

SUMMARY | 2009

# HIVOS KNOWLEDGE PROGRAMME



## DIGITAL NATIVES WITH A CAUSE?

A Knowledge Survey and Framework by Nishant Shah  
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# Digital Natives with a Cause?

Youth are often seen as potential agents of change for reshaping their own societies. By 2010, the global youth population is expected reach almost 1.2 billion of which 85% reside in developing countries. Unleashing the potential of even a part of this group in developing countries promises a substantially impact on societies. Especially now when youths thriving on digital technologies flood universities, work forces, and governments and could facilitate radical restructuring of the world we live in. So, it's time we start listening to them.

## About

Although there is much attention for the potential impact of youth as e-agents of change, there is limited knowledge about the subject and this knowledge is mostly focussed on Western societies. Hivos has partnered with the Centre for Internet and Society, Bangalore, to assess the state of knowledge on the intersection between youth, ICT and engagement worldwide and with a specific attention for developing countries. The report *Digital Natives with a Cause?* charts Digital Native scholarship and practice in order to create a framework that consolidates existing paradigms, and informs further research and intervention within diverse contexts and cultures. A summary of the report follows hereunder.

## Methodology

The report was compiled in three parts: a worldwide literature survey, including scholarship, public discourse, policies, legislation, anecdotes and incidents in the field of youth and technology; conversations with influential youth and technology scholars, practitioners and activists; and a knowledge framework based on conclusions, suggestions, ideas and projections drawn from the literature survey and conversations, and knowledge gaps requiring research.

## Findings

This report assess the state of knowledge on the potential impact of youth as e-agents of change and concentrates on bridging the gap between social sciences and liberal arts research on the one hand, and the world of grass roots practice and global policy on the other. For four focus areas – social transformation, political participation and mobilisation, pedagogic interventions, and livelihood – questions are posed and findings listed. These questions help identify knowledge gaps and detail the survey's focus.

### *Q: What constitutes a Digital Native identity?*

A: Existing literature offers no definite answers, only working definitions: children born after 1980; youths significantly affected by the rise of Internet technologies; an emerging global population growing up with digital technologies central to everyday functioning. No literature attempts to provide either a theoretical understanding or serious expostulation of what a Digital Native identity can mean. Yet there is an increasing amount of anecdotal and scholarly evidence of a generation who relate to digital technologies differently and live in a markedly different way than preceding generations. Scholarship that address this sense of difference is rare; most rely on novelty as the source of the difference, without interrogating the identity's mechanics and politics. Discussions of Digital Natives and their presence/growth devolve into questions of infrastructure-building, safety and education, without adequate theorisation of the identity.

### *Q: How do we understand Digital Natives as e-agents of change?*

A: While scholarship on the 'identity politics and constitution' of Digital Natives is limited, an incredible amount of anthropological and sociological work exists on Digital Natives as e-agents of change. There is constant alarm that the Internet and its collaborative potential are severely underused by youths who remain apathetic to political participation. However, we believe this alarm rises from evaluating Digital

Native activities based on a pre-digital understanding of politics and engagement; and from concentrating on actions rather than the conditions of change that Digital Natives create and in which they mature. Few works have overcome these limitations and demonstrated how new forms of agency and empowerment are created and appropriated by Digital Natives in their everyday relationships with Internet and communication technologies.

*Q: What are the factors that bolster our understanding of technology-mediated identities?*

A: The survey revealed the existence of an image of technology-mediated identities in general, and the Digital Native in particular, as an almost disembodied identity, without any of the factors or differentials that abound in contemporary scholarship. Some of the more interesting ideas on contextualising Digital Natives come from unusual sources like studies in post-human identities, robotics and the philosophy of science. The few works from these disciplines indicate that key influences must be considered to understand a contextualised Digital Native identity: gender and sexuality; class; language; socio-cultural indicators; and geo-political status.

*Q: What new structures must be developed for the young to emerge as active stakeholders in technology-mediated developmental changes?*

A: Expert opinions indicate no need to search for new structures that will 'empower' the young in their relationship with technology. They focus, rather, on the potential of existing digital spaces and technology-driven social applications familiar to Digital Natives. Simultaneously, they emphasise convergent and accessible technologies, open and unlicensed technologised platforms, and the creation of public repositories of knowledge and information as crucial to fulfilling the potential of existing digital spaces and applications.

