

**The local-global connection in the  
information society:  
Some tentative formulations around gender,  
development and social change**

Paper presented at a seminar series on  
Gender, work and life in the new global economy

Seminar 4:  
Gender and work in the global context: Theory and practice

Organised by The London School of Economics  
May 2007

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## Introduction

This paper is part of my feminist project to bridge the gap between gender equality advocates in the so-called information and communication technology (ICT) or 'information society' arena and those who have worked on critical global governance issues other than on ICTs. A Southern feminist agenda on the information society cannot emerge until the twain meet.

While there is considerable feminist scholarship in the area of gender, global economy and work, particularly based in the critiques of globalisation, the ramifications of what is now known as network society or information society for developing countries and their local development agenda are not yet so seriously examined in feminist literature. This paper locates development and gender in the rapidly changing global context, which in some fundamental ways is linked to new technologies. It seeks to use this understanding to propose a feminist reconception of development and of the gender equality project that is appropriate to the changing social landscape. The paper argues that the 'information society' framework is both a diagnostic and explanatory lens, through which to explore global socio-economic processes, as well as a theory of social change that helps to analyse the emerging meanings of development and gender from an equity and social justice perspective. It connects the ICT for Development (ICTD) discourse to neo-liberal notions of development, unpacking how market fundamentalism in development has informed and in turn been shaped by the ICTD narrative. Using the concept of 'inclusive citizenship', the paper provides a new framework that restores the political content of development and gender in the information society. It highlights the urgency for addressing the governance deficit at the global level and submits that positive social change in the information society can happen only with progressive public policy.

### **1. The transmutation of development and gender in discourse: 'Global' as the organising principle**

I begin with a broad brushstroke of the recent history of development, characterising it in the rapidly changing global socio-political context - of a capture by neo-liberal ideology of its constituent meanings, and of the crisis of global governance - and its implications for development and gender equality. This first section argues how the 'external' economic and political environment impinges directly on the autonomy of nations, leading to the 'marketisation of development' and the depoliticisation of gender. This emerging context marked by an erosion of social justice frameworks in development discourse, over-valuation of the market and a global governance deficit - makes negotiating gender equality a complex proposition for its advocates. This context addresses the ahistoricity that is quite characteristic of development debates in relation to ICTs and the information society.

From the vantage of development, the significance of the global economy may be captured in the breaking down of major social contracts that have existed in the world for at least fifty years. According to Gita Sen (2006),

*The first social contract that has broken down is that between workers and employers, framed as this relationship was in the right to collective bargaining and rights through social democracy.... The second contract that has been broken is that*

*of (a) the welfare state in the countries of the North where a set of entitlements and rights of citizens was matched by the responsibilities of the state and (b) the terms and understanding of the development project in countries of the South. The third social contract that has been broken is the contract that brought together countries of the South and North in an understanding of living in a common world and, therefore, the mutual responsibility for the project of development (2006, p.17).*

These defining attributes of our brave new world originate in the ascendance of neo-liberal ideology, throwing up fundamental challenges to the development project. In the past decade, global negotiations on development have increasingly witnessed the obscuring and even negation of a rights approach by powerful countries and interests, a fact flagged repeatedly in critiques of the MDGs (Antrobus 2004), and a strong posturing from the North against financial obligations to the South. The emerging dominant global sentiment around development is characterised by a faltering on the frameworks of rights and social justice (Charkiewicz 2004). This defiance by dominant forces of the normative basis of development and global cooperation constitutes in effect the neutralisation of the political content of development that has direct implications for navigating local development in the times we live in.

The International Conference on Financing for Development held in Monterrey in 2002 epitomises this shifting landscape. The negotiations around development financing concluded with what is known as the "Monterrey Consensus". The Consensus forged a 'partnership' between developed and developing countries based on mutual recognition of the benefits to be gained from the implementation of policies. Critiquing the Monterrey Consensus, Marina Durano (2002) argues how the rhetoric of the partnership in reality consolidates the forces of globalisation. Despite reference to upholding the United Nations Charter and a commitment to the principles of justice and equity, the Monterrey Consensus explicitly excludes human rights language as a normative framework for proposed actions, thus creating an ideological vacuum to be filled by market forces:

*The Monterrey Consensus...seeks to expand global capital by promoting foreign direct investment, integrate the poor into the global market through market access for exports, and legitimate the supremacy of the World Bank-International Monetary Fund-World Trade Organisation in economic governance.*

The endorsement of a market-led approach to development through the Monterrey Consensus affirmed the dominant development model by sealing the supremacy of capital mobility. This is expressed mainly as an "anti-tax" position, since the proposal for an International Tax Organisation and the hotly contested Currency Transactions Tax were removed from discussion after the Fourth Preparatory Committee Meeting in January 2002. This is a matter of concern since capital income's share of total taxes has decreased and labour income's share has increased (Rodrik 1997). In general, any mention of regulatory measures on any form of capital has met with strong opposition, chiefly from source countries.

Although by the end of the nineties there was an increasing jettisoning of global justice frameworks in development discourse and "the sustainable development discourse had been transformed by marginalising social justice-oriented approaches and accentuating those that

resonated with neo-liberal govern mentality" (Charkiewicz 2004, p.50), the Monterrey Consensus on Financing for Development marked an emphatic realignment of development.

Thus, by the time of the Monterrey Consensus and in the interceding rise of the Bretton Woods institutions as the arbiter of national development policies, of the World Trade Union (WTO) as the overarching framework for globalisation, and in the push for a 'coherence' throughout the global system – between policies of financial and trade institutions and the United Nations frameworks, we see a realignment of global policy processes. Development was being subsumed within the liberalisation agenda, unequivocally establishing the supremacy of market ideology and the subsidiarity of political principles of justice and equity. This polarity was more than evident in the Monterrey consensus – the globalisation-liberalisation agenda was normalised in the "*common* (emphasis added) pursuit of growth, poverty eradication and sustainable development" (United Nations 2003, p.6). Not surprisingly, the Johannesburg Earth Summit that followed in 2002 closely mirrored the same crisis in discourse for development, with 'self-interest' based negotiations replacing normative principles.

