

NetSquared: Building Community to Foster Social Innovation

A concept paper from TechSoup Global

"People don't need somebody out in Washington to tell them how to solve their problems, especially when the best solutions are often right there in their own neighborhoods, just waiting to be discovered."

-Barack Obama, Remarks on the Community Solutions Agenda

NetSquared is a global network of local communities. Around the country and the world, we are empowering people at a local level to foster novel solutions to social challenges — connecting them to each other and to resources that allow innovative ideas to emerge, take shape, and create impact locally and beyond.

Our work is built on three interrelated core strategies:

1. Connecting social change makers at a local level.
2. Creating a global network to connect local communities to each other.
3. Surfacing projects with the greatest potential for impact across the entire global network.

1. Connecting Social Change Makers at a Local Level

Work towards social change is at its most concrete when people are rooted in a common place. This phenomenon occurs repeatedly at NetSquared Local meetings, through which local organizers bring together anyone interested in technology and social impact to learn, share, and collaborate — whether it's innovators or entrepreneurs, nonprofits or foundations, governments or service providers, techies or non-techies. Despite the range of backgrounds (or, arguably, because of it), these groups possess the locally informed wisdom and history to hone effective solutions relevant to their own community.

NetSquared Local meetings take place in over 56 cities around the world, with new locations being added every month. Most NetSquared Local groups meet monthly and some also convene workshops and conferences and provide training to local NGOs. As more groups are created and the network builds, the opportunities for impact multiply.

Snapshots: Local Organizers Who Power the Global Network

The following snapshots illustrate the range of backgrounds and the strong commitment possessed by the NetSquared Local organizers.

Sarah Schacht: Seattle, WA

Sarah Schacht is a political entrepreneur who searches for simple technology solutions to complex social problems. She specializes in youth outreach, crafting technical plans, online organizing, and field work. Having been involved in politics from an early age, she has been a conservative and a liberal, working for a range of causes and campaigns. In 2003, she left college to work on Howard Dean's presidential campaign in several states of the United States.



Olivier Kumedjro: Lome, Togo



Olivier Kumedjro is a telecommunication engineer and computer system support specialist. He also is the Co-founder and Chairman of [Strategie D'Actions Pour L'Integration et le Developpement](#), a nonprofit that aims to demystify and promote the use of ICT for disadvantaged youth.

Peter Deitz: Montreal, Canada

Peter Deitz is a blogger, social media consultant, and the founder of [Social Actions](#), a website that helps people find and share opportunities to make a difference. He has worked in the nonprofit technology sector for the last five years.



Snapshot: NetSquared Local Cameroon — Local Knowledge-Sharing Through Regional Conferences and Broadcasting

The NetSquared Local groups in Cameroon organize a bi-monthly television program to share learnings related to NetSquared Local efforts. They also host regional conferences in several cities. Asama Abel Excel, the organizer of the NetSquared Local in Douala, Cameroon, helped orchestrate a three-day regional conference in Kribi, Cameroon. The conference, which attracted 280 participants, focused on providing guidance and training to aspiring social change makers on topics ranging from organizing a successful community-based project to a seven-step approach to grant writing. It also involved meetings with government officials and citizens to explain the mission and the vision of NetSquared and NetSquared Local and how NetSquared resources can benefit Cameroon communities.

2. Creating a Global Network to Connect Local Communities to Each Other

While every local community is unique, they all face similar issues. Through the [NetSquared blog](#), the [project gallery](#), and the [annual conference](#), NetSquared offers social change makers a variety of opportunities to connect with like minds from around the globe — sharing ideas, providing feedback, and even collaborating on new projects. This global network facilitates broad information sharing and can lead to immediate local impact.

Snapshot: NGOs Collaborate to Empower Farmers Through SMS technology Locally and Globally

DatAgro, a project of D.C.-based DataDyn.org, promotes the development of rural agricultural communities in Chile through access to critical farming information via SMS text messaging. Across the globe, the Agriculture Marketing Information Service (AMIS), based in Cameroon, delivers SMS messages to regional farmers and consumers enabling them to connect directly and do business.

When featured at the NetSquared Year 4 Challenge, both organizations were working on different but equally innovative means of disseminating essential information to poor, rural farmers. At the conference, they learned about each other's work and started sharing best practices and the challenges they faced. They decided that rural farming communities around the world could benefit from a rigorous documentation of the lessons they learned, as well as from access to the processes and tools they developed in bringing SMS technology to rural agriculture. They initiated a project to document and package their work and to make it available for free to other communities using a Creative Commons license. Their goal is to help other projects avoid mistakes and maximize the impact of the time and resources they invest.

These two projects empower farmers on different sides of the world with information via SMS messages. They are now developing one solution that they can implement in both countries while they are freely sharing their learnings with communities around the world. This is the ethos of NetSquared in action.

3. Surfacing Projects with the Greatest Potential for Impact Across the Entire Network

By connecting local communities into a global network, NetSquared helps social change makers to strengthen and scale their individual projects — as exemplified by the DatAgro and AMIS projects discussed above. NetSquared also creates a mechanism to highlight these individual efforts and to proactively connect them to resources they need to create the impact they envision.

