 2012

Pushing Boundaries

My grandfather's story and my story represent a generational shift in concepts of global engagement. Today, more U.S. students than ever before are going out there, not to perform a duty, but to find opportunities to learn. The U.S. State Department reports that study abroad by college and university students has more than tripled in the past two decades.³ Some students are going to Europe, but many others are pushing the boundaries even further, heading to Asia, South America, and Africa. These continents were once viewed cautiously as destinations left to thrill-seekers and do-gooders. Today, more of my peers than ever before are choosing developing countries as their new classrooms. And you can be sure that when their time in these places comes to an end, the friendships, the communication, and the conversations will not.

To a quickly growing number of Americans—particularly Millennials—the developing world is no longer a site for charity work. Its people are not helpless. They are friends and partners—fellow learners who have their own views and experiences to contribute to

Developing countries
are home to **87 percent**
of the world's youth.³



In 2010,
two-thirds of students in
low-income countries
completed primary school.⁴

ongoing dialogues on how to solve our persistent shared problems like poverty and hunger. The two-dimensional concept of “the West and the rest” is no longer adequate; people in my generation from every continent are finding new ways to forge partnerships across national borders and through once dense cultural underbrush. Americans are venturing out in greater numbers, but the world is coming to us too. According to the Institute for International Education, the number of international students coming to the United States each year has grown by 32 percent over the past decade—and developing countries top the list of sending nations.⁴

**“I was not born without a cause.
I was not born without faith.
My heart beats strong to yell at
those who do not feel,
And so pursue happiness.
It is a right of birth.”**

— Excerpt from
Un Derecho de Nacimiento

With all the exciting changes, the fact remains that the ability to get on a plane is still a privilege of rich people. But as my Pakistani friend has taught me, a plane ticket is no longer a requirement. If you have even a basic education and strong will to learn, access can take you far. The price of international connectivity is falling all the time. According to the U.N., more than half of the people in the developing world are now cell phone subscribers.⁵ Internet users, though still a minority, are poised to multiply quickly as the cost of broadband access

falls. And once people are online, they are thoroughly connected in ways that go beyond Skype and Facebook. Open learning initiatives such as Harvard University’s Extension School are providing world-class educational opportunities to anyone with a LAN line and a laptop. Computer science, comparative literature, world history, abstract algebra—it’s all there and it’s all free. Other exciting idea-sharing platforms, such as the innovative TED.com, are bringing the world’s brightest minds around the same table for unparalleled international collaboration.

BOX c.1

AGRICULTURAL EXCHANGE: FUTURE FARMERS OF AMERICA PARTNER WITH YOUNG GHANAIS

The Future Farmers of America (FFA) has launched an 18-month project with a peer group of young Ghanaian farmers through the Hunger Alliance of Ghana. The project aims to provide an experiential medium for both groups to share technical knowledge about farming practices. Ghanaian youth will share their specialized local knowledge of farming their home landscape, while a team of U.S. graduate students from FFA will train their Ghanaian peers on how to advocate for agriculture

with their own national government. FFA has 85 years of experience in agricultural research, education and advocacy, and understands the importance of healthy relationships between the agricultural community and the government. Young people’s organizations like FFA are still relatively new to Ghana so this partnership features the added value of international peer exchange that may germinate online, but can quickly grow to take on a tangible form.

2015+

Ready or not, the U.N. Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) will expire in 2015. Some goals will be met, while others will not. Regardless of global progress on MDGs 1 through 7, MDG 8—creating a global partnership for development—is being tackled in ways scarcely imaginable 10 years ago. Partnership is the new name of the global game. The experience of the MDGs has taught us that ownership of it cannot rest with national governments alone. The potential for sharing is enormous, and most importantly, the global mindset, particularly among youth, is shifting to accommodate an immensely more inclusive conversation.

Like my friend, each new person brought to the table is a valuable and original human resource with incalculable potential. And the more minds that we have working on hunger and poverty, the better. These are two chronic plagues that will not be eradicated until not only governments, but people—youth, students, researchers, entrepreneurs, people of faith, and others, of all income levels, and from all corners of the globe—can seize these bold new tools of communication and collaborate as peers for creative and coordinated development beyond 2015.

Derek Schwabe is the Hunger Report project fellow at Bread for the World Institute.

Musicians in central plaza of Mexico City perform song “Un Derecho de Nacimiento/Right of Birth.” See lyrics on opposite page.



BOX c.2

A RIGHT OF BIRTH: ARTISTIC VOICES EMPOWER YOUTH IN LATIN AMERICA

Earlier this year, a group of young Mexican musicians wrote a song titled “Un Derecho de Nacimiento” (A Right of Birth) to artfully raise their concerns and hopes for development and human rights issues in their native country. The song was recorded in June as a music video in the central plaza of Mexico City and was posted on YouTube. It soon grew widely popular with young Mexicans, and was rapidly circulated online through social and news media. By September, the video had received over one million views across the web. It has become a rallying cry

for Spanish-speaking youth the world over who want to make a statement about national and global injustices like poverty, corruption, discrimination, and environmental exploitation. This is just one example of the potential of social media tools like YouTube to empower and unify people across many countries, particularly young people who know these tools as a way of life and want to make their voices heard loud and clear.

View “Un Derecho de Nacimiento” now at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JCWGOUIqq4k>.