**Global connectivity is old news**  
  
Twenty years ago--in March 1996, to be precise--I was a director at the World Bank and I was making presentations within the World Bank that were embarrassingly similar to the presentation on the Global Connect Initiative of 2016.   
  
This was of course before firms like Google, Amazon and Facebook had been created, and before the iPhone was imagined. Even so, some of us could see that the Internet was going to be at least as significant to the human race as the invention of the wheel. And so we were evangelizing this idea to our colleagues.

Although we often received blank stares when we made the case for global connectivity, people began to understand when I told them this.

In June 1995, a health worker in a little village in Zambia logged on to the website of the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta Georgia and got the answer to a question on how to treat malaria.   
  
Now this was June 1995, not June 2015. This was not the capital of Zambia: this was a little village 600 kilometers away. And this was not a rich country--this was Zambia, one of the poorest countries in the world.   
  
But the most important part of this picture for us in the World Bank is something different: the World Bank isn't in the picture. The World Bank isn't organized to share its knowledge with all the millions of people who make decisions about poverty. But just imagine if it was! Think what an organization we could become!

That simple narrative did get attention and in due course the president of the World Bank (Jim Wolfensohn) announced to the finance ministers of the world in October 1996 a major strategic initiative for the World Bank to use the Internet to share its knowledge with the world. We were going to be become "the knowledge bank." The initiative was in due course implemented and by 2000 the World Bank was recognized as a world leader in the field.

Yet in comparison to the scale of the problem, progress has been shockingly slow. Here we are in 2016, twenty years later, with only 30% of people in developing countries having access to the internet. And in the World Bank itself, only 1% of infrastructure lending is devoted to enhancing connectivity, at a time when most people realize that internet access is a basic human right, thus updating Maslow''s pyramid.

​So why has progress towards connectivity been so slow?   
  
Even more important, where will we be ​in another twenty years, i.e. in 2036? Will we still be making the same Global Connect presentations to the same aid agencies and the same government ministries, with internet access reaching still perhaps only 60% (up from 30%), and the World Bank infrastructure lending for connectivity moving up to 2% (up from 1%)?

A commitment to funding internet connectivity and building up technical skills are two important elements in the Global Connect presentation and these are vital.

**The missing link in the Global Connect initiative**  
  
But there is one element that is totally missing in the presentation which I believe is critical. It is responsible for the slow progress to date. Unless it is fixed, progress over the coming twenty years will be similarly dispiriting.

This concerns the bureaucratic management practices that still permeate international aid agencies and government ministries. These management practices lead to organizations that are unable to adapt to changing conditions and unable to innovate, even when they have money and technical skills.

Unless the international aid agencies and government ministries emancipate themselves from these bureaucratic management practices and adopt the Agile management practices that are now standard in Silicon Valley and in firms like Google, Apple, Amazon and Facebook, I am afraid progress towards global connectivity will continue to be agonizingly slow.

The primary constraint isn't money or technology. It's bureaucratic management. The frustrating thing is that we know how to manage in an Agile fashion so that innovation is continuous. Tens of thousands of private sector firms all around the world are now implementing Agile management practices and many books have been written about it (including mine).

Yet international aid agencies and government ministries continue to grind along with bureaucracy dominant. (It's been some time since I worked in the World Bank, but inputs into[glassdoor.com](http://glassdoor.com/) confirm that the situation isn't significantly different: the bureaucracy is still horrendous.)

So here's my suggestion: introducing Agile management practices into the international aid agencies and government ministries should be considered at least as important as bringing new money and technical skills.   
  
Companies from Silicon Valley would be making a major contribution to the issue of global connectivity and the public good if they shared and evangelized their Agile management practices to the international aid agencies and government ministries. They could be helping make the case that technology by itself is not a solution: the real gains come from combining technology with Agile management. Silicon Valley knows this. It's time that this understanding was more widely shared.  
  
I would even suggest that Agile management is more important than money or technical skills. Without it, progress will continue to be agonizingly slow. With it, rapid progress will be made even without new money or new technical skills, because innovation will create new solutions.

Here's some more reading on Agile management:

<http://www.forbes.com/sites/stevedenning/2015/07/22/how-to-make-the-whole-organization-agile/>  
<http://www.forbes.com/sites/stevedenning/2015/01/26/why-do-managers-hate-agile/>  
<http://www.forbes.com/sites/stevedenning/2016/03/29/gary-hamels-3-trillion-prize-for-killing-bureaucracy/>  
<http://www.forbes.com/sites/stevedenning/2013/05/07/the-best-new-books-on-the-creative-economy>

**A technology/management parable**

One final point. There was a certain irony listening to the discussion yesterday about the issue of "sporadic connectivity" when I as a supposed participant in the discussion was being prevented from contributing precisely because of "sporadic connectivity"!

Yet this wasn't in essence a technical problem: more robust technical solutions obviously exist--a telephone line! It wasn't a lack of funds or lack of technical skills. It was the choice of a technology that didn't in the end work--in other words, a management problem.   
  
An old-fashioned telephone link would have been less fancy than a Google Hangout link but at least it would have worked in a reliable fashion. In retrospect, a combination of a telephone link and a video feed would have been a better solution and would have guaranteed audio access, even if the video connection sporadically failed.

Now we might look at this as a one-off piece of learning for the next conference.  
  
But it is also an important parable for the bigger issue of global connectivity. There were interventions yesterday to the effect that "a two-inch screen is unacceptable" and "2G connectivity is not good enough." Yet a two-inch screen and 2G connectivity are an awful lot better than no connectivity at all.

The thing is, the best is often the enemy of the good, and frequently contributes to total failure.   
  
So I agree strongly with Vint's intervention when he argued for putting the priority on getting some kind of connectivity to everyone as soon as possible. That should be given much higher priority than idealistic schemes to enhance the quality of access.  If we give people any kind of access, they will find a way to make it work. Internet access is a basic human need and we should treat it as such.