*Q: Who are the stake-holders in shaping youth-technology relationships?*

A: Governments, who perceive ICTs as a panacea; educators, who play an important role in the engagement and participation of Digital Natives in their immediate environments; the market, which is becoming deeply involved in the governance and regulation of these new spaces and populations; civil society organisations (CSOs), which face challenges in coordinating and harnessing the power of the young for particular causes; and Digital Natives, who have demolished earlier hierarchies and demonstrated new aesthetics of political participation, cultural consumption and social transformation.

*Q: What are the changes produced by the emergence of Internet technologies and technology-mediated identities in developing information societies?*

A: There is a strong contextualisation and 'domesticisation' of Internet technologies and applications within different regions. Mobile technologies and portable computing devices have fuelled the creation of digital borderlands where youths engage with technologies at an intimate, local level while drawing from public and global paradigms. The systemic change in the history of technology interaction and social application is not so much in 'novel' forms of engagement or participation, but in re-visiting the local with a sense of adventure and playfulness that no other technology has ever allowed. The ability to publish, create cultural products, mobilise local resources, promote community-based causes, and build new forms of socio-cultural relationships has led to a systemic change: Digital Natives – generally posited as hyper-territorial and global – have become fiercely local and embedded in their contexts. Their 'local', however, is also global, because of the reach and the collaborative networking model of the Internet technologies they use to mediate it.

## **Knowledge Gaps**

Based on the literature survey and framework questions, the following knowledge gaps were identified:

- lack of a vocabulary and framework to address Digital Natives' identities and actions;
- lack of research recognising that not all Digital Natives are equal;
- an explanation of changes in Digital Natives' roles and learning practices, and in educators' roles and the nature of evaluation and assessment;
- how Digital Natives reflect on their actions and identities;
- how Digital Natives abuse technology, and possible safeguards that deter abuses but harness its power;
- the changes Digital Natives induce in the conceptualisation of the political.

## **Knowledge Network**

A list of 20 ICT-related organisations was assembled. Many emphasise making conditions of change possible so a Digital Native has the assurance, guidance, support and space to begin his own political

campaign. All are web-based, and physically based in Asia, Europe, Africa, or North and South America.

## Policy Guidance

Multidisciplinary theoretical approaches venturing beyond the cause-and-effect model and providing the necessary vocabulary and sensitivity are crucial to understanding Digital Natives. The lament that youths are apolitical is a result of insufficient attention to activities that do not conform to existing notions of political and civil society formation. Digital Natives are sensitive and thoughtful; it is time to listen to them and their ideas, and to focus on their development as responsible and active citizens rather than on their digital exploits or technologised interests. Since youth-technology stake-holders have been identified, existing scholarship and interventions can be consolidated to formulate policies.

### Five future interventions have been devised

First, given the terms 'digital activism' and 'e-activism' are misnomers, consider youth and activism in terms of the interaction between online and offline engagement. Create conditions that allow youths to exploit technologies they are familiar with and invest in; and create access and awareness among Digital Natives not yet participating in social change. The answer is not in the 'e' but in the 'activism', and in existing political spaces rather than creating new ones.

Second, create sustainable conditions for the young to work as agents of change. Promote youthcamps, barcamps, sourcecamps, exchange, digital broadcast and publishing platforms, organisations expert in the legal implications, and an infrastructure for the germination and growth of effective political ideas using online components.

Third, overcome the physical-virtual dialectic when speaking of Digital Natives. Consider them as techno-social identities straddling physical and virtual realms. Provide physical conditions that raise Digital Natives' awareness of the political edge of their choices and activities, and offer free, guided and safe spaces to experiment with new infrastructure support ideas to shape individual efforts into larger, more effective movements.

Fourth, to consolidate knowledge and experience, create multilateral networks convening the field's major players.

Finally, rethink the politics of funding. Create a model offering incentives, financial assistance and support without the usual mechanics of funding and scholarship possibly beyond the ken of Digital Natives – who are, after all, school and college students, children and young adults. Establish simple procedures and models, without funding complexities and politics, that recognise and support ideas.

## Next Steps

This scouting mission displays that digital natives have a potential impact as agents of change. Young people can be an entry point for bringing technology and engagement together. But the answer is not in the 'e' but in the 'activism'. Engagement with youth should focus on their development as responsible and active citizens rather than on their digital exploits or technologised interests. As a first step in working towards enabling digital natives for social transformation and political engagement, a multistakeholder conference (researchers, practitioners, business, digital natives themselves) will be organized fall 2010.

## Information

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