

ICTD – Is it a New Species of Development?

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In the not so distant past, when either-or debates about information and communication technologies (ICTs) and 'other' development priorities were doing the rounds, a typical phrase would be – "*But email is no substitute for vaccines*"! Thankfully, the field of ICTs for Development (ICTD) has moved from that juncture. The structural nature of what is a society-wide transformation, triggered by a new techno-social paradigm, makes it more and more evident that the core ICTD issue relates to the all important question of power; where the socially marginalised and disadvantaged groups and people are located in the new social configurations. A participant in a grassroots community video project for marginalised, poor women, describes the power shift associated with ICTs succinctly – "*But you cannot bribe videos; they tell honestly what our stories are.*"¹

The simple power of ICTs is often forgotten; how, for instance, paper, print and postal technologies enabled the formal structures of the world that we take for granted today. In the emerging information society, digital technologies lay out the warp and weft of new social structures. And this society is being shaped today through an intense power struggle. However, a strong, and in fact dominant, section views ICTD through the ideological framework of neo-liberalism; a belief that markets are the most appropriate and adequate instruments to organise social life. To these ideologues, the principal ICTD opportunity is to in fact deploy ICTs in order to universalise market fundamentalism in all facets of life. Unfortunately, this viewpoint is able to take enormous strength by aligning with the relatively

more innocent, techno-fascinated worldview of technologists who like to see ICTs as neutral and equally beneficial to all, avoiding discourses of power around ICT use and assimilation in social structures.

Those with such an ideologically charged and narrow neo-liberal take on ICTD have been largely successful in casting this meaning of ICTD as the obvious and natural one. Ironically, it has been the tendency of the advocates of the dominant version of ICTD to label any alternative to their worldview that may be more attuned to issues of power – central to most social and development analyses – as ideologically motivated, and therefore not worthy of serious consideration. In a Gramscian sense, the hegemony of neo-liberalism in ICTD has been naturalised as the 'common sense' way of casting ICTD.

It is between these two opposing poles of a socio-political understanding of 'development' on the one hand, and ICTD's dominant form as 'neutral', apolitical and essentially moulded in market fundamentalist ideologies on the other, that this paper examines ICTD as a new species of development. The arguments in this document are organised along three sections: the first unpacks the contested meanings of development that have informed ICTD through a political economy and historical analysis; the second lays out the defining attributes of the field and its study; and the third raises some issues for reconstructing the field, through examples mainly from India.

ICTD -Tracing the Genealogy

The advent of ICTD - somewhat homeless and therefore in many ways trans-disciplinary - is a story as any other, best illuminated by reclaiming history. In the late 80's and early 90's, when post-colonial thought seemed to be upstaged by post-modern lenses, the asymmetries of globalisation started showing up in the new world of haves and have nots, giving renewed credence to neo-colonial narratives. The balance of power that defined the very possibilities for who could be global was being framed through neo-imperialism and corporatism, with a strong co-option of the domestic elite in the erstwhile colonies. Suddenly, North-South politics assumed a new significance, even as the categories of South in the North and North in the South were being talked about. Meanwhile, the global South was also being reconfigured through the digital revolution seeking new comparative advantages in the emerging information economy. The digital revolution also heralded new pathways to development, and as theories tried to keep pace with the emerging information society, nations in the developing South were attempting to leapfrog development milestones. It was the beginning of a new global society where global connectedness made it possible to link up everything valuable in the world and, correspondingly, jettison everything not valuable².

The deep structural import of the digital revolution was clearly evident. What was initially a revolutionary information and communication technology, quickly transformed itself also as the key production technology of the emerging society. The new economic order was about setting comparative advantages around knowledge, and ICTs were the platform for its manipulation and control. An unprecedentedly connected world made for an highly integrated market. As ICT diffusion helped build a globally unified market over which neo-colonial models of economic hegemonies could be established,

such diffusion could also be posited as the panacea for development. Development, including social development, and market expansion never had such a simple congruence ever before. And suddenly, vintage corporate marketing strategies like 'Bottom of the Pyramid' (BOP) were cast as the central development mantra, with almost a sense of eureka!