The Monterrey Consensus also noted that developing countries were to be given equitable representation in those institutions and processes that have been created to govern the rules, regulations and institutions that make up the international trading and financial system. From Monterrey in 2002 to now, there has been little movement on this agenda, flagging what Jan Kregel (2006) calls a "democratic deficit" in global governance. Kregel elucidates this deficit in terms of the current lack of:

- representation of developing countries in the governance structure of the Bretton Woods Institutions, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the continued dominance of the governance of financial markets by the Group of Seven (G7) countries.
- any formal proposals to date on how developing countries will have voice and representation in these institutions and a complete absence of transparent governance structures and lack of any formal representation of developing countries in ad hoc voluntary bodies key to global decision making on financial markets.

Ad hoc and informal groups and networks that initiate policy in the global economic arena can be seen as lacking in legitimacy, since they lack transparency and have limited membership and, therefore, undemocratic proceedings. The legitimacy of the Basel Committee, made up of the Group of Ten's (G10) central bank officials, is thus questionable because the officials are technocrats whose mandate for representation is unclear (Durano 2002).

By the beginning of the millennium, the political economy canvas of development was clearly reflective of the decreasing autonomy for developing countries – a lack of representation in emerging global governance structures coupled with the assault of an increasingly powerful global market. Local development has thus begun to be mediated more and more by the "external economic environment" (Khor 2003) comprising global economic structures and trends and the policies determined or influenced by international agencies such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, the WTO, the United Nations (UN), and developed-country groupings such as the Group of Eight (G8), the Organisation for Economic

Cooperation and Development (OECD) and bilateral aid agencies. This environment directly impinges upon and invariably limits the ability of developing countries to deal with their development priorities. Martin Khor (2003) gives the following examples of global influences:

- The continuous fall in prices of export commodities has caused tremendous income and foreign exchange losses to many developing countries and is a major cause of persistent or increased poverty at the local community level.
- The financial instability and sharp currency fluctuations caused by large inflows and outflows of external funds have led many developing countries (including those considered the most successful among them) into financial and economic crises, with dramatic and sudden increases in poverty rates.
- Many developing countries have suffered declines in or threats to their industrial jobs and farmers' livelihoods as a result of inappropriate import liberalisation policies, partly or mainly caused by external policy influences resulting from loan conditionalities or multilateral trade rules.
- Cutbacks in social sector expenditure, as well as the introduction of the "user-should-pay" principle as a result of structural adjustment policies in the past have been identified as significant factors in the deterioration of social well-being of vulnerable and poor groups in several developing countries.

The policy regimes and prescriptions of global institutions impacting local development have also been seen as derailing decentralisation and "diminishing 'fiscal space' (i.e., options and resources) by transferring the rights of governments to investors" (Alexander 2006).

Research on the particular impact of foreign private investment promoted by the market model in developing countries clearly traces differential and negative consequences for vulnerable groups. A report by the UN High Commissioner titled, "Economic, Social and Cultural Rights: Liberalization of Trade in Services and Human Rights," presents extensive evidence that, although increased foreign private investment can upgrade national infrastructure, introduce new technology, and provide employment; it can also lead to:

- the establishment of a two-tiered service supply with a corporate segment focused on the healthy and wealthy and an under-financed public sector focusing on the poor and sick;
- an overemphasis on commercial objectives at the expense of social objectives which might be more focused on the provision of quality health, water and education services for those that cannot afford them at commercial rates; and
- an increasingly large and powerful private sector that can threaten the role of the government as the primary duty bearer for human rights by subverting regulatory systems through political pressure or the co-opting of regulators (2002, cited in Alexander 2006).

The 'marketisation of development' has also implied relegation at national levels of public policy instruments in addressing social justice and equity. The privatisation of public services has specific gendered impacts as has been argued by feminist scholars. The disappearance of state responsibility for maintaining public services has led to women having to double or treble their workday to take on a greater workload at home, with more hours of voluntary work in their communities and in activities generating income, to the detriment of their health, quality of life and leisure (Kessler 2003).

The anchoring of macroeconomic policy in neo-liberal ideology, in a globalised context wherein the concomitant factors shaping national policies are located externally, accentuates the separation of macroeconomic and social policies in public policy formulation. This separation has been critiqued as deeply gendered. The social content of macroeconomic policy tends to be biased against women with its "deflationary" bias (resulting in job losses, crowding of the informal sector and increased household responsibilities), "male breadwinner" bias (promoting the view of men as 'providers' and women as 'dependents' and denying women, who largely comprise the informal sector and the part-time work force, of state benefits) and "commodification" bias (where the focus on minimising budget deficit makes access to social service difficult for the poor and transfers caring responsibilities to women in the household) biases (Elson and Cagatay 2000).

The development terrain – marked by an erosion of social justice frameworks in the ideological underpinnings of development discourse, over-valorization of the market and a global governance deficit – makes negotiating gender equality a complex proposition for its advocates. Essentially a 'devil and deep sea' experience, the feminist challenge has been on the one hand, to articulate the gendered implications of economic growth models and their attendant assumptions in dominant discourse and on the other, deal with 'gender fatigue' matched perhaps only by the intensity of aid fatigue, on global negotiation tables.

Ewa Charkiewicz (2002) in her assessment of global feminist advocacy identifies how by the new millennium, the new feminist vocabulary, which deployed the concepts of gender, gender equity, equal opportunities and individual empowerment was stuck in, what may appear in the short term as a mutually productive relationship with neo-liberal governmentality. Advocacy documents by women's groups introduced cost-benefit calculations along with the rights-based arguments for the integration of women so as to demonstrate the "efficiencies to be gained by the integration of women" – an approach highly valourised by donors and within the UN networks as the strategy to engage with UN and other international NGOs.

