GLOBAL – Making the World a Smaller Place

To go or not to go?

Every researcher is confronted now and then with the decision whether to attend an interesting – and often important – conference. Various resource constraints, like time or budget, can easily tip the scales against going. Tiwonge Msulira Banda from the UbuntuNet Alliance (Africa) is living proof of that: "Our travel from Malawi to Vienna, Austria, takes about 24 hours. If it is a one-day or two-day meeting, it means travelling 24 hours coming and 24 hours going back just to attend [...]." In addition, our ecological footprint is bigger the more we travel and events like conferences are no exception.

The GLOBAL project addresses these aspects and concentrates on offering viable solutions. Its infrastructure and services aim at supporting global research collaboration. Connecting scientists to an event, e.g. a symposium, via the virtual auditorium makes active engagement possible, be it as a speaker or regular attendee. The TV-like conferencing makes it easy for people to find their way around and communicate with each other effectively.

Borka Jerman Blažič, professor at the Institut Jožef Stefan (Slovenia), states: "We communicate much easier [over distance] if we see each other – our partners, our friends, our professional colleagues –, and GLOBAL is enabling that."

The Global infrastructure

The GLOBAL infrastructure supports event types ranging from regular meetings to fully fledged virtual conferences that cover parallel sessions and many remote auditoria. Such complex events require the active support of the GLOBAL team. But it is not only about technology, as Claudia Córdova Yamauchi from CLARA (Latin America) emphasises, "[...] it is about the quality of life – how this technology is going to impact in the lives of people. This is the most important thing and I think GLOBAL is going to impact [on researchers' lives]."

TV-like videoconferencing

Global opens opportunities

The GLOBAL project plays an active role in changing the European Research Area by opening up to other parts of the world and cooperating more closely with scientists globally. "When the GLOBAL project came along and we were approached by the ZSI [Centre for Social Innovation, coordinator] to be part of this project we were delighted about the visibility it gives us African researchers and the possibilities to be part of the community. This is quite exciting," says Margaret E. Ngwira, secretary of the UbuntuNet Alliance. With the GLOBAL infrastructure, research communities have the opportunity to make their engagement more effective. In addition to virtual meetings, the GLOBAL infrastructure supports networking, sharing of presentations, documents, pictures, and, for those who could not attend or wish to review certain material, event recordings can be watched at a later time.

GLOBAL is a specific support action in the EU Framework Programme for RTD (FP7) and runs from May 2008 to October 2010. Especially during the proposal writing stage, the project relied on the helpful and insightful support of the NCP.

It goes without saying that the project partners themselves exploit the infrastructure GLOBAL offers to researchers and research projects from Europe and around the world. To say it in Tiwonge Msulira Banda's words: "We [from Africa] could attend using the infrastructure that the project is working on. It gives so many opportunities to people from very far away or for people who cannot travel that very day to attend conferences."

The benefits **are** real, also on the interpersonal level, so it is no wonder that Margaret E. Ngwira enthuses about the first physical project meeting that "[e]ven as we are just sitting in this meeting – you know we have Latin America, we have Africa, several European countries – we feel like one family together. We know each other **virtually** and when we meet for the first time **physically** we know each other. So it's a success."

GLOBAL will continue its efforts to provide and improve its services so that joint research collaborations can be more effective – there is still much to do to achieve the "ultimate goal", which is, as professor Juan Quemada (from project partner UPM, Spain) puts it, "a world that is much smaller and much better connected than it is now."

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