The first decisive encounter that development discourse had with the new world of ICTs can be traced back to a meeting of the G-8 countries in Osaka, Japan, in the year 2000. Indeed, while much of the world waited for, and expected significant initiatives aimed at addressing the debt crisis, the G-8 meeting chose instead to redirect attention to the role of ICTs in global economic restructuring and socio-economic change. The Okinawa Charter, which came out of this meeting, spoke of international cooperation for development and announced the setting up of a Digital Opportunity Task (DOT) Force with a wider stakeholder participation, including from developing countries. Three active non-government partners in the DOT Force alliance - the Markle Foundation (which declares its specialisation in the use of new technologies for health and national security), Accenture (a leading consultancy firm with a good amount of business with technology firms) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) - got together to bring out a report on the role of ICTs in development activity. This report, called the Digital Opportunities Initiative (DOI), as can only be expected from its authorship, came out strongly with its faith in market mechanisms, stating categorically that to have impact, ICTD initiatives needed to employ a business model³. This was a watershed statement, painting the entire development canvas with a new, neo-liberal brush.

Traditionally, governments have been the principal development agencies in developing

countries. But they did not seem to have much of a role in the new scheme of things envisaged by the DOI. This sentiment of the redundancy of the State has been enduring throughout the last decade in the ICTD domain and often echoed in many a debate. Not very coincidentally, this premise is also the central pillar of the neo-liberal vision of development.

In 2001, the Global Development Alliance (GDA), a program of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), was created as a new way to effectively provide aid to developing countries. The GDA, based on public-private alliances, was touted as the solution to development problems. It sought to “deepen the impact of development assistance by linking U.S. foreign assistance with the resources, expertise, and creativity of private sector partners”⁴. The GDA marked a reorientation of USAID in the context of international development assistance; the new model was to rely upon market-based solutions to advance broader development objectives, stimulate economic growth, develop businesses and workforces, address health and environmental issues, and expand access to education and technology. Within this new paradigm of development assistance, where development was seen as wedded to the corporate sector, the US government defined its ICTD vision. Under the Digital Freedom Initiative (DFI) “the leadership of the U.S. Government” and “the creativity and resources of America’s leading companies” were being mobilised for the developing world⁵.

Even as unprecedented street protests in Seattle, just at the turn of the millennium, had underlined the lopsidedness of corporate globalisation and its undermining of domestic economies, the DFI adopted the GDA as its business model. It was all in keeping with the dominant sentiment of the times. Everything, including development assistance, needed a business model. Connections between economic

growth and access to technology were cast in linear and unproblematic terms. If American multinational corporations could deepen their markets, then development, as well as access to technology, were expected to get delivered. The DFI website highlights a ‘success’ story – of a Senegalese merchant supported by USAID, who instead of getting his supplies from Dubai could now, using the Internet, get it from New Jersey!⁶ This was the new level playing field that USAID was creating.

In the North, new ICTs had emerged in a dialectic with mature institutional systems. This model was being passed on to the South through development cooperation, unmindful of the fact that models of the North were unlikely work for the South. For developing countries, ICTs were opening up new pathways, and in fact many countries in Latin America, that had suffered the tyrannies of liberalisation and privatisation through the diktats of the International Financial Institutions for over a couple of decades, had a different vision of ICTD. The official document of the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean⁷ reveals this distinct indigenous perspective:

“Immature institutions and inefficient organizations are a serious obstacle to development. The digitization process in the different e-sectors of an information society constitutes a form of institutional reorganization..... In times of normal, incremental technological change, increasing returns to scale tend to strengthen developed countries’ leadership positions. However, when a new innovation arises or major structural changes occur, a temporary window of opportunity opens up for less developed countries to catch up....It should be pointed out that the ongoing debate in Latin America and the Caribbean regarding the transition to an information society and to the digital era is often based on “stylized facts” and theoretical constructs deriving

from developed countries. There are various reasons to believe that such facts and constructs are ill-suited to an exploration of the region's position in this process. Firstly, the industrialized economies' macroeconomic fundamentals have been kept within a reasonable range of equilibrium, and economic growth has been modest but steady. This fact provides a basis for projecting the transition to the digital era along a given path, and the macroeconomic "backdrop" for that transition does not generate any major degree of uncertainty. Secondly, in developed countries the provision of public goods by the State and the existence of fairly mature regulatory systems and agencies creates an adequate institutional and market environment in which to examine the transition to the digital era."