Feminist tactic at global levels has thus followed the dictum – if good sense fails, push for a business case – in a pragmatism that has brought largely unsatisfactory results in the packaging and repackaging of gender equality within rubrics such as social capital, social inclusion or social safety nets. This collapse of gender concerns within the wider categories – of 'poverty' or 'social exclusion' – within global policy has systematically depoliticised gender, percolating quickly into frameworks for national level policy making as well.

Charkiewicz (2002) also highlights how from "Rio to Johannesburg" the social movement, feminist movement including, has metamorphosed into 'NGOs', an organisational form which draws on the corporate model, leading to delinking the social movement from the grassroots. Essentially a story of decline for gender politics, we find impacts of these shifting trends petrified more and more in official policy. This is neatly and clearly borne out in the World Bank's gender action plan for the fiscal year 2007-10, critiqued by Christa Wichterich (2006):

*What impresses most when reading the action plan is the one-dimensional thinking which places markets central and not human beings or the economic rights and potentials of women. Elements of reciprocity, social obligation or moral economy that*

*are of great importance in the economic context for women, are systematically ignored. This one-dimensionality and blindness to economic alternatives makes the Bank's concept of gender equality in global markets a smart version of the dogma of competition and growth with the market-totalitarian message underlying: There is no alternative!* (p.5)

I have attempted to lay out some basic trends in the development discourse in this section. Although selective and illustrative in terms of the elucidation of historical factors leading up to the present context, the idea is to argue the simple and straightforward connections between the neo-liberal juggernaut and a crisis for local development and gender equality, within a political environment that preserves the dominance of powerful countries and corporate interests. The locus of these political shifts is undeniably global. It is therefore quite clear that the points of influence for social change, to a good extent, also lie at global levels.

My attempt in the next section will be slightly more ambitious; to show how the near-ossification of neo-liberalism as a development panacea is structurally by and large an information society phenomenon, and how in turn, development discourse in the emerging information society is fuelled greatly by neo-liberal ideology.

## **2. Making sense of the information society**

Although information society theory is still nascent, there is considerable scholarship that provides conceptual tools to understand how 'the network' consolidates global capitalism. More recently, empirical studies suggest how the shifting loci of social organisation in the information society and negotiations of power between the global and local, make for a more complex reality where the political is as much a force to reckon with as the economic. This section looks at the specific implications of 'the network' in terms of the new lease of life for neo-liberal ideologies. It also submits that there is a need to move towards an alternate discourse where the possibilities for progressive social change, including for gender equality, offered by the information society phenomenon are claimed.

### **Information Society Theory**

In his persuasive work on information society theory, Manuel Castells (1998) asserts that "this global economy is historically new, for the simple reason that only in the last two decades have we produced the technological infrastructure required for it to function as a unit on a planetary scale" (p.5). Castells (2000) characterises the information age as the network society, where "networks constitute the new social morphology of our societies, and the diffusion of networking logic substantially modifies the operation and outcomes in processes of production, experience, power, and culture" (p.500).

Castells (2000) also argues that the "most decisive historical factor accelerating, channelling and shaping the information technology paradigm, and inducing its associated social forms, was/is the process of capitalist restructuring undertaken since the 1980s, so that the new techno-economic system can be adequately characterised as informational capitalism" (p. 18).



Recent work by Fuchs (2007) also asserts how the need to find new strategies for executing corporate and political domination has resulted in a restructuring of capitalism characterised by the emergence of transnational, networked spaces in the economic, political and cultural system, mediated by cyberspace as a tool of global co-ordination and communication. He says:

*...global network capitalism is based on structural inequalities; it is made up of segmented spaces in which central hubs (transnational corporations, certain political actors, regions and countries, western lifestyles and world views) centralise the production, control and flows of economic, political and cultural capital (property, power, skills) (p.49).*

However, Fuchs (2007) also observes that while "global network capitalism is an antagonistic system, transnational networks are both spaces of domination and spaces of potential liberation from domination. Network commons challenge network capitalism, networked control is challenged by networked participation, and networked manipulation by networked wisdom" (p.49).

Similarly, Darin Barney (2004), critiquing the capitalist conception of the network society by Castells, argues that "at its most advanced level of articulation, the discourse of the Network Society not only normalizes present conditions, but also justifies political, social and economic measures that might otherwise be negotiable. At this point, to choose but one example, changes in labour law that support the casualization of the workforce can be uncritically justified because we live in a Network Society" (2004, cited in Peltola 2006). He sees the information society as providing "a new technological infrastructure mediating an increasing array of social, political and economic practices wherein the reproduction and institutionalization of networks as the basic form of human organization and relationship is seen across a wide range of social, political and economic configurations and associations" (2004, cited in Wikipedia 2007).

Jari Peltola (2006) also challenges the network society analysis of Castells, restoring the place of the political. According to Peltola, "[Castells' analysis] gives the impression that the central elements of network society are already in place, and there is little or no choice for individuals, organisations, nation-states, or politics in general but to adapt to this situation by taking advantage of network society as effectively as they can. In this sense, Castells questions the significance of politics as process and indirectly hints that the network era is not necessarily very favourable for politics...the fundamental point in Castells' study is that the political preconditions of network society are no more contestable" (p.14).

Although as a body of knowledge, information society theory is still in its infancy, from the early Castellian grand narrative of a new capitalism, we see a widening of the analytical lens of the subject, which, in more recent times, varied perspectives that suggest more than just a counter-discourse. In these interpretations of the information society, we see political narratives embedded in discourse almost as significantly as the economic ones.