Key to this mechanism is NetSquared’s ever-evolving challenge model. It was developed in 2005 as a focal point at the NetSquared Conference to mine, profile, and accelerate innovative projects, using collaborative technologies. NetSquared sponsors an annual NetSquared Challenge, calling for submissions from around the world that outline innovative applications for technology to support social change. Previous challenges have focused on mashups (combining existing tools to produce something new), mobile applications, APIs, and more. NetSquared also collaborates with other organizations to bring Partner Challenges to our community. These Partner Challenges often focus on a specific sector of social benefit work and technology, such as the [UC Berkeley Human Rights Center Mobile Challenge](#), the [USAID Development 2.0 Challenge](#), and [Social Actions Change the Web Challenge](#). Over the last three years, NetSquared has solicited more than 680 social benefit projects, paired those with the best chance of success with the technology and operational expertise they need, and awarded \$376,000 in direct financial support.

When we launched NetSquared, the [challenge process](#) model was a relatively new concept that has since ballooned into its own industry. According to a recent McKinsey report, the prize sector is valued at \$1 to \$2 billion, and total funds for prizes have tripled in the last decade [1]. A host of organizations, foundations, and corporations now run their own challenges all aimed at harnessing the wisdom of crowds to identify ideas that will change the world.

What makes NetSquared challenge model different? It is the NetSquared Community.

This community of social innovators and their supporters, including members of the foundation, corporate, and volunteer sectors, come together to identify projects with the most potential for social impact and success. They drive the engine that surfaces the innovation transpiring in local communities around the world. They provide feedback to project teams and they vote for the winners of the challenges.

Unlike most other challenges, the NetSquared challenge process leverages the NetSquared community to provide support on an ongoing basis, above and beyond the timeframe of a challenge. Project teams continue to develop their projects, soliciting

[1] *And the Winner is... Capturing the Promise of Philanthropic Prizes*, McKinsey & Company
http://www.mckinsey.com/App_Media/Reports/SSO/And_the_winner_is.pdf



feedback and advice and sometimes collaborate with each other to leverage competencies and share resources. Community members offer in-kind donations to project teams, from assistance with business plans to PHP coding. In addition, NetSquared works with the philanthropic sector, corporations, and universities to provide mentors and guidance for challenge participants. For example, through the support of the French American Charitable Trust, we recently provided fund development assistance to all featured projects from the NetSquared 2009 Challenge, connecting the projects with fundraising experts and guidance to help them move towards increased investments and greater community impact.

At its most successful, the challenge process model democratizes opportunities for funding, catalyzes community-driven innovation, and is collaborative by design. While most challenges serve the few (the “winners”), NetSquared aims to serve the many. We believe the real winners are not the projects that get the most votes or money, they are the communities that benefit from social innovation, and the more social innovators collaborate, the greater the benefit for us all.

In Conclusion

In a recent speech, President Obama discussed the potential of the nonprofit sector to address the social challenges that America faces and the need to look beyond well-known organizations to find the “hidden gems that haven’t yet gotten the attention they deserve” [2]. Throughout the country, these “hidden gems” are hard at work for social change.

Through its global network of local communities, NetSquared has been unearthing and showcasing the types of locally-based innovative solutions that would fit President Obama’s vision of “hidden gems.” An ambitious, continually evolving global experiment, NetSquared empowers people at a local level to jointly build and share innovative solutions to social challenges in their own backyards and, increasingly, around the world.

For more information please contact:
Marnie Webb, co-CEO TechSoup Global
mwebb@techsoupglobal.org
www.netsquared.org
www.techsoupglobal.org

[2] Remarks by the President on the Community Solutions Agenda. June 1, 2009
http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-The-President-on-Community-Solutions-Agenda-6-30-09/



About TechSoup Global

TechSoup Global has a long history of providing direct technical assistance to civic organizations in all 50 states. Over the past two decades, we have provided resources that run the gamut from volunteers who help connect computer systems, to robust information resources offered to over 300,000 unique website visitors per month, to our product donation program that helps put technology hardware and software into the hands of thousands of organizations every year. We are committed to ensuring that all organizations have the technology resources they need to achieve their missions. TechSoup Global's 2009-2010 budget of \$23 million is derived from earned revenues and contributed support from donors as diverse as Microsoft, Cisco, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, USAID, and the Corporation for National and Community Service.

Current key services and offerings include:

The TechSoup.org website is recognized throughout the world as a trusted nonprofit technology resource. Each month, approximately 300,000 unique visitors access the site to make more informed technology decisions by reading articles and downloading worksheets that cover a wide range of technology topics (from entry-level to more advanced), and to share their technology-related challenges and solutions with a community of peers.

TechSoup Stock is a unique, web-based service that distributes donated and discounted technology products to nonprofits at the lowest possible cost to the receiving nonprofit by partnering with leading technology companies. TechSoup Stock currently offers donated and discounted technology products from 40 major technology providers, including Microsoft, Cisco Systems, Symantec, Intuit, and Adobe. TechSoup Stock has distributed over \$1.5 billion in technology products to almost 107,000 nonprofits in 31 countries.

The TechSoup Global Network works with capacity-building NGOs across the world to ensure that every nonprofit on the planet has access to the technology products and resources they need to operate at their full potential. As of October 2009, the TechSoup Global Network serves NGOs in 31 countries, including Macau, Spain, Russia, and South Africa.

The NetSquared Initiative helps nonprofits worldwide use new Internet-based tools such as blogging, podcasting, and other social Web applications to extend their reach and impact. Launched in 2005, NetSquared helps social benefit organizations around the world develop the strategic framework, knowledge, and skills to put these powerful new online tools to work for positive social change. Over the last three years, NetSquared has solicited more than 680 social benefit projects, paired them with the technology and operational expertise they need, and awarded \$376,000 in direct financial support.