Although, by the new millennium there was enough and more to show how markets were notorious when it comes to the vulnerable – an inquiry which was increasingly a centerpiece in development research and theory – ICTD was being constructed outside of this analysis, ahistorically and apolitically. Through a corporate partnerships based ICTD, technology and marketing experts from the North were to build capacities in the South, authoring road maps on everything – from how to achieve MDGs to how to make e-governance plans⁸. In donor agencies, technologists were being hired to envision and manage ICTD programs when in fact such programs were essentially about local social processes. ICTD was determined to dump every rule in the development rule book.

Another significant global policy dimension around ICTD was the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) held in 2 phases, 2003 and 2005. The UN General Assembly in 2000 gave WSIS the mandate to explore ICT opportunities in achieving the development priorities of the Millennium Declaration. Meanwhile, UNDP and other multilateral and

bilateral donors had adopted the DOI framework as their ICTD policy guide. Most Southern governments still had little or no ICTD vision, and their ICTD activity was managed by Information Technology (IT) and Telecommunications ministries eager to make the best of the unprecedented economic opportunities in IT exports and IT jobs. Under the circumstances, the neo-liberal ICTD worldview foisted by the dominant discourse met with little resistance from most developing country governments.

The WSIS process, seen as a great hope by developing countries looking for development finance for ICTs, failed to further their case. Northern governments, especially the USA, resisted any progressive outcomes. By default, WSIS delegitimised the case for global responsibility to provide basic ICT access as a public good and gave a global political stamp to the dominant ICTD model. ICTD aid was now to be put to the service of global capital, which effectively translated into a tax on development aid budgets to pay for Northern ICT products and services. And ICTD was to roll out almost exclusively through public-private partnerships (PPPs) and copious advice to the global South on deregulating the ICT sector.

What seemed to be new champagne in a new bottle was of the same old brand – good old neo-liberalism, with lots of extra fizz. As trans-national submarine cables were becoming the giant tentacles of neo-colonialism, ICTD was to be the means to prepare developing countries for a 'brave new world'.

ICTD - The Field and its Study

This section moves from the above political economy perspective to examine some of the defining attributes of ICTD as a field-in-the-making. The ICTD field is shaped predominantly by a two-fold discourse. Firstly, the utopian preoccupation with technology and an ahistoric conception of the world. It is as if

new ICTs and their intrinsic push for free and open communication have suddenly rendered all known conceptions about social structures irrelevant. The struggle for social power now is ostensibly only about the individual pitted against usurping systems and institutions. Structural inequities among people and groups are not admissible in this schema wherein an individual's very access to these powerful technologies is seen as, somehow magically, bestowing equality. Within this logic, engaging with and building and sustaining new socio-political institutions is passé. In fact, such techno-fascination dislodges two concerns central to development – equity and institutional transformation.

Secondly, as discussed earlier, ICTD is constructed within the neo-liberal shadows of development. It is the engine that propels the marketisation of development. Blatant in its method, ICTD uses every trick in the newest version of the neo-liberalism bag, 'inclusive neo-liberalism', the key ingredient of which is the material incentives to disempowered masses to promote the market colonisation of the lifeworld. Telecentres in their mainstream avatar are based on the commodification of information, packaging development as a set of over-the-counter services, and promoting a formulaic entrepreneurship based model as the unassailable anti-poverty pill. Individuals are to pay for information, that concerns their basic struggles with poverty, as 'consumers'. Within the wider context of privatisation, ground-level ICTD models may even subsidise the access of impoverished masses to ICTs, but only so far as they can establish new channels of market penetration and control for global capital. In its allegiance to neo-liberalism, ICTD puts the individual at the centre of development discourse, dislocating the notion of the collective that is a category significant to the development project. Locked in the grid between techno-centric and neo-liberal imaginaries, ICTD embodies irreconcilable dilemmas for transformative development on the ground.

The open secret about ICTD is its ultimate depoliticisation through the multi-stakeholder model. Within the wider development discourse promoting New Public Management (NPM) techniques, 'partnerships' between public and private sectors are advocated as development's panacea. ICTD has carried this legacy forward in many ways - positioning communities, government and private sector players as equally legitimate policy actors with convergent and shared goals. From partnerships in implementation, to partnerships in policy making, the multi-stakeholder model is made out to be an unproblematic progression towards capturing society's governance. The win-win formulation of an essentially contested arena depoliticises development, subverting the transformatory meaning and potential of ICTD for local communities, and obscuring the aggrandizement by the currently powerful.