For instance, in his recent work, Yochai Benkler (2006) situates an analysis of the information age in liberal political theory, emphasising individual action and non-market relations. According to Benkler, the shift in networked information results in several changes within

democratic societies, which include “enhanced autonomy” – through improved capacity to do more for oneself, more in loose commonality with others and without being constrained to the market economic system and in (or to?) formal organisations that operate alongside the market sphere; “the networked public sphere” – where it is more difficult to buy attention on the Internet than it is in mass media outlets and harder still to use money to squelch an opposing view; “social justice and human development” – wherein free access to information will improve the equality of opportunity for those who are the worst off and “a critical culture that is far more transparent and malleable” and “networked social relations”. Benkler argues that with the Internet and networked information economy, there is an opportunity like never before for improvement in the normative domain of justice as compared to what was possible with the industrial information economy. The networked information economy is seen as reducing both cost barriers and transactional barriers and thus creating alternative paths and a system that relies too heavily on proprietary approaches to information production is shown as not just inefficient but unjust as well (Benkler 2006).

While the complexity of the network society is discernable in this emergent body of knowledge that seeks to theorise about change in the times we live in, for those interested in the business of social change, suffice it to say that the information society phenomenon is clearly more than an economic roller coaster; it is a defining social and political paradigm, marked by contestations that Benkler (2006) describes as “the battle over the institutional ecology of the digital environment”. At the heart of Benkler’s argument is that as the law tightens the control of exclusive rights, social trends push towards a networked information economy in which knowledge, information, and art are all shared. He identifies how despite institutional changes aimed at tightening exclusivity, at each layer of the digital environment, there have been countervailing forces. At the physical layer, the development of wireless devices which allow user-owned networks to offer an avenue for a commons-based platform; at the logical layer, the centrality of open standard-setting processes and free software; and at the content layer, the cultural movements and the technical ‘affordances’.<sup>1</sup>

Benkler’s thesis moves conceptions of the information society in the direction that challenges techno-determinism, which often points to a capitalist utopia, with a marked optimism in the networked information economy’s potential for better human welfare, development, and freedom, and provides a useful point of departure for understanding change in the information society.

Before social change can be discussed in relation to gender and development, situating these categories within the global economy is necessary – both to account for the economic power of the information society in navigating development discourse and as an analytical exercise to identify the specific information society processes entrenching development and gender deeper within the neo-liberal ideological web.

It is noteworthy that conceptions of the ‘network’ have journeyed through the early characterisation of the Internet as a new democratic space, to its critiques as a global economic infrastructure consolidating capitalist restructuring, to the more recent empirical analysis of its inherent fluidity and therefore potential for social and political reorganisation. Historical discourse of technology has moved along two main axes – one of technologies of production, which had their high point in the Marxian thought, and two, of technologies of

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<sup>1</sup> Action possibilities which are readily perceivable

information and communication, with their moorings in social and political narratives (largely ignored by economic theory). Significantly, ICTs are as important a technology of production as they are (as their name suggests) of the social processes of information and communication. This has meant a new tension between the classical economic discourse and socio-political thinking, a healthy tension, in fact that is only now beginning to manifest.

### **Capitalism in a New Cloak – Information Society as a Totalising System**

Manifestations of structural inequalities in the 'new global economy' are discernable in the immunities enjoyed by global capital from any regulation as well as in the absence of political commitments from developed countries on labour mobility. These have been well documented in the now familiar debate about the supremacy of capital and the tensions between labour and capital mobility.<sup>2</sup> How labour segmentation also undermines international solidarity among workers by pitting the desperation of workers in poor countries against the threat of unemployment of workers in rich countries is another dimension, also fairly well discussed in literature.

More nascent is the exploration of how capitalism in the information age reproduces and consolidates the gendered basis of global economic production. The global economy has also been discussed extensively for how global capitalism appropriates women's labour. The global economy also embodies new gendered arrangements in which the burdens of caring support are based on racial, ethnic and geo-political hierarchies. Typically, household work is outsourced to poor women migrants from labour exporting countries, in the middle class homes of labour importing countries. Thus capitalism in the network society does not merely ride on the social reproductive roles of women but gains new legitimacy for institutionalised gender biases. New mutations of the gender division of labour form the bedrock of 'network capitalism' where the labour of poor, unskilled, migrant women seeking employment outside their countries provides the basis of care work within the household work organisation of labour importing nations. Within the current global context, labour segmentation not only penalises low-skilled and unskilled labourers who move out to foreign countries often illegally and at great risk, but also reproduces hierarchies based on race, class, ethnicity, and geopolitics, reinforcing existing gender biases in the division of labour and in social reproduction roles (Kabeer 2006).

Altogether missing in the analysis of the global economy, although intrinsically interlinked with the labour segmentation issue, is the impact of network capitalism on 'community'. Significant to development theory and practice, the question of solidarity requires a recasting in terms of 'local community' in the information society. This conceptualisation moves current understanding about the globalisation phenomenon deeper into the social reorganisation of contemporary times. The centralising tendencies of the 'network' and the structurally segmented spaces of global network capitalism make for a powerful case that demonstrate the limits of macroeconomic models – the privileging of investment and economic growth rather than human development. The potent combination of centralised coordination and segmented spaces in the information society manifests in the local impact of corporate models like that of Wal-Mart. Micheal Gurstein (2007) captures this in his scholarly analysis:

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<sup>2</sup> See analyses of General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) by Durano (2005) and Jawara and Kwa (2004).

*The electronically enabled network that is Wal-Mart and the parallel centrally-controlled electronically-enabled networks that underpin the contemporary advanced economies and cultures are, at their very core, "totalizing" systems in the sense in which thinkers such as Hegel (and Marx) understood "totalizing systems". That is, they are systems whose inner life is one of extreme and even cancerous and explosive growth and through this to the absorption or transformation of ever wider circles of production (and consumption) into extensions of these ever-expanding network chains (p. 6).*

Gurstein (2007) also argues that corporate giants like Wal-Mart drive out small businesses which are the backbone of the community and "hollow out the town". Thus, as Wal-Mart squelches its competitors, it breaks that backbone.<sup>3</sup> This deleterious impact on local livelihoods is concurrent to the 'marketisation of development' discussed earlier. The subjugation of local development and local community to neo-liberal ideology is complete in the information society context wherein the weakening of labour and the obliteration of local livelihoods pushes poorer nations and vulnerable groups to the periphery. The global governance deficit exacerbates this increasing loss of autonomy for local communities to set their terms and make claims for "human freedoms and human fulfillment" (2003, cited in Durano 2004).

