

The Digital Divide

Is it an SfD problem to tackle?

Could SfD help bridge it by being the catalyst?

An opinion piece from a sport for development practitioner in rural Southern Africa utilising football as a platform for education outside the classroom and purposeful play, as developed by Coaches Across Continents. World Parks World Cup attempts to 'bring communities and conservation together through sport'. Why World Parks? Well, I stay next to 3 national parks. Why World Cup? I have a vision of communities, rangers and parks personnel from Parks across Africa coming together to showcase their parks, people and talent by holding a World Cup football tournament, so the world can say thank you to them for not only protecting our flora and fauna for future generations to enjoy but also as they protect vital ecosystems services for the globe. But that's another story...

I am based in the very last village in South Africa, 500 meters before you enter the Kruger National Park, in South Africa, Limpopo National Park in Mozambique is 32 km further to the east through the Kruger, and Zimbabwe and Gonarezhou National park 10 km to north. The village where I operate World Parks, World Cup from, is called Bennde-Mutale, it is in the heart of what is known as the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Conservation Area. An area where the nearest city is far away on treacherous roads, teachers sometimes commute more than 5 hours to schools on dirt roads, and when in Zimbabwe and Mozambique the closest tarred roads are back in South Africa across the Limpopo River.

During this Covid 19 pandemic, as with many people, I have had time; time to think, to ponder and to contemplate. Maybe more than others as I couldn't join my daughter in the US because of travel restrictions and lockdowns. Now however, is the time to write some of those thoughts down, to share, to declutter my head and to hopefully spark some thoughts and discussions in the Sport for Development field. A field I am new too, 4 years, with similar goals to what I have been involved in, education and community development, I have found sport an ideal way to stimulate, engage, motivate and educate across the area I stay.

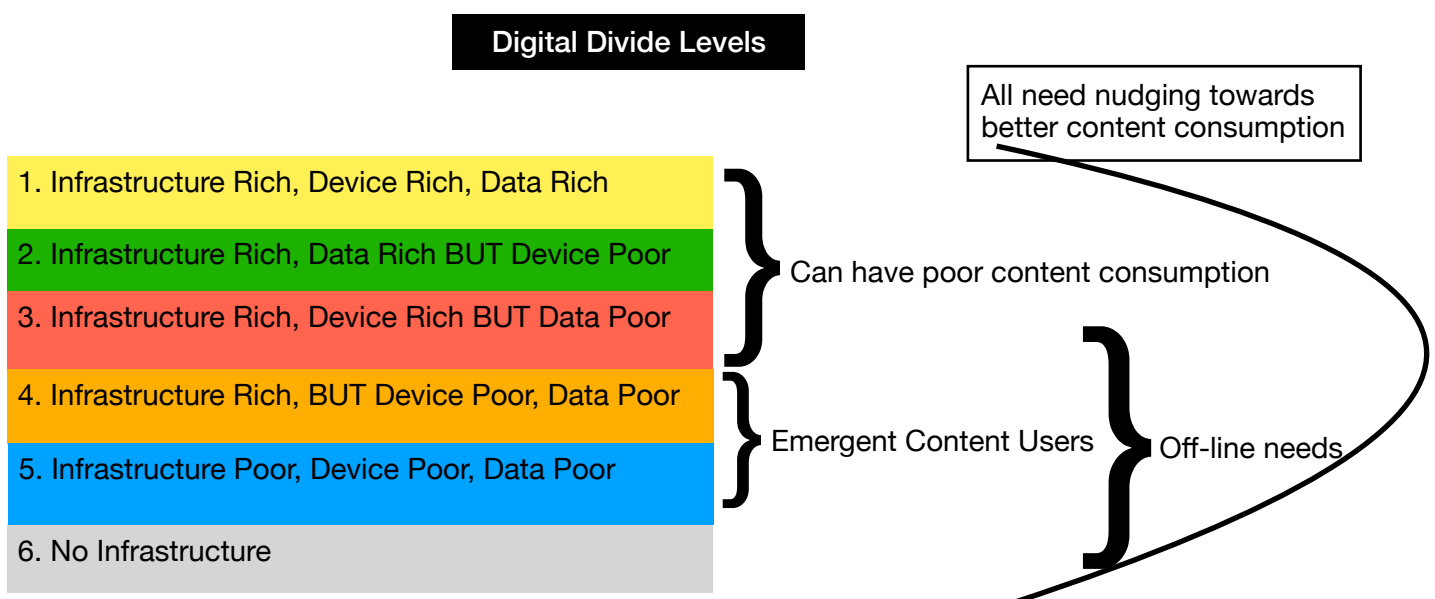
During the Covid 19 global pandemic, after my initial panic, disappointments, upsets and confusion I joined in a few Zoom meeting organised by Beyond Sport. I thought they were great, joining in with the bigger picture, connecting, sharing thoughts and having those thoughts listened to, made me feel part of the 'group' the SfD 'family' so to speak. The connections did wonders for my mental health.

