BY SANJAY PRADHAN

AS YOU OPEN THIS ISSUE of Development Outreach, I invite you to join me in a vision of the future.

Imagine, just a few years from now, a developing country official who is struggling with a difficult problem: perhaps re-integrating demobilized soldiers back into their communities that have been torn by conflict, or helping the desperately poor climb out of poverty through targeted assistance programs.

She taps into a series of online platforms that enable her not only to describe and measure the problem precisely, but also to instantaneously identify how five other countries have tackled a similar challenge in different ways. Imagine that she has access to user-friendly summaries of each country’s reform program and its outcomes.

She then connects electronically with her counterpart from the country with the most relevant experience, who is eager to share his knowledge. Together they get the right people involved, design an action plan of country visits, videoconferences, and detailed technical consultations.

And imagine that for all this, financing is available—and quick, either from her country’s budget or from a rapid-response trust fund.

Our practitioner then implements reforms to tackle her challenge and reports back on the results, so that others can in turn benefit from her experience and provide feedback.

Now imagine that hundreds of these South-South exchanges are taking place through a global platform that enables countries to quickly learn about how others have tackled pressing development challenges. And imagine that these exchanges are taking place not just South-South, but North-South and South-North, as countries seek to learn about innovations around the globe.

This is of course the vision of an ideal future. But the power of South-South cooperation and experience exchange is very real and various models are being refined around the globe. The enormous collective potential of scaled-up South-South cooperation and capacity building could be transformative. But right now most examples consist of relatively ad hoc initiatives.
So how can we turn our vision into reality?

This issue of Development Outreach, “The South-South Opportunity,” is one small contribution to that cause. It is an attempt both to capture the state of the South-South agenda today and to provide inspiration for the development community as we move ahead with the dream.

The first section on Perspectives introduces the key players, the agenda, and current thinking. The following section on Practices is an overview of South-South learning in action. The last section on the Bogota High-Level Event on South-South Cooperation and Capacity Development, and the evidence gathered by the international Task Team on South-South cooperation, describes how that remarkable event, which took place in March 2010, was a major milestone in scaling up the South-South agenda.

I would like to offer my heartfelt thanks to the authors and editors of this issue. South-South cooperation can indeed be a valuable complement to traditional North-South cooperation. Let us join forces to unleash its transformative power by forging a new generation of instruments for South-South cooperation in the service of poverty reduction.

Sanjay Pradhan is Vice President of the World Bank Institute.