To understand the political economy of the dominant information society paradigm, capitalist forces need to be seen as working at two levels: one, in consolidating and transferring 'controls' to global levels, thus promoting the global governance deficit; and two, in denying local communities access to political expression through a refuge in the innate global character of the phenomenon. What we see therefore is the appropriation of the network for a simultaneous process of global consolidation and local abdication.

I argue earlier that the capacity of national governments to pursue independent policies to achieve their development goals is inhibited by the larger political context and a democratic deficit in global governance. In the networked world, we see a proliferation of political actors and a diffusion of political authority over major governance functions. Policy spaces in respect of most domains – from environment to financial markets and the information society – are characterised by multiple actors, fragmented governance arenas, ad hoc structures that are neither democratic nor representative and even bodies operating independently of their member states (Haas 2003). For instance, the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) has the innocuous task of administering domain names on the Internet and administering the root files of Internet names and numbers. However, its various roles have strong public policy implications. These include allocating domain names to political entities, countries and sub-country units; giving trademark protection on domain names; deciding which entity will run top-level domains (TLD) in which key areas, like education, travel and tourism; deciding which kind of content classification is allowed for a TLD and which is not; and addressing the issue of multilingual domain names.

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<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, in a recent sex discrimination lawsuit, Wal-Mart took the position that its 3,400 stores are operated more or less independently. The company encouraged women who were discriminated to sue the actual stores instead, in what can be seen as a powerful information society example of centralised control over policy in the complete abdication of employer obligations through an externalisation of costs.

ICANN's governance structure has been a topic of intense debate. It has a private governance system, dominated by corporate interests mostly from the United States (US) and with little accountability to anyone (except to the US government under a contractual agreement). Strangely, it tries to shield its current structures by claiming that it only does technical administration and no public policy, a claim which has been exposed many a time. ICANN is a good instance of how different strategies are adopted by dominant sections to safeguard their interests, in this case using the cover and the power of technical knowledge and policies. In the information society, political debates are increasingly seen to be masquerading as technical discussions, in order to deny legitimate constituencies a voice in deciding these important issues.

For social policy, the new global economic playing field effectively becomes a zero-sum game where business interests increasingly supersede the authority of democratic and representative governance and the legitimacy of principles of the greater good. Capitalism in the information age thus raises immediate questions not only about national sovereignty but also about a more fundamental reconstitution of political relationships, and therefore, of citizenship in its broad meanings of rights, entitlements, and claims, especially of powerless /marginalised groups at global to local levels.

### **3. Development and gender in the information society: From global to local**

This section will attempt to examine how the ICTD discourse is codetermined by the dominant neo-liberal notion of development. It traces the political origins of the ICTD discourse and its manifestations at local levels, deconstructing its neo-liberal foundations.

#### **The birth and growth of ICTD – through global policy corridors**

By the late eighties, developmental policy options were becoming linked to the shape of technological evolution (Perez 1988, cited in Thompson 2004). By the mid-nineties, the recognition that developing countries, although remaining in the periphery, are increasingly integrated into the global network resulted in the inclusion of such technologies as important elements of development intervention (UNESCO 1996 and UNCTAD 1997, cited in Thompson 2004). By the end of the decade it was clear that the emerging trajectory of the use of ICTs for development was indeed collinear with the dominant perspectives – like that of the World Bank – and shaping development itself, and getting appropriated and assimilated steadily into this worldview (Thompson 2004). In 2001, the South African Non-Government Organisation Network (SANGONet), Congress of South Africa Trade Unions (COSATU) and South African Non-Governmental Coalition (SANGOCO) issued a statement against the World Bank's Development Gateway website declining to participate in the initiative, claiming that: "While the Development Gateway purports to promote local community organizations and their information initiatives, its true intention is to control the development information discourse to promote its own particular perspectives" (Aslam 2001, cited in Thompson 2004). These were early resistances and marked new forms of knowledge politics in the information society.

The first decisive encounter that development discourse had with the new world of ICTs can be traced back to a meeting of the G8 countries at Osaka, Japan, in the year 2000. The

International Telecommunications Union (ITU) had proposed a World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) as far back as 1996, at a time when the US was talking about the concept of a global information infrastructure (since 1993). These were mostly technology-centred and private-sector driven conceptions. The emerging institutional setting of the information society was decidedly neo-liberal, and in the year 2000 the G8 countries adopted the Okinawa Charter on the Global Information Society. The charter extolled ICTs as "one of the most potent forces in shaping the 21st century" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Japan 2007, p.1).

Indeed, while much of the world waited for and expected significant initiatives aimed at addressing the debt crisis, the G8 meeting chose instead to redirect attention to the role of ICTs in global economic restructuring and socio-economic change and initiated the Digital Opportunity Task (DOT) Force, an international coalition of government, industry and civil society organisations, "to harness the forces of new technologies in order to narrow social and economic inequalities by making the benefits from these technologies accessible and meaningful for all humanity" (World Bank 2003, p.7).

However the meeting steered clear of addressing the political issues involved in using ICTs to reconfigure development. It was "completely silent on rethinking development orthodoxy on the privatisation of telephone networks; or preventing new arrangements for the settlement of the cost of international telephone calls, which have highly negative foreign exchange implications for developing countries; or, indeed, encouraging a renegotiation of the prevailing cost structure of the internet, which effectively shifts the cost of expanding a (Northern-based) infrastructural-network to new or late (Southern-based) adopters" (Cline-Cole and Powell 2004, p. 6).