In this larger design, ICTs are positioned as 'tools' – which diminishes their political nature and potential for social-structural changes. ICTD becomes a means to plug market imperfections, rather than a social project to address structural exclusion. Within multi-stakeholder or PPP models, corporate 'philanthropy' has perseveringly created and nurtured markets through ICTD projects. What critics of neo-liberal governmentality have called 'accumulation by dispossession', neo-liberal ICTD advocates call 'wealth at the bottom of the pyramid'.

Depoliticisation of the field is further legitimised through neo-liberal incantations, invariably evidenced through self-serving research to affirm the goodness of everything material and monetary. These mantras concern the widely deployed concepts and frameworks such as sustainability, efficiency, scalability and total cost of ownership, used to promote market models, marginalising core development questions about community control over locally generated surpluses or the long term social costs of

monopolistic market models. For instance, although ICTD is about new information models in development, where the benefits of not commoditising information from a human and social development perspective far outweigh any advantages of doing so, 'community' telecentres are still based on business models, which see information and knowledge as saleable products. Interestingly, the indices used to evaluate ICTD projects are themselves so ideologically loaded that they simply 'prove' the *a priori* and naturalised connection between the market and ICTD.

The dominant ICTD discourse leaves little space for radical change in the direction of the empowerment of marginalised communities. While collaborative production methods underpin most progressive movements in the ICT arena in the global North, where both labour and innovation are distributed across the collaborating community, ICTD practice on the ground in developing countries constructs communities as passive consumers within corporatist frameworks. This is ironic because the greatest transformative potential of ICTs lies in democratising power towards the peripheries. For instance, in the name of pragmatism, ICTD in rural entrepreneurship projects often promotes proprietary models in software, content and applications, even when alternatives based on open and collaborative methodologies do exist. Although 'open ICT' movements have some presence in developing countries, much of ICTD is delinked from these movements, their ethics and values. Conversely, those involved with these progressive technology movements, mainly due to the lack of understanding of the field of development, have also largely failed to contribute to building new progressive ICTD frameworks.

ICTD's discursive terrain has a gaping ideological hole conveniently left unplugged; it concerns questions of 'what is the change we desire' and 'how we would like to pursue it'. In this ideological vacuum, certain premises and

concepts dominate ICTD, despite lack of evidentiary basis for the same. Concepts like financial sustainability, services, demand, user, and consumer are constructed as more relevant and suitable for ICTD, to the exclusion of others like community, empowerment, participation and citizenship. However, a bigger tragedy here is that funding follows a bandwagon approach, supporting the very premises and concepts that are quite notably unproven and quite suspect from the vantage of visions of change ideologically rooted in transformatory development theory. Such is the holding power of discourse.

These trends in the ICTD field leave grassroots communities in the South in a devil and deep sea predicament. For progressive actors working with communities and community based organisations, understanding and engaging with the rapid changes in an entirely new and under-theorised domain has been a very challenging task. Community development actors have viewed technologists with a good amount of suspicion for their techno-determinism and disregard for social processes. Decoding vested interests and their control of the ICTD cosmology – its vocabulary, its theory, and its elaborate strategies of cooption – has appeared to be too huge a task, to which these actors have been able to devote little time and resources.

Thus, communities, as ICTD subjects, are caught in a paradox. New ICTs are enticing, and obviously full of myriad new possibilities. However, critics of market fundamentalism in ICTD have not necessarily demonstrated a real grasp of alternative models of practice, and those in the field of ICTD practice are still largely non-political, playing into the hands of the neo-liberal ideologues. Meanwhile, for governments in the South, who are pushed to get their regulatory environment on track for an unbridled reign of the market, their primary education about ICTD potentials and pitfalls comes from corporate ICT vendors. (Recently,

an expert group advising the French government on privacy related policies was dismantled because it was found to have too many persons from US owned companies). ICT corporates have sought to capture not just developing country markets, but also the imagination of under-resourced and ill-informed governments. State sponsored ICTD programs, like the Common Services Centre (CSC) program in India, inspired by ideologies passed on by the World Bank who is a funder for the program, have used the PPP model to set up publicly funded telecentre infrastructure that basically subsidises the extension of markets into rural areas for corporates. Interestingly, social inclusion of marginalised communities is sought to be achieved in the CSC program simply “by reaching the remote rural locations of India on a sustainable basis, and offering a variety of world-class services...”⁹¹ While it is pretty unclear what the CSC program will do for local communities and their access to entitlements and rights, the State has shown no hesitation in legitimising the corporatisation of governance and the marketisation of development through the program.