However the thoughts and conversations I had in the breakout sessions nearly always revolved around 'going digital', accessing the internet, many of the other conversations were about, Zoom fitness, Skype stretching, and Youtube dancing. In the world outside of the SfD, news stories abounded about schools going online, Universities going 'digital', my own daughters school in

Michigan, USA, went digital within a few weeks of lockdown there, a 7 year old with her own laptop, budget laptop, but still at 7, the new normal. Everyone was 'going digital'!

All of this got me thinking as I looked around the landscape where we operate, internet based learning, or online learning was just not a viable option for our 600 plus participants we have on our programme across 3 countries. We operate in a transboundary area, with schools and communities living in extreme rural areas all sparsely placed, all of whom had been experiencing lockdown of various forms, certainly no formal schooling happening. An area where electricity hasn't arrived, water can be a 3 to 5 km away walking, food security is not secure due to elephants raiding crops, this is certainly the case in Mozambique and Zimbabwe. South Africa we are lucky we have electricity and newly built cellphone towers and fenced off parks, however, if someone gave my 100 devices to take our participants online tomorrow, I would not be able to.

Across WPWC landscape we have various challenges for going on-line, 100% of our operating area falls under Levels 4,5 and 6 of the digital divide, as shown below. This must be the case for many other SDP actors across the globe.



In South Africa we are mainly level 4, though poor electrical infrastructure leads too many blackouts and loss of internet access, Zimbabwe is level 5 and 6 as are the areas in Mozambique. For 80% of our participants to access on-line education of any form, even with hundreds of tablets donated they still could not access an online platform. Poor, means you are data poor therefore digitally poor.

I asked myself, is this really my problem, or even a SfD problem? Is this not an infrastructure issue? A serious global development issues? I could say, 'not my problem' let the UN or Zuckerberg fix it. However, for our coaches and participants it is my problem, exacerbated now by the Covid 19 Pandemic. We have been unable to implement our project, communicate with the

majority of our participants who haven't had any schooling now for months because of lockdowns and lack of digital access. Funds are low, priorities shift, simply surviving as an organisation is tough for all out-there but ideas still abound. Covid 19 has provided some of us with the impetus to connect digitally and has shown us what technology can do and how it can complement educational techniques both formal and informal, sport related or not.

The SfD field is very broad, with myriad disciplines, implementing and operating in every nation state and the no-mans land between, across every religion, culture and code, the SfD field operates in urban, peri-urban, rural and extreme rural areas. This means too, that the SfD field operates across all 6 levels of the digital divide where participants either benefit from it, are abused by it or have no idea what it is, but will do soon. One of my fears is that new and emergent content users will become drowned in the content of the modern internet, used, and abused by it if no guidance is given.

I heard, in a recent Sport for Development webinar on 'The future of SfD', one of the speakers say that their dream is for there to be no longer a distinction between 'Sport for Development' and 'Development', they should be synonymous.

Can they really become synonymous? Can the SfD world aid beyond health and wellness, education through sport and the many other intangible benefits it brings? Can SfD become a catalyst for global issues of interconnectedness and education for all? A driving force on the edge of a new paradigm, guiding good online content use for emergent users, enabling online education in the rural extremes under the guise 'sport for development', leaving no-one behind.

I would say yes, it can, it should. The SfD world can be the catalyst which lays the foundational bricks to build a bridge across the digital divide in a concerted and conscientious way.

How many of us sit at home with multiple devices within arms reach, uncapped data, streaming the latests documentary or film, while many sit with none in the dark with a candle for light. Like the water crisis there are those of us who have half a dozen taps in our houses, hot and cold, while for the majority, they may have 1 cold water tap between 50, 100, 300 people or there are no taps and people rely on a single hand pump for a community of a 1000, or it's a painstakingly hand dug well or even a river with crocodiles to access a basic need, water.

With the Covid 19 pandemic, digital access is showing to be a basic need as schools close, cases flare up in an area, lockdowns circle around and around. Unlike the water crisis though, the digital divide crisis is easier to get around and to implement, there is no need for dams to be built, wells to be drilled, pipes to be laid or water tanks to be brought in and erected. The digital divide is relatively easy to cross, I can drive into the middle of the bush, the desert, or even the Antarctic and connect to a satellite overhead and access the digital world, at the right cost!

