

ICTD – Is it a New Species of Development?ⁱ

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In the not so distant past, when either-or debates about information and communications technologies (ICTs) were doing the rounds, a typical phrase would be – “*But email is no substitute for vaccines*”! Thankfully, the field of ICTs and 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 are located in the new social configurations. A participant in a grassroots community video project for marginalised, poor woman, describes the power shift associated with ICTs succinctly – “*But you cannot bribe videos; they tell honestly what our stories are.*”ⁱⁱ

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. To these ideologues, the principal ICTD opportunity is to 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. Thus, in a Gramscian sense, the hegemony of neo-liberalism in ICTD has today been naturalised as the 'common sense' way of casting ICTD.

It is between the two opposing poles of a socio-political understanding of 'development' on the one hand, and ICTD's dominant form as a neutral, apolitical and essentially moulded in market fundamentalist ideologies on the other, that this article 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 analysis; the second lays out defining attributes of the field and its

study; and the third raises some issues for reconstructing this field.

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, 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. The global South was being reconfigured through the digital revolution for a new comparative advantage in the emerging information economy. 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 valuableⁱⁱⁱ.

The Okinawa Chapter at the meeting of the G-8 countries at Osaka, Japan, in the year 2000, was the first decisive encounter that development discourse had with the new world of ICTs, initiating the Digital Opportunity Task (DOT) force. Three active non-government partners in the DOT Force alliance – the Markle Foundation, Accenture and the United Nations Development Programme – got together to bring out a report (the Digital Opportunities Initiative (DOI)) which as can only be expected from its authorship, stated categorically that to have impact, ICTD initiatives needed to employ a business model^{iv}. Another significant global policy dimension around ICTD was the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). Foregrounded on an overall political context that did not favour a transformatory, pro-South approach to the financing for development agenda, the ICTD framework was to roll out almost exclusively through public-private partnerships (PPPs). This neo-liberal ICTD worldview foisted by the dominant discourse met with little resistance from most developing country governments, as they had little or no ICTD vision of their own and were eager to make the best of the unprecedented economic opportunities in IT exports and jobs.

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: the utopic preoccupation with technology leading to an ahistoric conception of the world and as discussed earlier, ICTD as constructed within

the neo-liberal shadows of development.

This dominant ICTD discourse leaves little space for radical change in the empowerment of marginalised communities. This discursive terrain has a gaping ideological hole conveniently left unplugged wherein certain premises and concepts of neo-liberalism dominate ICTD despite lack of evidentiary basis for the same. However, a bigger tragedy here is that funding follows a bandwagon approach supporting these very premises and neo-liberal concepts. Such is the holding power of discourse.

These trends in the ICTD field leave grassroots communities in the South in a predicament wherein understanding and engaging with the rapid changes in an entirely new and under-theorised domain has been a very challenging task especially since some actors have historically viewed technologists with a good amount of suspicion for their techno-determinism and disregard for social processes.

Meanwhile, for governments in the South, their primary education about ICTD potentials and pitfalls comes from corporate ICT vendors. State sponsored ICTD programs like the Common Services Centre (CSCs) in India, inspired by ideologies passed on by the World Bank who is a funder of 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.

Moreover, ICTD research has also show complacency, theoretical looseness and a characteristic ahistoricity. The casualty here is the D in ICTD, the lack of strong community accountability, the uncritical celebration of easy-to-infer attributes to the exclusion of deeper systemic insights and long term historically and theoretically grounded ethnographies. 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.

Reclaiming ICTD 'for' Development

At this point, ICTD is a great story that needs a strong movement. ICTD discourse needs to

build outward from the basic premise of equal membership for everyone in the information society through developing an alternative theoretical basis and vocabulary to interpret the information society phenomenon. Essentially, this 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. 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.^v In all these stories, there is a unifying theme – the communitisation of ICTs; not merely the consumption of ICTs and ICT based 'services'. Thus for information to be democratised, ICTs need to be community-led and -centred.

Such forward-looking models of ICTD project design, 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 is about systemic change and often not so much about linear processes or direct, immediate and tangible gains. The real 'choices' for empowerment through ICTs therefore need strategic vision and a perspective about desired change. This is an ambitious social and political project and thus it is untenable that ICTD modelling follows simplistic parameters of demand and revenues.

Current innovative movements originating in the global North, advocating an 'open ICT ecology', offer points for convergence on an emerging progressive politics around ICTs. However, Southern actors need to participate in these 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 these 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 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.

The previous 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. This 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.

ⁱ Based on an IT for Change Perspective Paper of the same title, March 2009. Authors can be contacted at ITfC@ITforChange.net

ⁱⁱ 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.

ⁱⁱⁱ 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

^{iv} *Creating a Development Dynamic - Final Report of the Digital Opportunity Initiative*, Accenture, Markle Foundation, UNDP, July 2001, http://www.markle.org/downloadable_assets/doifinalreport.pdf

^v Stories of marginalised communities, especially poor women, and their appropriation of ICTs and the ensuing disruption of local power hierarchies come out of projects in India like the Deccan Development Society in Andhra Pradesh and the Self-employed Women's Association (SEWA) in Gujarat.