IN-HOUSE NEWS

USAID Offers $10,000 for Best Development Idea Using Cell Phones

When violence broke out following Kenya's elections, citizens became journalists and sent text messages to David Kobia and Erik Hersman—innovators who then mapped areas of high conflict on their Web site, Ushahidi.com, and Google Maps. This enabled citizens to avoid dangerous hot spots.

Last spring, Kobia and Hersman won $25,000 in an online challenge for creating Ushahidi.com.

Using technology to improve life in developing countries is a goal of USAID's Global Development Commons (GDC). Call it Web 2.0, inventive economics, wikinomics, or crowdsourcing—it's changing the way business is done.

On Oct. 13, GDC opened a public contest—the Development 2.0 Challenge—offering a grant of $10,000 to the winner.

"[The Challenge] is more of a competition-cum-collaboration—a continuous, online set of brainstorming to combine, test, and refine innovative approaches to specific problems," Administrator Henrietta Fore said.

The Challenge invited the public to submit ideas that use cell phones for international progress and growth issues.

"Mobile networks are one of the few infrastructures that work and are accessible to low-income populations," said Al Hammond, entrepreneur in residence at Ashoka, a global organization that runs similar open-source challenges on Changemakers.net.

"If mobile phones could be used more readily for financial transactions, for healthcare services, or to empower small producers with trade information, then they would be immensely more valuable to low-income communities," Hammond said. "The key to that is software applications—and especially voice activated applications—that empower users to do things they now can't do."

Any innovator or organization that registers at the Challenge through www.globaldevelopmentcommons.net can submit an idea for a mobile application that addresses a major development issue.

Viewers can review and rate each project, and offer constructive criticism. Innovators can revise and resubmit projects based on the critiques until just before the Challenge closes on Nov. 28.

In addition to competing for a grant of up to $10,000, worldwide applicants gain visibility for their ideas, constructive feedback, and the chance to present before senior USAID officials and investors.

USAID employees can register, review, and vote at www.netsquared.org/usaid.

"The beautiful thing about an open call is that you don't need to know the solution that you are seeking until it hits you," said Jeff Howe, author of *Crowdsourcing: Why the Power of the Crowd Is Driving the Future of Business,* and contributing editor at *Wired* magazine. "You just have to be astute enough to recognize gold when it comes up."

With the prize money they won for their Web site, Ushahidi—which means "testimony" in Swahili—Kobia and Hersman reinvested in their company, with plans to add reports and encouragement for peace efforts. They hope to expand the mapping system, build a heat map highlighting deeper conflict areas at specific times, and link the data to news stories and YouTube.

Join the Global Development Commons at www.globaldevelopmentcommons.net. ★

Photo by Jason McElweenie

David Kobia, left, and Erik Hersman won an online contest for their Web site that identified violent areas in Kenya based on input from text messages.

Mark Ward Moves to United Nations Post in Afghanistan

Mark Ward, senior deputy assistant administrator for Asia, departed USAID in late October to serve as the senior development advisor at the United Nations assistance mission to Afghanistan. He will work on priority reconstruction and development projects, and will be based in Kabul.

Ward, who is a career minister in the Senior Foreign Service, managed the Asia and Near East Bureau. After the bureau was reorganized into separate bureaus, he continued as head of the Asia Bureau. He served as the Agency's mission director in Pakistan from July 2002 through December 2003.

Ward was the 2006 winner of the Service to America Medal for international affairs.

In a statement Oct. 21, Administrator Henrietta Fore noted that Ward's "innovative work forging public-private partnerships in the wake of the Asian tsunami disaster and the devastating earthquakes in Pakistan and China has broken new ground in how the world responds to massive regional upheavals. Mark's deep personal commitment to mobilizing reconstruction assistance following these disasters linked USAID's work to the highest levels of the U.S. Government and private sector, and earned him the personal gratitude of President Bush and former Presidents Bush and Clinton." ★

EGYPT FSNs DEVELOP ACCOUNTING SYSTEM THAT GOES GLOBAL

Sherif Zohdi, a Foreign Service National (FSN) staff member in Egypt, threw down his pen late one night in Cairo, exhausted after working on the USAID mission's financial accounts.

"There has to be an easier way. We spend days reconciling cash accounts manually," Zohdi told fellow accounting team member Emad Shawky that night.

Zohdi said he knew that the mission was not alone and that other missions were also struggling with an onerous manual system of validating records against those of the U.S. Treasury.

Eager to develop a better system, Zohdi and Shawky spent many weeks and weekends exploring software options, preparing the design and flow, writing their own software program, and testing the results.

Zohdi demonstrated the preliminary system, which was praised by worldwide colleagues, in a USAID controller workshop in Kiev in 2005. The team continued to refine the system with help from USAID Egypt Controller Jed Barton and FSNs Hossam Rahman and Marmar Farid.

The system was ready to launch in September 2005. In Egypt, it would mean full control over cash reconciliation, significant time saved, and accurate financial reporting.

Photo by USAID/Egypt

USAID staff who developed the new CART system, left to right: Sherif Zohdi, Jed Barton, Marmar Farid, Hossam Abdel Rahman, and Emad Shawky.

In August 2006, the system gained the full support of the Agency's chief financial officer.

Hungary and the Dominican Republic took the lead in piloting the system and declared success. Cairo worked closely with Washington's accounting team to ensure consistency with the USAID headquarters accounting system.

In November 2007, a gradual worldwide implementation began of the system, dubbed the Cash Reconciliation Tool or CART.

"CART increases accuracy by reducing the opportunity for human error and provides detailed reporting and tracking," the Agency's chief financial officer said.

The Egyptian team worked closely with more than 50 missions on installation, trouble-shooting, and resolving technical issues. By June 2008, the last mission had installed the system—three months before the goal set by the chief financial officer.

"It is an easy tool that has transformed a cumbersome task into an expeditious and flawless process," said Maria Virginia Garcia of the Dominican Republic.

"It is an excellent system. The manual process that used to take two to three days is now done in a couple of hours with CART," said Roberto Brito from El Salvador.

"It is a fantastic tool. It eliminates the possibility of errors which was inherent in the manual system," said Stephen Kairu of Kenya. ★