The Okinawa Charter also spoke of international cooperation for development and announced the setting up of a Digital Opportunity Task (DOT) Force with wider stakeholder participation, including from developing countries. Three active non-government partners in the DOT Force alliance – the Markle Foundation (which declares its specialisation in the use of new technologies for health and national security),<sup>4</sup> Accenture, a leading consultancy firm with a good amount of business with technology concerns<sup>5</sup> and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) – got together to bring out a report on the role of ICTs in development activity. This report, called the 'Digital Opportunities Initiative' (DOI) as can only be expected from its authorship, came in strongly with its faith in market mechanisms – stating categorically that "those initiatives that employ a business model were most likely to succeed" (Accenture et al. 2001, p.2.2.6).

The UN General Assembly in 2000 considered the ITU recommendation for a WSIS, and the General Assembly gave the WSIS the mandate to explore ICT opportunities in achieving the development priorities of the Millennium Declaration. Meanwhile, UNDP and other multilateral and bilateral donors had adopted the DOI framework as their information and communications technologies for development (ICTD) policy guide. Southern governments still had little or no ICTD vision and their ICTD activity, if any, continued to be looked after by information technology (IT) and telecommunications ministries that were anxious to make the best of the unprecedented economic opportunities in IT exports and IT jobs. They were

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<sup>4</sup> See: <http://www.markle.org>

<sup>5</sup> See: <http://www.accenture.com>

happy to endorse the pro-market DOI ICTD framework for their activities, including that of e-governance. It is under these circumstances that the first phase of WSIS was held at Geneva (Gurumurthy and Singh 2006).

The content and process of how WSIS would unfold was not clear in the mandate given to the ITU to organise the 'multi-stakeholder' event. In a rapidly changing world, the intersections between new technologies and development were still only hazily understood. Further, this understanding was beginning to be encapsulated in the grand narrative of 'bridging the digital divide', a key goal in development, predicated on the fallacious assumption that access to ICTs' can be addressed without "...consideration of the ownership and control of the networks...in isolation from the large development divide that has characterised the world, both past and present" (Y'au 2005, p.118). The WSIS, we must remember, followed on the heels of the Monterrey 'Consensus'. Behind the apparent consensus implied both in the WSIS Plan of Action and Declaration of Principles one may see the urge of international capitalism to develop and profit from a globalising economy, overwhelmingly dependent for its functioning on the ICT it sells (Ishemo 2004).

Civil society engagements at WSIS did push for greater visibility to the social and rights-based underpinnings of the emerging notion of the information society; however, this still remained largely to the exclusion of a Southern (as in geo-political South) interpretation of what this notion means. The first phase of WSIS firmly located communication rights issues in global discourse. In the second phase, there was an imperative to anchor within the WSIS discourse the significant opportunities for development that ICTs provide for structural and institutional transformation in developing countries, beyond North-promoted 'digital divide' and market-based development formulations. Although a beginning was made in this direction, this major realignment did not really take place, even in the second phase (Gurumurthy and Singh 2006).

The reality behind the rhetoric of "putting the potential of knowledge and ICTs at the service of development" (World Summit on the Information Society 2002, pp.4-5) unfolded quite predictably in the discussions on financing taken up during the second phase of WSIS in 2005. The first phase of WSIS (held in 2003) had exhorted developing countries to adopt national e-strategies with outside help, as well as allocate increased shares of their aid receipts to ICT-related activities (World Summit on the Information Society 2003). But it was quite evident in the stubborn posturing of the countries of the North that development financing for bringing a global infrastructure to people of the world was not available, an attitude completely in sync with the aid fatigue of the time.

By delegitimising the case for global responsibility to provide basic ICT access as a global public good (Accuosto and Johnson 2004), the WSIS process reaffirmed the market model; powerful countries could now take their role for 'technology transfer', as agreed in Monterrey, rather seriously in what effectively translates into a tax on aid budgets to pay for Northern ICT products and services. Development aid was now to be used in conjunction with global capital to promote partnerships with the corporate sector in the name of "multi-stakeholder partnerships for bridging the digital divide", and also for "building the capacity" of developing countries to deregulate the ICT sector. From the Monterrey Consensus to WSIS, the project of marketisation of development may be seen as complete. ICTD as a brand new opportunity for developing countries leapfrog was cast clearly and unabashedly in the market mode.

Ironically, even during the WSIS process, many developing countries bemoaned the fact that deregulation and liberalisation had not got them anywhere in respect of reaching telecom access to remote areas and disadvantaged groups. Empirically as well, it has been highlighted how the market has failed to develop the Internet infrastructure in Africa. A Panos brief (2003) emphasised how "the private sector is not interested in building these regional structures, and investment in telecommunications infrastructure in developing countries has declined, from \$70 billion in 1998 to \$15 billion in 2002" (Panos 2003, p.4). At the WSIS negotiation table however, market failure, stark as it was, did not really count in the discussion of 'action lines'.

However, it must be mentioned that as a discursive space, WSIS did move more in the direction of acknowledging the paradigmatic and structural aspects of the impact of the new ICTs than had earlier dominant frameworks on ICTD. The outcome documents of the process thus do represent new contestations with respect to the "pragmatic and efficiency-based discourse, that is essentially neoliberal" (Singh and Gurusurthy 2006, p. 876).

Feminist advocacy at WSIS was fraught with complexity. The absence of authoritative feminist vocabulary on the analysis and the alternatives in the information society arena and a complete disconnect of the official deliberations and of feminist politics on the ground from pro-South standpoints on interrelated global issues like financing, access to knowledge, sustainable development, trade etc., substantially diminished the space for any clear gains for gender equality and development.

The WSIS has also been characterised by ambivalences of women's groups involved in the WSIS "multi-stakeholder" process, in articulating issues of social and economic injustice at one level, and of proponents of social/economic justice to move beyond tokenism in engendering their perspective at another level, and an intersecting complexity in the tension between human rights and social justice issues (Gurusurthy and Singh 2006).