ICTD, like every other development issue, is inextricably intertwined in the wider politics of development. The institutional arrangements governing production relations in the information economy are a complex web. They implicate developing country dependencies for aid, the power struggles in the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), and the conditionalities of multilateral institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. ICTD on the ground cannot be seen as separate from this web that ideologically, and often coercively, shapes national policies about ICTs, as well as about information and knowledge. The trans-locality of mediating factors in ICTD outcomes significantly includes a global policy vacuum, a governance deficit

that impinges strongly upon ICTD possibilities on the ground for communities.

The ICTD research field needs to be problematised against this complex and fluid backdrop. ICTD research – unlike the huge body of development research which is enlivened by contestations and counter-contestations – typically shows a complacency, a theoretical looseness and a characteristic ahistoricity. Research has been funded often to develop markets, and within this overarching agenda, methods and outputs - of knowledge production and signification, representation and legitimation - seem to challenge conventional ethics that define the boundaries of academic disciplines. Part of the reason for this is that technologists and businesses populate the research field. It is as if development wisdom is lacking in developing countries (even assuming that ICTD needs a clairvoyance about new technologies) that in the name of ICTD one needs to import resources for such ‘expertise’ from the North.

Lack of institutional capacity of Southern centres of research has been typical. Meanwhile, an amazing array of Northern universities and their corporate donors have descended on the South – many times of course, with methodological precision in their tightly designed and neatly executed pilots. The casualty here is the D in ICTD, the lack of strong community accountability and the uncritical celebration of easy-to-infer attributes, to the exclusion of deeper systemic insights and long term historically and theoretically grounded ethnographies. Local information behaviour is sadly ignored, and technological models are placed at the centre, in a never-ending quest for scalable revenue models. Indeed, many an arena of knowledge and practice that can never be supported by market players, and requiring public support and careful, long term research, do not find favour. Who drives the research agenda is an old research question, but like the Emperor’s New Clothes, it is a question that has never been asked in ICTD.

Two key issues of contemporary ICTD theory and practice are being briefly examined below to demonstrate the fragility and narrowness of the premises informing much of ICTD research; the mobile versus Internet/telecentre argument, and the abiding BOP thesis. ICTD enthusiasts who have always glorified revenue model based telecentres, now increasingly mouth the mantra of mobile telephones as the ideal platform for development services. In this regard, it is not just a coincidence that with mobile phones, the pay-for-service model comes in-built. The mobile revolution is often used to discredit and move away from the community Internet or telecentre movement. Undoubtedly, mobiles have revolutionised communication, and the reach of ICT devices. Everyone prefers a mobile - a smaller, handy and less expensive - user device to a bulkier and more expensive one. But that is not the only point in the mobile versus Internet/telecentre contestations. As important is the issue of the superiority of the open platform of the Internet over the dominant proprietary platforms of mobile telephony, discussion about which seems to be completely absent from ICTD research. Use of mobiles with an underlying fully open Internet platform, of which Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) is just one example, is the real revolution, which is being actively blocked by mobile telephone companies. To counter the regressive stand of these companies, ICTD protagonists need to have a strong presence in the very intense global debates on Network Neutrality¹⁰, but this is not so. Meanwhile, the rhetoric of 'mobiles is the way to go' is being used by vested interests to entrench proprietary and closed (as against open) communication, software, applications and content models in developing countries, especially among marginalised sections who are the principal targets of the 'mobile telephony' rhetoric. These nuances are glossed over by the euphoria over mobiles that the academic community has not taken responsibility to examine.

A similar lack of theoretical rigour is true for most formulations around BOP. The World Bank Report on BOP¹¹ examines a range of markets, and the argument is the same for each; that poor people are willing to spend more money in return for better services or services they currently lack. There are thus huge markets waiting to be tapped if the private sector produces goods that are tailored to the needs and circumstances of the BOP. Seán Ó Siochrú insightfully unpacks the report, highlighting the fallacy in its logic, based on ground realities¹².