As with all developmental issues, money is seen as the answer, with the right amount of funding things can be made better but they take time, the right funding call has to come out, assessments have to be made, government tenders must be issued and approved. Is this true for the digital divide? In part yes, funding is needed, and assessments have to be made. Do we have to wait for the right funding call to be made? No. Do we have to wait for government approval for giving someone access to a connected device for complementary educational purposes? I'd say no, but on scale it would be better to have their support.

At the beginning of the year I was elected to the board of Directors of something called the Vhembe Biosphere Reserve, a 30,000 square km region of unique and special biodiversity, tasked with tackling conservation issues, natural resources use, youth development and climate change. It is this last issue, climate change, where I have learnt the most when tackling a global issue; partnerships, and coalitions are needed. A coalition of various stakeholders from International levels down to the grassroots levels all providing either expertise, funds, networks, ideas, or opening doors to new thought processes of implementation to overcome a global issue.

With the SfD world operating at all levels of society across the globe, from; the United Nations, Commonwealth Secretariat, governments, federations, leagues, universities and academic down to Mr Moyo our Zimbabwean community organiser who sits by the fire at his rondaval in his homestead in rural Zimbabwe. A man who is now part of the WPWC and CAC families and more importantly connected to the SfD family. We can as a family, as a coalition, help the likes of Mr Moyo, the wider community of children, the rural and urban poor, refugees and the digitally excluded and digitally voiceless, who are stakeholders in the SfD world, get connected.

The different levels of the digital divide show us the immediate needs and what actions can be done quickly, or with a bit of thought and what actions need greater planning and partnerships to bridge this divide. Some areas may simply need data, a wifi router and funds to pay for it, other places, it'll be devices and data access, or developing an app associated with a sports programme which encourages good content behaviour. Or it'll be the extreme where some forms of infrastructure would be required; satellite, solar power, devices, data, and an educational app for new users. During the CV19 lockdown I even had time to mentally lay out an app I would develop for my region, one that would promote good content behaviour especially in emerging content areas, whether it is possible or would actually work in the real world is another matter, it certainly worked in my 'lockdown' head.

Of course the above would need funding, by shifting the conversation though, one away from \$, £ and € and towards the global and local language of megabytes and gigabytes; an amount and an expense everyone can relate to. Be it in the business world, sports world, conservation world, favelas and shanty towns of the urban poor or the traditional rondaval rural poor of Africa, they all understand the importance of mb and gb. More so now, during Covid 19, than at any other-time.

If we were able to change the mindsets of people to see the digital divide in a language they understand such as mb and gb, then we can use those pieces to start to build the bridge.

Instead of asking people for money, \$5, £5 or €5 we can ask for 5gb or 250mb and get the monetary equivalent be it \$3, or £0.50p. Framing the donation in mb/gb terms at accessible amounts to all, will nudge and enable people from all walks of life in all countries to donate as they understand the need for data, they may live the need, understand it and donate when then can.

You'd think that donating actual 'data', as some organisations enable across the world, such as in Australia which allows people to donate 'data', would solve the issue. Could that not be something which could be rolled out on a bigger scale? It could but it wouldn't solve the device poor or infrastructure poor, their needs are coupled and entwined with proposals, funding and donations. Again though, we could phrase this in mb/gb. If we know the average cost of 1gb of data in a particular country for a 'pay-as-you-go' user, we could use that ratio and say we need 10,000 gb (\$10,000 equivalent \$1 = 1gb) to bridge the digital divide here and provide x number of participants access to online complementary health, wellness and educational activities. Something I would encourage my daughter to use as an emergent content user at the age of seven along side her formal school work, data free.

