

Executive Summary

Transforming the Fight Against Poverty: The Internet & Anti-Poverty Strategies

A new paper authored by Dr. Elaine Kamarck, Professor at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government, examines the ways in which Internet technology has transformed anti-poverty efforts in the U.S. and around the world. In her paper, Dr. Kamarck finds that the Internet is as central to the transformation of programs promoting social justice as it has been to the transformation of business and culture in the previous two decades.

The Internet has substantially reduced the cost of government overhead and improved services in anti-poverty programs, transitioning the welfare system from one that contributed little to alleviating poverty into one that has helped focus these programs on the poor themselves. One of the biggest challenges faced by governments is the cost of administering benefit programs in a way that ensures all eligible people are served and fraud is minimized. Through use of the Internet, the databases of many programs have been integrated, allowing one government program to check others electronically to avoid duplication and fraud.

Using an IT-based systems approach to poverty programs has also helped the government increase the quality and speed of services while reducing overhead costs. This has allowed the government to pursue a win-win course in the administration of anti-poverty programs, increasing productivity while freeing up people and dollars for program activities designed to address the core issues in poverty.

Globally, the Internet is also being used to promote health, education and economic development. In the third world, promoting access to food, healthcare and basic education are among the critical needs that NGOs have used web-based technologies to advance.

In agricultural communities, the Internet is closing the gap between producers and markets, allowing farmers to keep a greater portion of their profits. Internet shopping sites specializing in selling arts and crafts bring income to artisans living in impoverished areas. Health care workers in remote regions now have access to modern medical journals and opinions from colleagues through online technologies.

Increasingly, anti-poverty efforts will depend on a robust, capable and affordable expansion of the world-wide web. Dr. Kamarck posits that the information technology will continue to transform anti-poverty efforts in the U.S. and abroad, with governments and NGOs only just beginning to experience the enormous gains in productivity made possible by the Internet.