In the wake of WSIS, the strategies adopted by the powerful Northern governments to nominally promote 'multi-stakeholderism' in the global information society governance arena, and use this cover to starve the arena of public funds (in the name of reducing governmental involvement) has been showing its negative effects. The Internet Governance Forum (IGF), an outcome of WSIS, though a novel and very significant global governance innovation, is in danger of getting reduced to an annual conference on Internet governance issues with little real impact on global Internet governance and policies. Another outcome of WSIS, the Global Alliance on ICTs and Development (GAID) has still not able to define itself or its purpose. It also seems to be drifting too close to the corporate sector and can become a vehicle of significant corporate influence on the ICTD policies in the UN, to the relative exclusion of other actors. Significantly, Southern voices in the information society arena, and also gender advocates from the South, are still conspicuous by their absence in agenda setting processes.

### **ICTD up the neo-liberal garden path – new prescriptions for local development and a new gender discourse**

By and large, in countries of the South, ICTD has been tagged on to the privatisation bandwagon, invading traditional domains such as health care, education, and other public



services with a pay-for-access approach and a techno-determinism that subordinates the core objectives of development intervention in these areas to an indefatigable search for business models.

Donna Vaughan (2006) observes that local communities benefit relatively little from ICTD because decisions on universal access and 'effective use' are mostly not answered in their favour. According to Vaughan, the ICTD framework tends to focus too much on macroeconomic issues and operates in a top-down/trickle-down philosophy. At a micro level the result is an ongoing level of exclusion from participation in the digital economy or information society, or at best lesser participation of the poorest.

Dominant ICTD practice and discourse has not been based on a vision of development deriving from equity and social justice; it is built around corporate opportunism – cloaked in terms such as corporate social responsibility, multi-stakeholderism, and public-private partnerships – that seeks to direct the future of communities in directions that fit in with their business interests. As Koefoed (2005) observes, "such firms have to try and create meaningful and sensible strategies in fields where technological trajectories are uncertain, regulatory frameworks are evolving and markets are undeveloped. In such circumstances, companies seek to keep the uncertainties under control by shaping their strategic vision around the immediate resources and opportunities they have at their disposal, and attempting to shape the future around their strategic vision" (2005, cited in Glover 1007, p. 45). A strong investment into public policy processes therefore becomes a key strategy adopted by the business sector. Dominic Glover (2007) provides a piercing analysis of this in the case of Monsanto and how the company built its market strategy around agricultural biotechnology in the 1990s. He says:

*The company had developed significant capabilities and resources in biotechnology, but faced uncertainty in the future evolution of the technology, the regulatory environment and future markets for GM crops and foods. Robert Shapiro's [A CEO of Monsanto] vision of sustainability answered the need for a strategy that would make sense of this uncertainty. In order to succeed, Monsanto needed to convince others that the vision was right and build momentum behind the strategy. By constructing a narrative that tied together GM crops with environmental sustainability, global food security and international development, the company hoped to succeed in doing so. The creation of 'narratives' or 'storylines,' that both diagnose problems and construct particular technical solutions to 'solve' them, involves a highly political process of ascribing roles and allocating power to the actors that are implicated in them (Keeley and Scoones 1999; Jasanoff 2005). In Monsanto's narrative about GM crops in the developing world, resource-poor farmers had a rather passive role to play. They needed to be corralled into position as consumers of the technology and also as symbolic arbiters of its utility, benefits and propriety (p.45).*

The narrative of ICTD is also constituted by the very same ingredients that make for Monsanto's appropriation of local development. Microsoft for instance, spends less time in improving its services than it does in setting *de facto* technology standards through promotion of its products using public policy avenues like those in education and teacher training. However the dominant ICTD narrative, characterised as it is within much more than a 'technology transfer' paradigm is more fundamental to development discourse. From the

ICTs as “an enabler of development”<sup>6</sup> rhetoric, to the DOT Force report that presented ICTs as the future of development, to the WSIS process and the emergence of ICTs as a ‘cross cutting’ thematic area in multilateral development financing, the ICTD narrative has acquired considerable legitimacy as the basis of a new development discourse. And as I have argued thus far, the ICTD narrative is implanted within and further entrenches the marketisation of development in its practice at micro levels and in its discourse at meta levels.

Neo-liberal in its ideological moorings and techno-deterministic in its real world orientation – the dominant version of ICTD completely obfuscates the possibilities for structural shifts towards a greater empowerment of disadvantaged groups. In its cooptational, ‘anything is better than nothing’ and ‘there is more for everyone’ kind of thrusts, it unabashedly ignores structural antecedents of exclusion at the community level, having no patience for deeper precepts of sustainable and participatory development and quite happy to repeat history in its allegiance to trickle-down and ‘bottom of the pyramid’<sup>7</sup> approaches.

Ted Byfield (2004) analyses telecentres in the rural South, reflecting how in its current formulation, the telecentre model “is becoming more responsive to the needs of funders, development agencies, and, possibly, investors, and less responsive to the needs of local beneficiaries” (p.6). This trend underlies the burgeoning of the telemedicine strategy. The goals of telemedicine projects have so far been to promote tertiary care (usually provided by super specialty private sector hospitals) through basic remote diagnostics rather than to strengthen primary health care and institutional capacities of community based health systems. The power of the connectivity miracle is thus sought to be appropriated for corporate interest and to ‘profiteer’ from vulnerable groups in remotely located communities through market models that make availability (rather than creative and localised public provisioning) of technological infrastructure the very goal of, rather than the means to, local development. ‘E-health road maps’ of developing countries like India have yet to capitalise on the technological opportunity for strategic planning, setting up community-oriented health information management systems, stronger linkages between the community and the local health centre, systematic enablement of the health extension staff, information dissemination for addressing preventive aspects, etc.

