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OPINION

'Strategic Corporate Philanthropy'

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How important is access to information technology? A World Bank report released earlier this year found a very high correlation between the rate of technology progress and income growth. It said: "Technological progress [distinguishes] fast-growing developing economies and slow growing ones. It also distinguishes economies that have made great strides in reducing poverty and those that have been less successful."

At Microsoft, we share the belief that information technology can have a dramatic positive effect on people's lives. We also believe that one of the best ways to accelerate the speed of technology adoption is through close partnerships between the public sector and the private sector.

Public-private partnerships make it possible to multiply the impact that a single organization or company could hope to achieve working alone. They combine public sector organizations' knowledge of local communities with private companies' technical expertise and implementation experience. As a result, these partnerships can develop and deploy effective information technology solutions that solve specific challenges with much greater speed.

The notion that businesses have a responsibility to promote the public good by supporting the work of nonprofit and governmental organizations is not new, of course. The late 1940s and early 1950s saw companies such as Ford, Western Electric and Philip Morris form foundations to manage corporate giving.

But much of this activity centered exclusively on financial support. Today, the value of corporate involvement lies as much in expertise as it does in monetary support. This shift is due in part to efforts by a number of United Nations agencies in the late 1990s to look for new ways to work with corporations to help address major global health issues.

The rise of this so-called "strategic corporate philanthropy" is an important step forward. When a company like Microsoft is in a position to provide not just money, but also the

expertise and experience to help an organization use technology to achieve its goals more quickly and more effectively, it can speed the pace and scale of progress.

Take the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's program to create a set of global technology competency standards for teachers. The goal is to ensure that teachers have the training and materials to provide students with the technology skills they will need to participate in the global knowledge economy. Three major corporations -- Microsoft, Intel and Cisco -- helped shape the program, thanks to a shared belief that a technically literate workforce is an essential ingredient for sustainable economic growth.

Across Asia, public-private partnerships are playing an important role in creating new economic opportunities. In South Korea, the Ministry of Information and Communication has worked in close partnership with the private sector for nearly 15 years to build a national technology industry. Today, South Korea is a global leader in information and communications technologies.

The ultimate goal is to support the development of local economies that have the infrastructure and skilled work force needed to create sustainable growth. My hope is that this will help increase the number of people who have the tools and knowledge to participate in the digital revolution from one billion to two billion and beyond. As this happens and more people join the global knowledge economy, they will spur further innovations that address difficult issues faced by so many people around the world. This, more than anything, will be the key to creating a world where everyone can expect to lead long, healthy, productive and fulfilling lives.

Mr. Gates is chairman of Microsoft Corporation