“The BOP fad now has the ICT market firmly in its site, with the publication of the World Bank report on the BOP markets....sponsored by our friends in Shell, Intel, Visa and Microsoft (are they really needed to sponsor World Bank reports?). Chapter 3 is devoted to the topic and, based on household ICT expenditure data, it estimates that the ICT BOP market size is an amazing \$51.4 billion..... If all these markets are developed and expanded, then the amount that supposedly poor people are paying for health, water, transport, housing, energy, education and food is going to sky rocket. Where are they going to get all the money to pay for all of these? People probably would pay more for ICT services or water, using money saved by not spending it on something else. And for better food, medicines, and so forth. But it is also patently true that a poor household simply cannot afford to pay more for ICT, and for clean water, and for medicines, and for food. Of course they would pay more for each, if they had the money, but they don't. They would very soon have nothing left to sacrifice.”

Trends in ICTD research seem to suggest its powerlessness as a knowledge enterprise, in its capture by commercial forces, theoretical apathy and lack of utility for transformatory development practice. Research in the area invariably seeks to propose recommendations

for what will work for market expansion; one seldom finds policy recommendations about what can strengthen public institutional accountability through ICTD or community capabilities and empowerment through new information ecologies. A buy-in to neo-liberal conceptions of 'value' has driven much of ICTD research in the direction of expropriation, with commercially valuable information ending up with the researchers, while little value has been added on the ground. 'Whose ICTD?' is the question that is most pertinent, and can lend the much needed philosophical, conceptual and methodological rigour to the field.

Reclaiming ICTD 'for' Development

At this point, ICTD is a great story that needs a strong movement. This, of course, implies challenges in politicising the ICTD discourse and infusing it with debate and creating a vibrant knowledge domain that can inform development policy making. However, the fact that practice is leading theory in many places augurs very well for the field. And as a new species of development, ICTD can do well with some evolutionary correctives. ICTD discourse needs to build outward from the basic premise of equal membership for everyone in the information society, which bespeaks a citizenship framework for the new global society, where development through ICTs brings freedom and provides real choices in navigating local and global relationships.

To take such a political approach to effect change, ICTD requires to develop an alternative theoretical basis and vocabulary to interpret the information society phenomenon, and pursue alternative models of practice that deploy ICT opportunities for transforming social structures. Essentially, the new ICTD project is about radicalising the field and making sense of changes to the epistemic categories of power, community, gender, participation, and exclusion/ inclusion, wrought by the new techno-social realities.

Methodologically, it is beyond doubt that ICTD must adopt new paradigms in research. Global and multi-sited ethnography allow for the relationships of the global everyday to be interpreted as also account for global political economy, the structures of global power underpinning fragmented spaces and sites of change across the world.

Unfortunately, changing priorities on the aid agenda, and prescriptions for mainstreaming ICTs in development sectors – very hasty, and even before the stage is mature for such mainstreaming – have seen multilateral institutions, who in fact put the ICTD agenda first on the global governance table, backtrack. To a good extent, this is owing to the fact that the schizophrenic nature of the ICTD field, as discussed in the earlier sections, has expectedly led to very unsatisfactory results for development in the last decade. Increasingly, ICTD is out of favour in global development policy circles ironically just when new development practice based on ICTs has emerged in the South, without prodding from theory. Much of this owes to the creativity of local development actors, both governments and NGOs. Global development institutions increasingly seem to under-emphasise the ICTD domain, abdicating it to corporatist plans and strategies, implying that enough is in any case being done by the private sector in this area. There is a complacent ignoring of some very troubling questions about whose interests corporatist models primarily serve, and how they restructure local power relationships, and their implications for marginalised sections in the emerging information society.

Offering alternative pathways to reimagine ICTD is a significant imperative in the reconstruction of ICTD. The real ICTD narratives actually lie in less captive and more movements-oriented spaces where voices of the poor and the disenfranchised offer cutting edge concepts in this domain. Anandi, an NGO in Gujarat, India, has taken autobiographical videos

of marginalised women, targeted by vested interests as witches, to the wider community, igniting dialogues about women's status. Similar stories of poor women and their appropriation of ICTs and the ensuing disruption of local power hierarchies come out of other projects in India like of the Deccan Development Society in Andhra Pradesh, where community media are being used by poor women to claim food sovereignty, and the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in Gujarat, where ICTs have been used by women in the informal sector to strengthen their networks, voice their agenda and market their products. The key is to comprehend this disruptive process where creation, sharing and control of information and knowledge are democratised and unjust social arrangements are upturned.

