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Examining the PC4D Approach—¹

Redeeming ICTs in Development

by Parminder Jeet Singh

Communication is the primary process of any social system or architecture. Its central importance to the project of 'social change' that development and gender equality efforts represent is also obvious.

It is therefore not at all surprising that when there are some paradigmatic changes in the technologies for, and thereby the possibilities of, communication, serious debates and contestations open up among the involved actors.

I see the new terminology used by Isis of People's Communications for Development (PC4D) in this light. I wish to contribute a critique of what, in my opinion, this new framework does, and what other perspective may be needed to complement it.

PC4D seeks to challenge the tendency of the dominant ICT for development (ICTD) frameworks to pull all existing development practice – with its varied nuances, and struggles of power - into a monolith that is centered on what may be called as the 'revolutionary organising power' of the new ICTs.

The new ICT-based systems that are being developed show every tendency

to entrench greater 'dependencies' and disparities between the dominant centre and the marginalised peripheries. Since these new systems are much bigger, tending towards global scales, peripheries are that much more remote and marginalised.

The PC4D framework attempts to put people back into the centre of development practice. It puts the blame for the reverse tendency, *inter alia*, on what is often an attempt to 'foist' new ICTs on grassroots development work when other more 'traditional' forms of communication may in fact be more appropriate.

The basic objective of this exercise is obviously laudable, especially in the context of the above description of the dominant ICTD frameworks. However, it may have chosen the wrong target - the new ICTs. The problem here is that we are indeed in times of some paradigmatic social changes, which are



Parminder Jeet Singh was among the panelists in one of the sessions in the second phase of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in Tunis, Tunisia in November 2005.

Photo from the International Telecommunications Union's (ITU) webpage on WSIS: <http://www.itu.int/wsisis/plib/a-detail.asp?0>

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captured in the term “the emerging information society.” And in such a situation while one may be aiming for stationary targets, they may in reality be moving, and moving very fast.

One might not agree with the way the contours of the emerging information society may be shaping up, and, as described earlier, I strongly agree with the proponents of the PC4D framework in this matter.

But this does not deny the fundamental fact that powerful forces – triggered by the new ICTs – *are* in fact having a far-reaching impact on many or most of our social institutions.

In such times of flux, definitions are difficult to settle on, which makes such claims as ‘traditional ICTs are more appropriate than the new ones’ quite problematic, often misleading and potentially dangerous to development thinking and practice.

In making such a claim, we need, for instance, to be clear about whether we are talking of user-end devices or of technology platforms; whether we are speaking about development practice

today in a freeze-frame, or including in our analytical framework practices and possibilities of the near future; and, whether we are interested only in the means of communication *from* development agencies *to* the communities, or we are dealing with the whole information and communication architecture of the communities and of development practice.

Which ICTs, and what kind of communication – Changing times defy easy definitions

Most of the PC4D framework seems built over and aimed at effectiveness of the communication from intermediary agencies to grassroots communities – the typical communication pattern of traditional development practice, captured in the processes of education, training and capacity building.

Shifting from this ‘educating’ mode of communication to a more equalising peer-to-peer and bottom-up kind is the next frontier of development practice, and the new ICTs give us a chance to do it. Accomplishing it would not be easy, but the need for crossing this frontier is



very high if ‘development’ is to get really people-centric, which is the principal aim of the PC4D framework. While the new ICTs do open up such possibilities, the ‘traditional’ ICTs have many clear ‘structural’ limitations in this regard.

It is therefore important to not only map existing communication practices but also to keep an eye on new possibilities.

In this context, the very meaning of what is ‘communication for development’ or C4D, needs to be closely interrogated.

One does see this confusion of meaning and purpose of the C4D term in, what appears to be, some conflicting findings of the survey. To just take one illustrative example, some respondents have said that films and videos are most effective, and others that they are too costly, and at yet others, that they may be positively alienating.

The difference here is not only of the specific contexts; it is about the meaning and understanding of what is a film or a video in development practice. The meaning of cost and effectiveness is related to the ‘form’ in which a technology is understood – video, in this case, and also to what exact purpose it is sought to be put.

This is not to find fault with the methodologically robust study which gives us a very useful mapping of the existing communication practices, but to

show the problem of definitional issues in a shifting landscape. We cannot be certain which C4D processes are in the mind of the respondents, and how they discriminate in terms of people-centricness of different C4D processes.

We also cannot be sure, in times of such rapid ICT changes, what exactly is meant by specific ICTs.

The PC4D survey speaks about radio as a highly favored medium in India. However, there is hardly any existing radio program in India² which can be said to be owned by grassroots women, or to which they instinctively feel connected as their own. Radio sets are cheap, and in absence of more empowering possibilities these women may listen to whichever radio programmes are on air. This, however, does not make the dominant form of radio as an appropriate PC4D process/technology.

On the other hand, digital technologies have made community radio possibilities much simpler, cheaper and, potentially, more participative. This is achieved through easier field recordings using digital recorders, and because of cheaper and quicker, as well as easier to learn and operate, computer-based editing.

