Influencing Development Discourse

Over the years, we have consistently emphasised the need for a political economy perspective on the information society to inform emergent development theories. Mainstream digital space is constructed in and through neo-liberal, capitalist logic. Further, global development policies recommending the adoption of new technologies for addressing the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and such, in their vision and conviction, seek to squeeze in developing country policies and local development efforts into frameworks informed by this dominant logic. This may be quite unsurprising given that the digital phenomenon, almost autonomously, seems to be realigning the axes of power, and much is at stake for powerful economic and political interests on the local-global continuum as the margins acquire a new identity.

Our perspective, informed by our engagement with local communities and interactions in the global political arena, strongly privileges analytical frames that capture the structural antecedents of exclusion in the information society. We feel that making sense of the political economy underscoring techno-social phenomena to reinterpret the future of development in its basic principles as well as strategic directions, is critical. A new era of development jargon seems to be taking birth, and these notions are worthwhile unpacking; for example, 'openness' in the 'network' society is being discussed in the Information and Communication Technology for Development (ICTD) space, and we have thought it important to seek conceptual clarity around what this means for how development itself may be visualised and practised. We have sought to claim and reformulate the concepts of 'public' and 'citizen' to ground the new ways of thinking about, and doing, development in the 'open' and 'networked' reality of contemporary life.

Political Economy of the Information Society

The International Development Research Centre (IDRC) invited us in May 2010 to be part of a public panel on 'The Potential of Open Development for Canada and Abroad'. We think it important to do some hair-splitting on this theme of 'open development', a notion that is increasingly gaining currency along with its variants – open data, open government, etc. – for examining the assumptions it carries about the content and goals of development. A shift towards openness, unless anchored in equity and social justice, can have negative implications for institutions in the public sphere, democracy and development, as well as those of economic production and distribution. We are contributing an essay to IDRC's proposed book, undertaking a critical analysis of the elements of openness, with empirical evidence from the fields of ICTD and Internet Governance (IG), and arguing the potential exclusionary impact of 'openness', where it may supersede the idea of 'public'.

At the ICTD 2010 Conference in London, we shared our perspectives on open development in a panel focusing on this issue (www.ITforChange.net/sites/default/files/ITfC/ICTD%202010_Open%20Development_0.pdf). We were also part of an opening panel dedicated to practitioners' perspectives (www.ITforChange.net/sites/default/files/ITfC/ICTD%202010_open%20plenary.pdf), as well as the panels titled 'How can ICT Research better Inform and Communicate Theories of Development and Globalisation? New Challenges and Promising Directions' and 'Conceptions of Accountability in Policy and Practice'.

Our presentation at the Second Harvard Forum on Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and Development was published in *Information Technologies & International Development* (Volume 6, Special edition 2010 – Harvard Forum II Essays). The paper, titled 'From social enterprises to mobiles – Seeking a peg to hang a premeditated ICTD theory', offers a macro-structural critique that derives from an analysis of policy texts,

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as well as from our first-hand experience (www.ITforChange.net/HarvardForumITID).

Continuing our efforts to reflect on the macro-structural implications of development, we will be organising a panel on 'How are digital technologies transforming development?' at the 2011 European Association of Development, Research and Training Institutes (EADI) conference on 'Rethinking Development in an Age of Scarcity and Uncertainty – New Values, Voices and Alliances for Increased Resilience'. This forum will enable us to interact with a larger European audience. We will examine the ideas and broad ideologies that ICTs have brought to the development sector, looking at the challenges in relation to new possibilities for development around the central question – what frameworks capture the impact of ICTs on the development sector?

This year we have also participated actively in the Euro-India Spirit Project (EIS), a governmental effort between India and the European Union (EU), as a member of the Working Group on 'ICT Addressing Societal Challenges'. The EIS Project aims at creating a shared ground for research on policies in the field of ICTs in India and the EU. We have, in the past year, intervened in the Working Group discussions, talking about the techno-social and the need for research on 'public technologies'. We look forward to reiterating this perspective at the EIS Copenhagen meeting, where the focus of the discussion will be inclusion, e-health and collaborative content creation.

Our articulations have also begun to have a direct impact. For instance, we have received feedback from IDRC about the way our work on the Information Society for the South programme has influenced their thinking for the 2011-2016 prospectus on the theme of Information and Networks. Such an impact is equally discernible in general with academic, civil society and governmental initiatives that seek our experiences and insights to nuance their interventions across different domains, a fact that reading the different chapters in this annual report will testify.