In all these stories, there is a unifying theme – the communitisation of ICTs, and not merely the consumption of ICTs and ICT based 'services'. Information can transform local power relations in favour of the disadvantaged, but for information to be democratised, ICTs need to be community-led and -centred. Abhiyan is a project in West India where ICT systems have supported micro planning through digital databases put together by local communities; in the Philippines, the Bukidnon tribal community has used Geographic Information Systems (GIS) to make claims to ancestral lands; in Mahiti Manthana, a project in South India, databases created and maintained by the community are being used to claim entitlements from public authorities.

Such forward-looking models in ICTD however, come with some peculiarities. While 'need' is usually something that participatory development recommends communities must define, what communities want from ICTs is not an easy question to answer. ICTs are about systemic change and often not so much about linear processes or direct, immediate and tangible gains. Thus, while ICT paradigms allow for many of the bold fantasies of post-development

thought to be realised, enabling a transfer of power to local communities and their emancipation from the burden of received models, the ICTD path to such emancipatory ideals essentially needs to be created. A research study in Africa on new ICTs¹³ points to how most women interviewed in the study did not notice the fact that very little local content relevant to their own issues was available. Lack of awareness about possibilities, and local gender norms, are bound to interfere with what, for instance, poor women may see as 'need'. 'Felt need' is notoriously difficult to go by in the case of ICT-induced systemic changes as has been well analysed vis-a-vis the phenomenon of "productivity paradox"¹⁴. The real 'choices' for empowerment through ICTs therefore need strategic vision and a larger perspective about desired change. This is an ambitious social and political project; it is untenable that ICTD modelling follows simplistic parameters of demand and revenues.

In India, ICTs have also shown new possibilities in revolutionising local self governance systems - from enabling transparency of budgets, accounting systems and fund transfers (which reduces fiscal risks and helps transfer more financial powers to self government bodies), to helping community monitoring of State interventions like the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA). One of the most groundbreaking legislations in recent years in India is the NREGA. The Act confers upon every citizen a guarantee of employment, which basically means the right to seek and get a livelihood through public works. Traditionally, implementation of rural employment schemes has been hugely encumbered by bureaucratic inefficiencies, apathy and vested interests. In the southern state of Andhra Pradesh in India, NREGA is now implemented through an Internet-based system, in the public domain, that addresses institutional dysfunctions. Despite some limitations, the model demonstrates transformational directions

for transparent and effective governance. It also shows how ICTD has the potential to meet the livelihood rights of the poorest and for addressing social justice agenda.

Similarly, in Chattisgarh state in North India, a mobile based system has been put in place to track the movement of food grains under the public distribution system (PDS), a food security program of the government. Leakages from the PDS in India are legendary and huge. In the Chattisgarh initiative, anyone interested in tracking PDS food grains coming to a particular PDS shop, can register her mobile number against the code for the specific shop. When food grains move for that shop from the godowns, at each stage or geographic point of movement, a message is generated and sent to the registered mobile. In Brazil, the city of Ipatinga uses the Internet for interactive, participatory budgeting, involving direct popular participation in local government decision making.

An important issue in locating ICTD is the problematique of its relationship with the State. As ICTs reconfigure human society, the State plays a decisive role in defining the playing field, not just by provisioning public infrastructure, but also by articulating the rules of the game, as shown in a brilliant analysis of the Finnish model by Manuel Castells¹⁵. Such a catalytic role for the State in the architecture of national information societies is necessary to address the imperatives for equity and social justice. While field experiments in ICTD have pointed to some possibilities, the preoccupation with business models has meant apathy in deploying ICTs for systemic change and institutional transformation. Such a vision implicitly calls for committed large scale effort, including by the State. If there is one thing that the global economic crisis has done, it is the unequivocal demolition of the romanticism about the supremacy of markets. Many developed countries are now revisiting their telecommunications policies with a view to use public investments in telecommunications infrastructure as a tool to revive the economy.

