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Notes on Trends, Niches and Actors in the ICT4D/K4D debate: 2005

In 2004, at the request of the Global Knowledge Partnership, IISD prepared some short notes on trends in the field of information and communications technologies in the development process (ICT4D) and knowledge for development (K4D) as input to a GKP strategy process. We have since published these notes as "Notes on Trends and Niches in the ICT4D/K4D debate 2004".

We received a similar request in 2005/06 from Netcorps Canada/International. Based on work carried out by IISD for Netcorps and UNESCO in 2005/06, we provide the following update on the status of the debate.

1. International Trends

a. Priorities and players from 2004 to 2005

More so than in 2004, ICT4D has been represented as a priority for the international community, in terms of public commitments to WSIS, the Internet Governance Forum, and the role of ICTs in reaching the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). However, the underlying funding support has changed, calling into question the level of actual commitment to ICT4D. Bilateral assistance agencies appear to be reducing their contribution levels for direct ICT investments, or outsourcing much of their ICT work to a single agency (for example, the Netherlands have committed 11 million Euros to the International Institute for Communications and Development; and the Swiss continue to invest in the Global Knowledge Partnership). Key agencies like the World Bank's InfoDev have gone through a rethinking phase – what are the lessons learned from the last decade; what are the more strategic investments that should be made in infrastructure and capacity. InfoDev now functions as a knowledge broker on ICT4D as much or more so than a grant facility for ICT implementation.

As we noted in 2004, the trend continues towards disbanding or refocusing ICT focal points within bilateral and multilateral agencies. The UN ICT taskforce has moved from a technical focus to a policy focus, emerging as the newly constituted Global Alliance for ICT Policy and Development.

ICT continues to be viewed as an enabler, to allow knowledge sharing and content development. But the hype from the late nineties is definitely gone, and with it a lot of unsustainable investments.

b. Integration of ICTs into the development process

When informants were asked about trends in ICT4D, they tended to emphasize processes rather than new technologies. Many were revisiting concepts of "development communications" and "communications ecologies" – looking at whole systems of interaction rather than further refinements on access to information that tended to be the focus of early ICT4D experiments.

One informant observed that there has been a substantial shift in the last year or two. In their view, the early actors in ICT4D were technical, networking or information content people rather than development specialists. Many of these actors entered the development field with unrealistic expectations that development would be accelerated if one could just get local knowledge or indigenous knowledge into an electronically sharable format. To be fair, those who sought advice and support from the development community often met with resistance. Development practitioners were often skeptical about the introduction of ICTs.

The trend now is the integration of ICT into development. Telecommunications infrastructure and ICT tools are now viewed as being just as important to community sustainable development as energy supply or transportation, for the new opportunities that they provide for poverty alleviation; for improving the management of local ecosystems, for strengthening health, education and other services for the well being of people, and for cultural resilience. Most volunteer sending agencies (Peace Corps, CUSO, UN Volunteers, VSO, etc.) provide support for ICT needs in addition to sending specialists in the more traditional development fields (education, health, agriculture, rural economic development and so forth).

Netcorps informants in particular observed that:

> There is strong recognition that ICT4D is critical to achieving the MDGs. But they are not yet included in national Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) or World Bank country assistance strategies.
> ICTs need to link with sectoral objectives – health, education, etc.
> There is still not enough research on the development results of ICT investments.

c. Putting the C back into ICT

ICT practitioners are also putting the "C" back into ICT: more emphasis is being placed these days on strengthening communication, beyond improving access to information. In general, there is a resurgence of international interest in understanding the value of communications in development work. Secretariats and mechanisms of multilateral environmental agreements are more actively considering how to operationalize articles in the conventions that relate to public education, training and awareness; coalitions like the Communications Initiative and the COMPLUS Alliance[1] are gaining international profile and taking on new international projects. UNEP is looking for new communications channels for the delivery of grassroots environmental programming.

d. New technology opportunities

A few technology sophistications were mentioned by informants:

> Growing interest in and demand for VOIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) (Skype, etc.) due to cost effectiveness and ease of use (click as opposed to dial/arrange operator assisted calls

Most references tended to be to interesting combinations of existing technologies rather than entirely new developments.

[1] www.comminit.com; www.complusalliance.org

Software for downloading information from the Internet for offline use (eg, UNESCO's eNRICH software for its Community Multimedia Centres)[2]
The loan of personal digital assistants (PDAs) and portable digital audio players with downloaded information and training materials to health and agriculture extension workers
The use of digital cameras, audio and video recorders for local arts and information production, and the distribution of products on CD/DVD/and other formats.
Use of mobile text messaging combined with email at local centres

e. Measuring the contribution of ICTs to development

There is growing attention to the need to assess how ICTs are supporting development. In mid-2004, the International Telecommunications Union launched the *Partnership on Measuring ICT for Development*[3]. In 2005, international initiatives to measure ICT4D: the *ICT Opportunity Index*[4] and the *Digital Opportunity Index*[5] looked to build upon the common set of core ICT indicators as they were defined within the *Partnership.* Industry Canada (International Telecommunications Policy and Coordination group) is working on how to connect ICT indicators to the MDGs. Of interest will be how all of these initiatives synchronize with the targets agreed to in the WSIS Plan of Action.