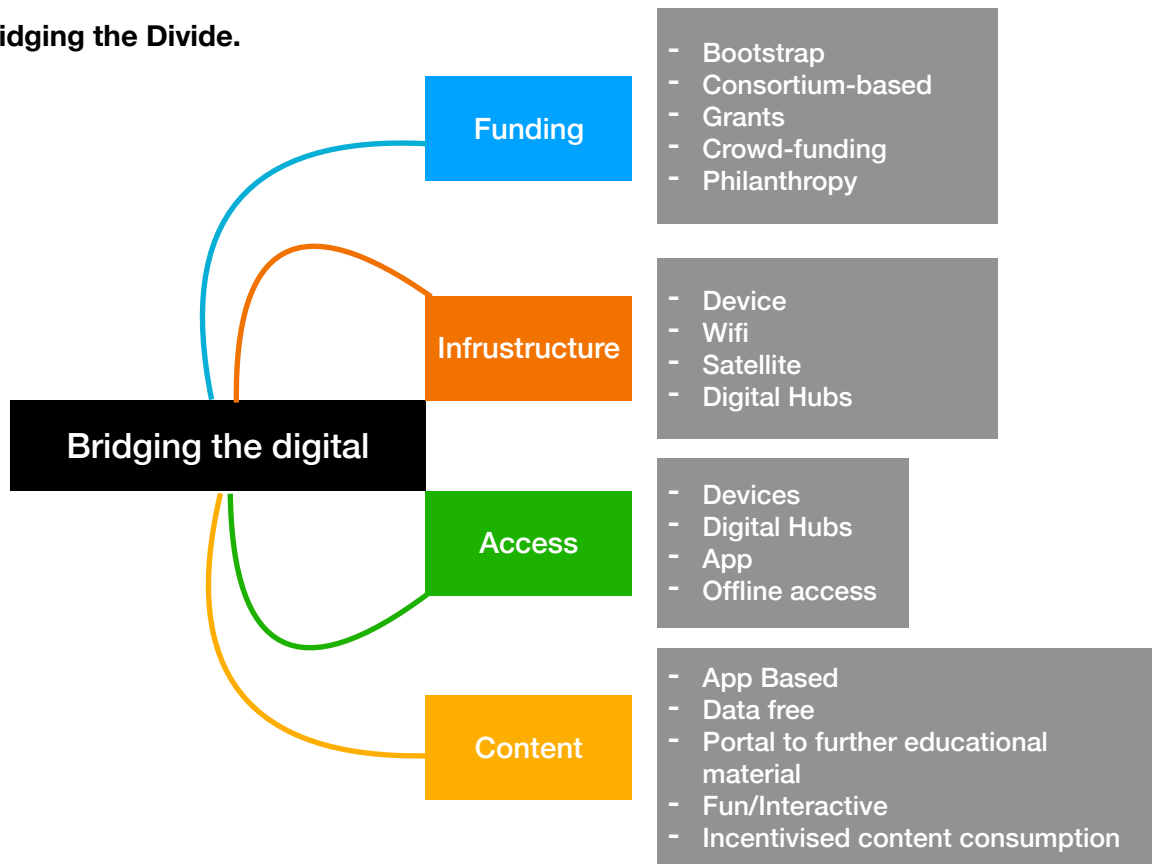
How is it possible to bring full on access to an extreme rural area? It is possible and fantastic when you are in the middle of the bush and you hit a Gonarezhou Sub Office with full wifi, youtube watching, FaceTime making connection. At the very furthest southern reaches of Gonarezhou National Park, in the buffer zone of communities and park, separated by the Mwanedzi River, is a sub office, no mains electricity, no cell phone network, but full on wifi around the offices and even as far as the staff quarters. How is this possible? Is it replicable? What is needed to run such a system in terms of power? How much does it cost to install, and power? What are the data charges? Capped? Uncapped? Are all answerable questions and quantifiable in monetary terms and therefore convertible into the universal language of mb and gb and thus raisable in terms of funds.

Ways and plans can be made to create 'digital hubs' where the digitally disadvantaged can access data. Furthermore devices don't have to social distance, in extreme rural areas where there is a wifi hub and charging station at least one person can collect the phones safely, plug the phones in to charge, connect them to the internet to download an update, new material or to upload a participants video and then return back, sanitised, to the users at the end of the day, for the user to look at new material, play physical games etc.

Through a coalition of willing partners starting with the SfD world maybe at national level or global, the digital divide can become a manageable process to overcome, willing partners can act together and implement a transformative education vehicle and cross the digital divide in a caring,

culturally aware, and meaningful way, with real thought and need as the driving force and not a commercially driven process.

Bridging the Divide.



