Beyond Connectivity: New Information and Communication Technologies for Social Development

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Overview

New Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are tools that have the potential to contribute to the realization of democracy, prosperity and human potential in the Americas. To this aim, governments in the region need to promote a socially responsible use of ICTs for development.

A socially responsible understanding of connectivity goes beyond providing equitable access to ICTs, and includes meaningful use and appropriation of ICT tools for social development. To this aim, ICT policies must take into consideration a broad base of social and political actors, including civil society and not limited to States or businesses, and must be aimed at solving the critical social, political and economic problems in the region. Moreover, policies must be aimed at local, national as well as regional levels. Otherwise, globalization will take over national and local initiatives, ICTs use will not contribute to development, and market forces will continue to dominate the introduction of ICT resources in the region, deepening existing social and economic inequalities in our societies.

Beyond connectivity

The digital divide is an expression of social and economic inequities. ICTs are not positive or negative in themselves, but they are not neutral. If left alone, they will reproduce and increase the social and economic inequities that exist in our societies.

There is a growing consensus around the importance of connectivity for social development. There is also increasing awareness that providing access alone is not a sufficient condition for lasting development.

Socially responsible connectivity strategies look beyond providing equitable access to supporting meaningful uses and fostering the appropriation of ICTs.

- **equitable access** to the technology, especially in remote areas and marginalized communities (e.g., public access facilities in schools, libraries and community centres, both rural and urban, providing connectivity to the Internet with navigation at reasonable speeds and costs);
- **meaningful use** of the technology according to local users' own needs and preferences, including acquiring, exchanging, producing and disseminating information and content (e.g., having the criteria to choose among a menu of communication tools, from email to electronic lists or web, depending on organizational goals);
- **appropriation** of the ICT tools in which people absorb, systematize and turn information and new relations into new knowledge that can be communicated to others and applied to solve their concrete needs (e.g., improving the quality of education and health, producing and marketing goods and services, improving governance and public accountability, designing and implementing agendas for social change).

An investment in access to technology may be easy to implement, easy to measure, and easy to showcase, BUT the same investment in **equitable access, meaningful use** AND **appropriation** will produce larger and more sustainable returns. **Socially responsible connectivity** will allow people to use ICTs as development tools that strengthen their ability to work, help them solve their most critical needs, enable the realization of their full human potential, and lay a solid foundation for the consolidation of democracy and prosperity.

NITC building blocks for development

In the LAC region there are two primary types of initiatives, outside of market forces, to disseminate ICTs. On the one hand, government strategies are primarily concerned with access to ICTs for the most vulnerable groups of the population. These programs are incipient but may eventually reach large numbers of people. However, while seeking equitable access, these programs usually leave aside the goals of meaningful use and appropriation of ICT tools.

On the other hand, civil society initiatives, such as telecentres, aim at equal access, meaningful use and appropriation of ICTs among rural or poor urban communities. While aiming at comprehensive goals, these initiatives are implemented in selective communities and they are unlikely to have a larger impact in the country or the region as a whole.

These initiatives are the building blocks for **large scale actions aimed at equitable access, meaningful use, and relevant appropriation of ICTs in Latin America and the Caribbean**. These actions must also be integrated with ongoing local, national and regional non-ICT efforts (e.g., health and educational state reforms; social funds targeted at the poor population; telecommunication policies).

Policy-making principles for ICTs for development

The goals for ICT policy-making are to promote equity and social development. To achieve these goals we need to establish **guidelines** for policy-making, policy-making **principles** that support these guidelines, and **examples** of specific policies these guidelines and principles may lead to.

Policy guidelines: increasing awareness and dialogue
Attempts to address ICT issues cannot be separated from real world worries and demands. To contribute to the realization of democracy, prosperity and human potential in the Americas, 'virtual' policy issues must be grounded in real world actors and agendas, and a broad base of stakeholders and participants (not just business and state actors).

Participatory ICT policy-making means that the first priority of powerful actors will be to **increase awareness** among people and organizations of how ICTs will impact their lives. In the LAC region, experienced ICT civil society organizations will play an important role as "brokers" in helping policy makers develop awareness strategies.

Parallel to increasing a general awareness concerning what to expect from ICTs, policy makers can involve a large number of political and social actors in **dialogue and negotiation** concerning what they want from the NTIC in order to serve their purposes.

Policy-making principles: beyond connectivity in local, national and regional arenas, and with diverse base of stakeholders
Regardless of the specific ICT policies that governments choose to implement, it is critical that they be based on **policy making principles** including:

- targeting equal access, meaningful use, and appropriation (instead of access alone, as has been generally the case);
- acting upon local and regional, as well as national scenarios; and,
- drawing on a broad consensus among the people who are affected by the implementation and impacts of a policy (rather than solely on business or commercial interests).

Policy examples for ICTs

- **support more egalitarian access**, by, for instance, establishing special financial plans and lower rates for non-profit and education organizations to acquire equipment and connectivity to the Internet, especially in remote areas and marginalized communities;
- **support more meaningful use**, by, for instance, strengthening capacities through training and networking, among local, national and regional organizations concerning the options NTIC give them to accomplish their goals; establishing search engines in the local languages that rank local first and foreign after;
- **support more relevant appropriation**, by promoting relevant uses of ICT tools and applications that help to solve real problems in ways that are socially responsible and culturally appropriate; this requires dedication of resources (both human and financial) from the outset of any connectivity initiative.

Conclusion

It is time we agree on basic policy-making criteria and principles that will bring about an environment that enables the use of ICTs for development in the Americas. It is time to reach an agreement on what we mean by connectivity. Connectivity means going beyond providing mere access, to fostering meaningful use and relevant appropriation. Connectivity means considering the interests of a broad range of actors including civil society, businesses and the State. Connectivity means working together to find appropriate ICT solutions for society's many needs.