In the project of its politicisation, ICTD needs to seek global alliances. Progressive movements originating in the global North and advocating an 'open ICT ecology' - open source, open content, open hardware, open spectrum and open search engines - offer points for convergence on an emerging progressive politics around ICTs. However, Southern actors need to participate in global ICT movements on an equal footing, contributing Southern perspectives. As importantly, ICTD theory and practice need to be centrally informed by these political agenda.

Openness, the key anchor of progressive technology movements, is non-negotiable, but it begs the question, openness for whom, and whether just by ensuring openness, equity can be ensured for all social groups and individuals to avail of the presented opportunities. ICTD therefore needs to be seen in the context of the debates of universality and indivisibility of rights, where positive and negative rights become equally important. ICTD needs to be on the agenda of the movements for global justice. Just like the industrial revolution defined the metaphor of modernity, the post-industrial society seems to attribute a halo to information glasnost. However, devoid of a philosophical and ethical anchor that is rooted in contemporary history, the proclivities of the information society for openness speak only to half the issue.

Just as modernity and its ideological contents have been studied for their impact on the wider political, economic and public sphere, and the construction of the 'other' as opposed to the European modern, rational man, the manner in which dominant interpretations of ICTD creates information society subjects needs to be unpacked. If the neo-liberal subject - the hapless 'consumer' - is problematic, so is the subject represented in techno-centric worldviews - the undifferentiated, technology 'user'. The latter term invokes pure categories of openness and choice that do not address the critical questions

of openness for what and whom, and what choices are really available.

The last decade of ICTD has been a lost decade in many ways. ICTD needs to represent a whole new political conception of transformative possibilities for the South, that is led by the South. It needs new theoretical frameworks built over development practice that is empowering to communities and marginalised sections. A reconstructed ICTD must also take from the insights and faultlines emerging in the politics of ICTs and of information and knowledge, from a Southern perspective.

Endnotes

- ¹ Mridula Swamy, "ICTs and Women's Empowerment: Findings from South Asia", in *An Empowerment Approach to Gender Equality in the Information Society - Regional Analyses from Asia*, eds. Anita Gurumurthy, Parminder Jeet Singh and Anja Kovacs, IT for Change, ISS Series, Volume 2, December 2008.
- ² Manuel Castells' trilogy on *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture* is an authoritative account of this phenomenon. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manuel_Castells
- ³ *Creating a Development Dynamic - Final Report of the Digital Opportunity Initiative*, Accenture, Markle Foundation and UNDP, July 2001, http://www.markle.org/downloadable_assets/doifinalreport.pdf
- ⁴ http://www.usaid.gov/our_work/global_partnerships/gda/model.html
- ⁵ http://www.usaid.gov/about_usaid/presidential_initiative/digitalfreedom.html
- ⁶ <http://www.dfi.gov/>
- ⁷ United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean – ECLAC, January 2003, <http://www.itu.int/wsis/docs/rc/bavaro/eclac.pdf>.
- ⁸ In India, state governments are supposed to make e-governance roadmaps to obtain central funds. Instead of involving governance related expertise, these roadmaps are invariably made by technology corporates, including multinational ones.
- ⁹ See Project Information Memorandum of the Common Services Centre program at <http://www.mit.gov.in/download/vol1rfpcsc.pdf>
- ¹⁰ Network Neutrality is a principle requiring openness and non-discrimination of a communication platform with regard to all content and applications.
- ¹¹ *The Next 4 Billion: Market Size and Business Strategy at the Base of the Pyramid*, World Resources Institute, 2007, <http://rru.worldbank.org/thenext4billion>
- ¹² Seán Ó Siochrú, "BOPping" in the information society, 2007, <http://www.is-watch.net/node/652>
- ¹³ Marie Helene Mottin-Sylla, *The Gender Digital Divide in Francophone Africa: A Harsh Reality*, ENDA, 2005
- ¹⁴ en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Productivity_paradox
- ¹⁵ Manuel Castells and Pekka Himanen, *The Information Society and the Welfare State – The Finnish Model*, Oxford University Press, 2004.



IT for Change Bridging Development Realities and Technological Possibilities

IT for Change (ITfC) is a non-profit organisation located in India. ITfC envisions a society capable of, and comfortable with, innovative and effective use of information and communication technologies (ICT) as a tool, to further goals of progressive social change.

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