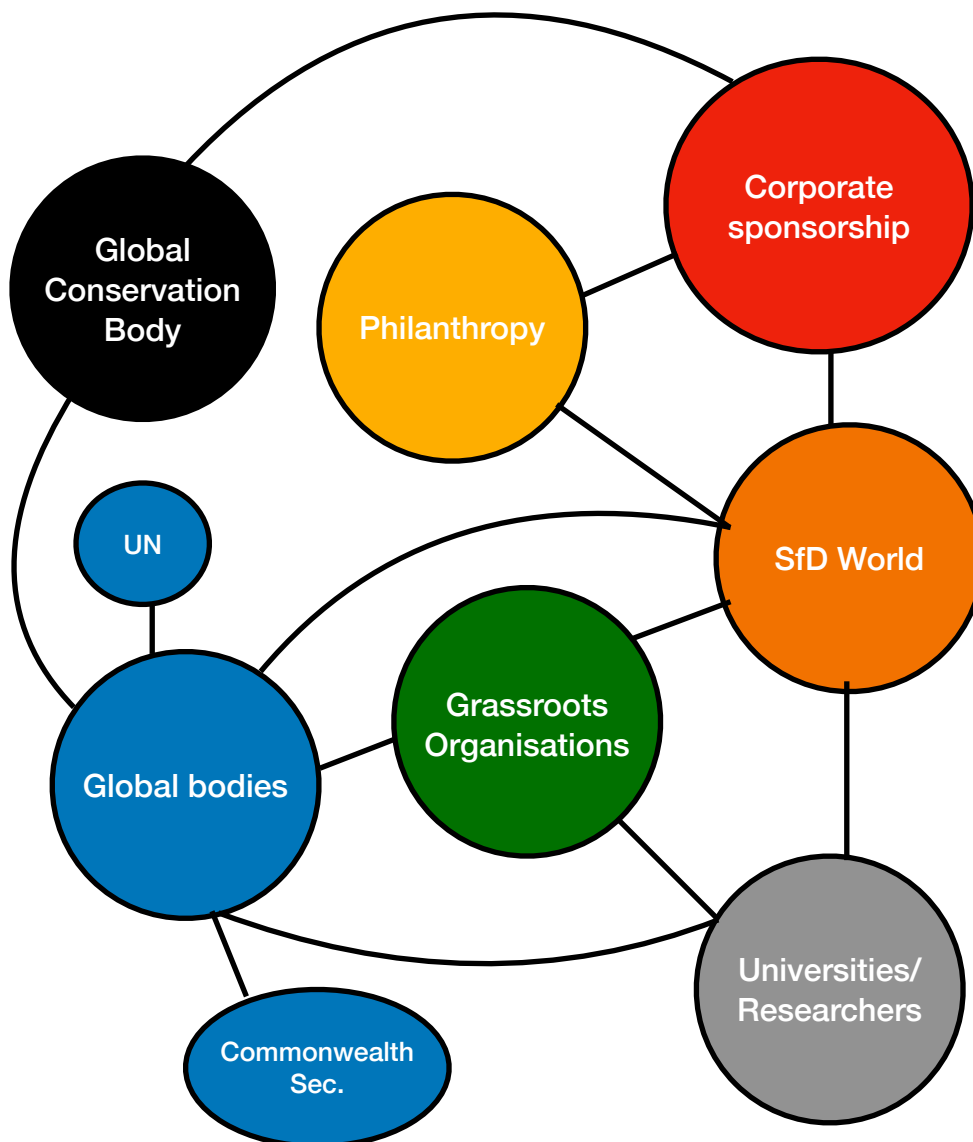
If one were thinking in terms of a coalition to bridge the digital divide with other global players from outside the SfD world then a global conservation organisation would be a step in the right direction. Why? All of us are living through climate change, loss of biodiversity and iconic species, the need to protect our environment, reduce our use of plastics and move towards renewable sources of energy.

If I overcame the infrastructure issues of my region and our participants had access to digital content then I would want to create an app for our local participants to engage in our programme, I'd also want them to be able to learn about conservation, biodiversity, and protecting the environment. What better way to do this than partnering up with say WWF, who already have classroom ready content, a consistent message, and are well known globally. Could I get them on board myself for my little app? Probably not, but on a larger scale it maybe possible, WWF operate globally and have content in most language. By bridging the digital divide in areas on the front line of climate change, biodiversity loss and educating people about these challenges you could create a wave citizen scientists/researchers in city centres, rural areas, no-mans land and more. This may become more vital as the Covid pandemic ebbs and flows across the globe restricting travel, and research.

The digital divide is here, the SDG's are an important guide for the SfD world, and the motto of 'leave no-one behind' is even more crucial as the digital divide lays bare the vast gap between the digital haves and the digital have nots. A problem for the SfD family? Yes. A problem to overcome alone? No. Can a coalition of willing partners from the SfD world start the conversation for the grassroots participants who are digitally excluded? I'd, say yes and maybe it is already happening, if it is I'd love to hear about it.

Thank you. I only mention WWF as they are operating in my landscape and so are at the forefront of my mind.

What a coalition could look like, be it on a more local, national or global scale.



About the author: Vince Mehers is the founder of World Parks, World Cup and is currently on the board of the local Mutele Development Foundation, the Vhembe Biosphere Reserve and plans to start a MRes in Sport and International Development at Brighton University, UK, 2020.