Political Economy of Knowledge

We have been involved with the Information and Knowledge Management Emergent (IKME)

research programme by being part of the sub-group focused on technology artefacts. We are also part of the team evaluating IKME's effort, along with Chris Mowles (Red Kite Partners). IKME is a network which gathers development researchers and practitioners exploring the concept of 'multiple knowledges' as a philosophy for effective development practice, as well as policies, especially at global levels. Our participation in the IKME network has helped us develop an understanding of the issues linked to technology architecture and their connection to local knowledge. The final report of the programme evaluation still has to be published, but being participant-evaluators has enabled us to become more comfortable with interpretations of contextual and nuanced changes and the lenses offered by complexity theory for development sector evaluation. Visiting *Sula Batsu* in Costa Rica was part of this learning; the organisation has worked with citizen reporters at the community level as well as with local school children, creating wide ripples of change through this process around how local knowledge is perceived, validated and valued. Furthermore, working with the IKME programme has given us access to a niche global community of thinkers, whose work reflects forward thinking in an area that is bound to have implications for the future of development.

We also participated in the IKME workshop titled 'Linked Open Information: Potential Opportunities and Pitfalls for International Development', held in Oxford (United Kingdom), in November 2010. We presented our perspective from the vantage point of the 'local' on the issue of the directions that linked data should take. The presentation critically examined the information behaviour in local communities, bringing in the issue of policies that influence technology and hence, linked data flows. In the general discussion on 'What are the powers and limitations of transforming linked data with visualisation tools?', our work with illiterate women and girls was cited.

We are a member of the advisory group of the Mobilising Knowledge for Development (MK4D) initiative, a project of the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), University of Sussex, Brighton (United Kingdom). This project aims at restructuring IDS' approach on sharing

knowledge for development to support informed decision making by those in a position to influence change towards poverty reduction and justice. By being part of the advisory group, we bring our perspectives on co-creation and Southern partnerships to a reputable institution and its emerging knowledge systems and processes.

We have been in continuous dialogue with scholars at IDS – working along with them on new proposals and providing complementary expertise to their research on ICTs. For instance, we were asked to comment on the final report of the research project 'Mediating Voices and Communicating Realities – Using Information Crowd-sourcing Tools, Open Data Initiatives and Digital Media to Support and Protect the Vulnerable and Marginalised' by Evangelia Berdou, research fellow at IDS. Our commentary on this work can be accessed at www.ITforChange.net/Commentary_Evangelia.

Networking with the Academic World

IT for Change (ITfC) delivered two lectures at the Fifth Summer School on Philosophy for the Social Sciences and Humanities, at the Manipal Centre for Philosophy and Humanities, Manipal University (India). Anita Gurumurthy used a gender perspective to analyse the information society in her talk 'Fat-free ice cream, alcohol-free beer and feminism without women - How to make sense of gender discourse in the information society?'. Parminder Jeet Singh discussed the adequacy of current political systems with respect to the context and needs of an emerging information society, in his talk 'Political action in the brave new digital world'. We have been actively seeking conversations with academia, inviting them to our policy advocacy workshops and also making presentations and delivering lectures in educational spaces. This link is also rather important, especially to build bridges with the student community, engaging whom is vital to our relevance as an organisation.

Recognising ITfC as an important voice in the sector of community radio, the Department of Communication (Sarojini Naidu School of Arts and Communication, University of Hyderabad, India) invited us to be a part of the advisory board of its quarterly e-newsletter, CR News – Tracking Community Radio in India.

The CITIGEN programme, described in the section on Feminist Frameworks, and our work on Democracy and Governance have also been instrumental in opening up relationships with academic institutions in India and the global South.

Looking Ahead

Moving on from the Information Society for the South framework, which sought to use the conceptual tools of 'public' and 'citizen' as cornerstone precepts for a development discourse around ICTs, we feel that our work needs a renewed emphasis on learning by doing and committed political advocacy. What network age development comprises is something we still know little about; the indications we have of possible breakthroughs in governance, education or empowerment are still nascent. We feel that pilots to support local development ecologies at a systemic level are an area we must explore. However, it is not easy to find the funds to pursue new methodologies where donors are getting more and more niche and limited to the 'concrete', in their support, and less appreciative of work at normative and experimental levels. Our engagement with governments at the national and sub-national level – more or less to keep reinstating what alternative frameworks are made of that use the 'information' or 'network' society opportunity – will of course continue, both through direct engagement in advisory bodies, as well as through research to bring convincing evidence on to the table. Globally, joining the fight for social justice and equity is vital; the IG arena is emerging as significant in global spaces, including in inter-governmental cooperation such as the IBSA (India, Brazil, South Africa countries) framework. Aligning with such platforms and also saying what needs to be in others is part of our discourse shaping agenda in the year to come.

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