Tell us more about your background and what attracted you to the world of NRENs.

I’ve worked all my life as an educational technologist, first in University College Dublin (UCD) and later at the World Bank Institute in Washington DC. It was an opportunity to explore the potential of satellite broadcasting in the mid-eighties that led me to see that these tools could open access to education and knowledge for those excluded. That led us into collaborative R&D programmes, funded by the European Union, that researched a whole range of technologies in what became known as ‘blended learning’, satellite broadcasting, videoconferencing, early web support tools, virtual classrooms etc. Applying that experience at the World Bank from 1997 led to the Global Development Learning Network (GDLN), a partnership programme with learning centres in developing countries. We used satellite links (VSAT) due to poor telecoms infrastructure in the Bank’s client countries. Our pedagogical design called for two-way videoconferencing because of our audience (mainly senior civil servants) and the emphasis on knowledge sharing between countries. But this required decent bandwidth and we also wanted to reach beyond capital cities. Therefore NRENs made excellent partners.

How did you sell NRENs to your World Bank managers?

The World Bank’s lending programmes in education were at one time mostly concerned with basic education. Therefore much of the discussion of ICTs in education was in relation to secondary education. However, I believed that the digital revolution in education in developing countries had a greater chance of success in higher education. It was therefore a vital issue that the World Bank projects eventually moved into. So the funding was aimed at improving the quality of teaching and the stimulation of research - two goals where the Bank likes to see results. It was also more vital there too. When the Bank projects eventually moved into that area the funding was aimed at improving the quality of teaching and the stimulation of research - two goals where the Bank likes to see results. It was also more vital there too. When the Bank projects eventually moved into that area the funding was aimed at improving the quality of teaching and the stimulation of research - two goals where the Bank likes to see results.

In your view, what are the main challenges NRENs face?

They need to get government support, in turn, donor support if necessary. Their biggest challenge is lack of awareness and understanding of what an NREN does and how it is different from commercial ISPs. Therefore raising awareness is vital. It is also important to show that an NREN exists in a global ecosystem, a ‘grand club’ if you will, that brings with it ready made access and inclusion in global partnerships that help to alleviate academic isolation. In addition, while it may have little intellectual rigour, the argument that ‘everyone else is doing it’ is quite persuasive.

What is your fondest memory of working with NRENs?

In another part of the Bank operations, in ICT and telecoms, we did similar, you could say ‘lobbying’. In parallel to that effort we ran a number of GDLN knowledge sharing programmes to raise awareness among decision makers in some countries on the benefits of NRENs. Our most successful effort, I believe, was the SERENE programme (South-south Exchange of Research and Education Experiences). All World Bank lending is based on requests from client countries, and so it was important that the key decision makers participating in the study programme could see for themselves the benefits and workings of NRENs in similar countries. My aim at the end of the programme, a mix of videoconferences, web and a study tour, was for the ministry and university management people to say ‘I want one of those’. And we largely succeeded. After the NRENs of Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Vietnam generously shared their experiences, Bangladesh now has BoREN, Bhutan has DuREN, and Afghanistan has AfgREN.

Finally, is there any advice you can give to the GEANT community – what can we do better?

Your ‘Case for NRENs’ website is excellent. It would be useful to add an update and global version of the GEANT Compendium. And maps – maybe a global map in the style of the GEANT connectivity map. On this advisory side you could lobby with donors for a global trust fund to help emerging NRENs.

Images courtesy of Michael Foley