2. The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) Process

The WSIS process was conceived in 1998 by the International Telecommunications Union. The driver for endorsement by the Secretary General of the United Nations was growing global recognition of "the importance of the revolution in ICTs as a means of shaping the future of the world and in achieving the development goals outlined in the Millennium Declaration" and the need for "a global vision and a global dialogue … to build the framework of an all-inclusive and equitable Information Society"[6]. The first phase of WSIS took place in Geneva, Switzerland, December 10 to 12, 2003. It addressed a broad range of issues and adopted a Declaration of Principles and a Plan of Action. The second phase took place in Tunis, Tunisia, November 16 to 18, 2005 and focused on Internet governance; financing strategies; and implementation mechanisms for the Geneva Action Plan. Much of the attention went to how to support the mass introduction of MIT's $100 laptop and how to establish an international Internet Governance Forum.

Official outcomes of the two stage process include:
Geneva Declaration of Principles
Geneva Plan of Action
Tunis Commitment
Tunis Agenda for the Information Society

[2] UNESCO: http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/ev.php-URL_ID=16772&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html
[3] www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/partnership/
[4] http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/publications/dd/index.html
[5] http://www.itu.int/osg/spu/statistics/DOI/index.phtml
[6] WSIS FAQs http://www.itu.int/wsis/basic/faqs.asp

For IISD's views on WSIS outcomes, see the following commentaries:

Did WSIS Miss the Point? An information society vision disconnected from sustainable development. Commentary: Maja Andjelkovic, 2005[7]
WSIS Unfolds: Finding the right way to Tunis[8]. Commentary: Terri Willard, 2005

3. Field experience on uses of ICTs in the development process

In work undertaken for Netcorps Canada/International and UNESCO, IISD has noted the following experiences these organizations have had up to 2005 with the introduction of ICTs into grassroots organizations and rural communities.

a. Contributions of ICTs in the development process

1. ICTs improve operational efficiencies, for organizations, communities and governments, with particular benefit in the health and education sectors.

2. ICTs help organizations with knowledge acquisition and communication to support organizational objectives and to have impact.

3. ICTs help organizations and communities gain visibility locally, regionally and globally and help them to partner internationally.

4. ICTs help organizations and communities to foster networking and information sharing.

5. The introduction of ICTs provides opportunity for diversification of the local economic base.

In particular, the integration of technologies (Internet, office computer support, radio, television and digital video production) is proving to be transformative in rural communities:

> Longer term benefits are already being realized within individual communities, such as the gradual removal of barriers to social inclusion, the stimulation of poverty alleviation through access to knowledge of better health, resource management and agriculture practices, through the establishment of listeners clubs as self help groups (a direct connection between [community multimedia centre - CMC] work and the generation of income from small savings and credit operations), and the creation of new livelihoods opportunities. The CMC role in fostering cultural resilience – the capacity of a community to retain critical knowledge and at the same time adapt to external influences and pressures - is particularly remarkable. [9]

[7] http://www.iisd.org/publications/pub.aspx?pno=766
[8] http://www.iisd.org/publications/pub.aspx?pno=678
[9] Evaluation of UNESCO's Community Multimedia Centres Initiative. http://www.iisd.org/pdf/2006/cmc_evaluation_2006.pdf

b. Continuing reservations about ICT4D

1. Technology dumping: ICTs brought into a community without advance planning and integration into existing community communications channels; or added on to existing development projects without consideration of how they might advance development

2. Lack of local content, and lack of capacity to develop local content, combined with easy access to foreign cultural norms, values and entertainment (computer games, pornographic sites, etc.)

c. Continuing barriers to use of ICTs

1. Initial hardware, software and telecommunications costs

2. Lack of, or sustainability of, the ICT infrastructure in the country, including limited bandwidth and unreliability of the energy supply

3. Lack of an enabling policy environment (sudden changes in national policies on connectivity charges destabilize organizations; broadcast licensing restrictions or restrictions on press freedoms prevent organizations from being able to broadcast freely and to broader constituencies).

4. Lack of access to affordable, reliable and long term technical expertise at the local level

5. Rapid changes in the technology (technology obsolescence and the costs of upgrading)

6. "E-culture" versus oral culture: Cultural preferences for face to face communications making use of email less reliable as a means for interaction and decision making.

d. Changing or ongoing needs

Informants indicated that support for long term planning for ICTs is still needed. This type of capacity building along with many other training needs in general were mentioned time and again by all informants.

1. Training for sustainability (training in how to raise funds and generate revenues to cover infrastructure costs; technical training to expand the pool of locally based technical support and to manage volunteer support)

2. Training for ICT management (training in how to plan and budget for technology upgrades, changes in telecommunications charges, etc.)

3. Training in knowledge sharing and networking (using the full potential of ICTs for working together across boundaries)

4. Agencies active in field work and analysis of ICT4D

Not including the many groups registered with the various caucuses and "families" of WSIS, the following is a brief list of major intergovernmental and non-governmental actors involved in ICT4D, investing more than USD500,000 annually in ICT4D activities.

Association for Progressive Communications (APC)
Global Alliance for ICT Policy and Development (superseding the UN ICT Task Force)
Global Knowledge Partnership (GKP)
Humanist Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries (HIVOS)
Infodev (World Bank)
International Development Research Centre (IDRC)
International Institute for Communications and Development (IICD)
OneWorld International
TakingITGlobal
UNESCO
WorldLinks (World Bank)