Moving targets – What we ‘see’ may be different from what we need to plan for

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To reject new ICTs *prima facie* on the evidence that they are not being widely used and/ or grassroots women are not comfortable with them is not much

different from relying on a survey that shows that women in an area are very uncomfortable with reading and writing to stop literacy programs in that area.

Telecentre on Wheels (TOW) is an initiative of an Indian organisation, Change Initiatives together with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and the West Bengal Renewable Energy Development Agency (WBREDA). Such a bicycle cart consists of solar-powered laptops, traveling throughout the villages of Ghoragacha, Madandanga, Kantabelia and Teligacha.

Source and photo: UNESCO

Srilatha Batliwala, an eminent feminist shared an interesting anecdote that describes the need to balance cultural diversity and ICT literacy.³ Many development experts expressed reservations about offering literacy programmes to tribal women, fearing that these programmes might have a debilitating effect on oral traditions. But using this argument in jettisoning literacy programmes altogether is difficult to accept for these programmes are among the principal means of exploring new emancipatory possibilities for these women.

But to entirely refuse to engage with new ICT opportunities for marginalised women – in fact, to not engage strongly enough – would mean succumbing to a self-fulfilling prophecy of new exclusions.

The dangers of such exclusions, not only in terms of lost opportunities of possible new means of empowering communication, but also in terms of empowering engagement with new digitally-transforming social-institutional ecology, are huge.

People are central to social change, but social systems and structures are also important

This brings us to two connected issues that have a strong bearing on this debate. (1) Are ICTs to be considered only as a communication tool, which people may or may not use?; (2) Do they potentially impact the whole information and communication architecture of the community?; (3) Do ICTs go much beyond a communication or information role to alter structural configuration in the society?

My answer to these questions is an emphatic yes, though it may not be possible to develop this line of argument much within the scope of this note.

ICTs change the relationships and hierarchies around information and communication processes, as more bottom-up communication becomes possible, and more open and participatory institutional designs are enabled.

Community radio and video enables a local discourse in the ‘voice’ of grassroots women themselves, and this



Introduction of ICTs in grassroots projects follow a closely parallel logic. The danger of alienation as well as possible co-option into, and consequent subjugation by, the ‘dominant social paradigm’ is very real, and should centrally inform ICT-based strategies.

can, *inter alia*, redefine relationships between the field workers of intermediary organisations and the community members.

On-demand availability of government information from telecentres galvanises new community processes of challenging officials and claiming entitlements; women's close association with such telecentres confer on them a new empowering 'role' in the community's information and communication ecology; and, women have used community-generated, digital, local information systems to do micro-planning and own up processes of development. These are just a few vignettes of what can happen, and these possibilities are being explored and built upon by many initiatives⁴.

These are no doubt early starts, and new information and communication, and community configurations are only starting to be built. There is also no doubt that such ICT-based interventions succeed only if deeply and appropriately embedded in 'traditional' development activities that are participatory and empowering to the grassroots women.

However, it is important for 'traditional' development actors to give greater support to these kinds of initiatives of appropriating new ICTs, rather than less, and to make strong investments in them.

In this context, to the extent that a PC4D framework, through the drawing of wrong conclusions and aiming at the wrong 'target', succeeds in pushing out such ICT-based efforts, we would have thrown the baby away with the bathwater.

We need to identify the enemy well. It is not the new ICTs, which as discussed carry many empowering possibilities that are up to development actors to work on and appropriate. The enemy is the ideological wrapping in which the ICTs come, and which informs the dominant ICTD model. It is possible to un-wrap them, and claim the ICTs for empowering grassroots communities. It is no doubt a very difficult task. But there is no other option.

Development actors will have to develop an appropriate theory and practice of progressive social change in the information society, which enables the grassroots communities to appropriate the new ICTs. .

An appropriate 'information society framework' will situate the analysis of these new ICT-related developments in the shifting structural/ institutional landscape, which is important to understand, theorize on and capture empowering space in. This aspect of the emergent situation in our societies must be given a balanced consideration along with the PC4D framework. ■

Parminder Jeet Singh is a director of IT for Change, a Bangalore based NGO. IT for Change works in the area of interpreting information society changes in the context of development. At IT for Change Parminder is involved with research and advocacy, and is also the program co-coordinator of a field project which aims to use ICTs in different ways for empowering marginalised women organised in collectives.

Footnotes:

- ¹ These are some observations that come from the work done by the author with Anita Gurusurthy at IT for Change, Bangalore, under a research and advocacy project titled 'Information Society for the South'.
- ² With the exception of two or three NGO-based efforts, but which were not covered in this study.
- ³ Gender Perspectives on the Information Society South Asia Pre-W/SIS Seminar", IT for Change, 2005.
- ⁴ These observations come from a few case studies done by IT for Change on projects in India which have used ICTs in an empowering way to benefit grassroots women.