



Leapfrogging technologies: a different route to development

mediamonkey.co.uk, September 26, 2005

URL: <http://www.pr9.net/business/services/2607september.html>

Interested in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) but not sure what to do and where to start? Want some information with which to talk to the board? Need practical examples of how other companies are using CSR to achieve sustainable business success? Article 13 can help you.

As part of their ongoing programme Article 13, the leading corporate social responsibility experts, have researched and released a feature examining the use of technology by business to deliver social and environmental benefits.

Below is a synopsis of Article 13's feature article, "Leapfrogging technologies: a different route to development". The article can be accessed in full at www.article13.com.

PR9.NET September 26, 2005 - The term 'leapfrogging technologies' describes the use of technology in developing economies to find new paths to development, skipping the slower route that other nations have had to take. Innovation is the cornerstone of leapfrogging. It is not just about identifying new technologies but also about finding new ways to apply existing ideas in a different context where, for example, the existing infrastructure may be very limited. Leapfrog technologies are, more often than not, those which don't require an existing grid – mobile phones, wireless communications, distributed power supply like solar power, and so on.

A range of different technologies make leapfrogging possible in the developing world. Article 13 focuses on three of these in its latest feature: communications technology, energy generation and distribution, and the application of energy to power transport. Investment in biotechnology and nanotechnology in the developing world is also signposted as another avenue which may trigger the leapfrogging effect.

Communications technology has proven to be particularly effective. It's easier and faster to put in cellular towers in rural areas than to put in landlines, so cellular use is exploding in the developing world. The provision of health services is one area where communications technology is making a significant difference to human well-being. ICT can help public health care by improving working conditions and infrastructure.

Article 13 then shifts its attention to business and how it can get itself into shape to benefit from deploying leapfrog technology. It is suggested that free-to-use knowledge is key to this process and that monopolies are likely to be left behind by leapfrogging entrepreneurs. The growth in use of open source software, such as the Linux operating system, in developing nations will be interesting to watch in this respect.

Another major challenge for business is regulation. Regulations that are successful in developed markets may create obstacles in developing markets. Regulation needs to ensure that the outcomes are right for that region and context, not defining processes so tightly that leapfrogging becomes impossible.

Developing regions can experiment with emerging ideas. Businesses that aim to build profit from this experimentation need to be alert to issues like social equity. Less than 10% of the world's population is connected to the internet, and 80% of internet users are in the developed world, so leapfrog technologies that use phones and TV will be more egalitarian and reach further.

There isn't a single path to leapfrogging. Regions will adopt technologies that fit their needs and resources. Leapfrogging can happen accidentally when the only systems around for adoption are better; it can happen because a particular setting limits options, like decentralised communication for inaccessible rural areas; or it can happen deliberately, where government develops targeted policies, like promoting the installation of Wi-Fi (ie 'wireless fidelity') and free computers in poor urban areas. Responsible business will work with the same flexibility, applying products and services where they offer the best fit with social benefits, and ensuring that the triple bottom line is sound.

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