Assignment Two: A Partnership between MIT and Computer Aid International
ES.259: Information and Communication Technology in Africa
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A Partnership between MIT and Computer Aid International

The digital divide continues to expand as communities with advanced technology continue to grow and those without access to technology get left behind. This divide can be seen between communities living in the same city or state or between communities from completely cultures and countries. The solution in both cases is to educate underserved communities about computers and other technology, and describe ways in which it can help them in their education and daily lives.

Starting this summer, students at MIT would join hands with Computer Aid International to help provide refurbished computers to organizations in developing countries of Africa. In addition to fixing old PCs, MIT students would also travel to Africa to teach educators, students, and/or families about computers. Students could join one of Computer Aid International's current projects or a new community with the need would be found.

Computer Aid International is an organization based in London, England that works to provide organizations in developing nations, including African countries such as Swaziland, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Rwanda, Cameroon, and Ethiopia, with refurbished PCs. They send PCs to areas where this application of information technology would have the greatest social and economic impact. In the UK they ask businesses to donate old PCs that they no longer need after upgrading to better technology. Then the hard drives of the donated PCs are completely cleared of data, the PCs are refurbished, and tested before shipment to their destinations.[1]

MIT has a two-part program at the Public Service Center called CommuniTech that works to shorten this technology gap. Through the MIT Used Computer Factory (UCF), CommuniTech provides refurbished computers to families in need in the Boston area. Then through Families Accessing Computer Technology (FACT), it trains the families to be able to use these computers.[2]

MIT students would work with or under CommuniTech to help Computer Aid International on one or more of its current projects.

One of the current projects is an initiative with Computers for Schools Kenya. Computers for Schools Kenya is a non-profit organization that works to create a sustainable use of computers in Kenya's secondary schools. Since August 2002, over 1000 PCs have been installed into 54 Kenyan state secondary schools.[3]

Computer Aid International has also provided computers to the Computer Education Trust (CET) in Swaziland. Created in 1998, CET is an initiative to help the sustainable use of PCs in Swaziland schools. Since the project began in August 2000, over 2,186

[1] www.computeraid.org. March 8, 2006.
[2] "CommuniTech," http://web.mit.edu/mitpsc/programs/communitech/. March 8, 2006.
[3] www.computeraid.org. March 8, 2006.

computers have been donated improving the use from almost zero to half of all secondary schools.

Another possibility is working with the Community and Individual Development Association (CIDA) University in South Africa. Computer Aid International and CIDA are working together to provide low-income students with high tech, low cost IT facilities.[4]

While MIT students could greatly help with these initiatives, it may initially be a little difficult to incorporate the MIT students into these established programs. However after a short period of time, there may not be any problems. Since the goals of all of the organizations will be very similar, if not the same, the MIT students would most certainly be valuable additions to the efforts. We would all be working together to provide resources and the PCs and to educate the members of the focus communities.

The team of MIT students would consist of several students who would clear the hard drives, a couple to refurbish, and one or two team leaders. Any of the students would be able to teach and work in implementing the efforts. The team could include members of CommuniTech. Ideally, the project would be a joint effort between CommuniTech or by a team under CommuniTech and Computer Aid International.

Since the PCs would be donations and we would be using the MIT facilities to clear the hard drives and to refurbish the computers, the main costs would be shipment costs, if we ship the computers, and the costs of travel to and living expenses in Africa. Part of the money could be fundraised. Companies could also provide monetary donations if not donating their old PCs.

Once the team is set up, work could begin immediately since it is very likely that donations would begin flowing in and we already have access to facilities and resources. There is no doubt that a team of MIT students could provide passion, knowledge, and drive to this effort to bridge the digital divide.

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[4] www.computeraid.org. March 8, 2006.

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