Instances of ‘privatised governance’ seen in Internet governance at the global level are as evident at the local levels, in new corporatised structures of private franchisee-based delivery of e-governance, whereby community control over governance processes is mostly compromised. Packaged as e-governance initiatives, large scale endeavours like the Common Service Centres (CSC) initiative of countries like India to create a rural ICT infrastructure are more akin to a cross between market extension for corporate businesses and rural entrepreneurship development programmes. Rather than providing the much needed reform of institutional processes for improving governance and including citizens into the governance system, the scheme is a publicly subsidised rural infrastructure for corporates, promoting the reach of products and services by domestic and multinational corporates. As Venkatesh Prasad (2007) puts succinctly, the CSC “does create some employment, but at the same time it also strengthens the landlords and their sons!” (emphasis original).

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<sup>6</sup> This terminology is often used in national policy documents.

<sup>7</sup> Used by C.K. Prahalad (2006), in his book “The fortune at the bottom of the pyramid: Eradicating poverty through profits”, where the poor are characterised as creative entrepreneurs and value conscious consumers.

The conflation of governance with entrepreneurship – a cornerstone strategy of public service delivery in the information society – is perhaps yet another avatar of the dominant notion of 'good governance'. Here the approach is to strengthen the state in terms of its ability to administer economic policies that serve transnational capital. In this equation, governance gets separated from democracy and sovereignty, and civil society gets involved as 'stakeholders', not political actors (Bendana 2004 and Jayal 2003). The telecentre 'movement', as it has come to be known, appropriates progressive development notions to promote a formulation of entrepreneurship that is linked exclusively to individual economic motivations rather than a balance between individual and community or social goals. With an overwhelming emphasis on business models, revenue and financial sustainability, the telecentre formula is also at the heart of the CSC example described above, where public services are marketised for the 'last mile' through a user fee approach. Lacking in community and public dimensions, the diffusion of new technologies through such a model anchors entrepreneurship in the information society in an inopportune, individualistic, market-oriented manner, missing the new spaces for inclusive citizenship and participatory development. Thus the issuing of local licenses to build low cost voice and networks and finding financing for them might indeed be taken up by 'entrepreneurs' (i.e. those already with money, or access to it) and provide cheaper or better services, but it does not necessarily empower the local community (personal communication, SO Siochrú, 2007).

The new spaces for collaboration and 'community', rooted in frameworks such as Free Open Source Software (FOSS), open access, open and free availability of publicly funded content and peer-to-peer mesh networking for connectivity (which bypasses corporate connectivity models) promote linkages between communities, citizen access to and participation in governance processes, horizontal convergence of development delivery at the local level, and an incentivisation for excluded groups to engage in development processes. The free software movement is in fact an excellent example of community and collaboration in the information society.

At the local level, projects have also simply failed to address gender equality concerns, often treating women as an add-on. "Women's empowerment" tends to be bandied about as the goal of projects, meaning multiple things in multiple project contexts. By and large pilots have also not addressed systemic and structural issues – critical to addressing gender. Anita Gurumurthy (2006) says:

*The emergent social system – the dominant version of the 'information society' – seems to be pre-determined, and the only issue that is seen as requiring to be sorted out is ensuring more widespread connectivity into the emergent system. The digital divide is sought to be bridged through "alternatives" that are but a linear extension of the dominant paradigm; a simplistic rearrangement at the margins that does not target fundamental power shifts. Many of these projects ride not on the opportunities for gender equality in the digital era, but are based on an "opportunism" that does little for the reconstitution of social relations (pp. 48-49).*

## 4. Towards a Theory and Agenda of Change

This argumentation in this paper is that the information society cannot be dismissed as a capitalist utopia or even a (resulting) social dystopia. Undoubtedly, the information society powers the neo-liberal juggernaut (with its downside of extreme exclusion that leads to a strong "criminal economy") (Castells 2000). However, as this section asserts, the changes wrought by the information society are profound and far reaching. In these changes lie the possibilities for reclaiming development and gender equality. The notion of inclusive citizenship provides a framework to make good the social discontinuity contained in these times of change.

This section engages with the democratic transition of present times, arguing the key role for public policy in enabling this transition and for a strengthening of global governance that can support developing countries to claim the information society on equal terms.

### Information society as a democratic transition

The paradigmatic nature of the information society requires a keen reexamination of the context and meaning of development. As a theoretical and analytical lens, globalisation does provide a diagnostic tool to explore development within a global-local continuum. Undoubtedly, critiques of globalisation help to characterise the global context of present times and its dominant ideological underpinnings. However, there is a need also for a theory of change that grapples with the complexity of the information society phenomenon, plotting the 'nodes on the network' that lend themselves to positive social transformation. The information society framework – obviously more in the making than the globalisation one – provides new concepts for social change theory and for creating sites for transformative change. What we are witness to is a transformation of the meanings of work, social life and community, that needs to be studied and understood. These moments also contain the seeds of transformation for gender roles and relationships.

Important insights lie in the many ongoing grassroots processes in the developing world. As telecentre operators, as community media producers, as activist bloggers and as individuals on the Internet, women are part of new social structures with new social roles. They connect also with others – women and men – and shape and define the public sphere in new ways. At the community level, these new roles and spaces have a symbolic significance, challenging culturally disempowering gender norms and practices.

The use of ICTs by grassroots women in their struggle for better livelihoods as in the case of Self-employed Women's Association (SEWA),<sup>8</sup> a labour union of women in the informal sector in India, elucidates the institutional value of new technologies. ICTs have been assimilated into the fundamental structures and processes of the organisation of women workers in SEWA, providing them a new institutional framework for engaging with the state, and for community mobilisation asserting their claims and exercising their rights. ICTs are not just efficiency tools within the SEWA setting; the integration of ICTs has transformed SEWA's organisational frameworks in meeting its objectives for gender equality.

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<sup>8</sup> See: <http://www.sewa.org>

The Network for Dynamic Labour Mart Associations in India is a development endeavour using information and communication management tools to provide new structural alternatives for informal sector workers. It aims to provide integrated services to ensure migrant labour in India derive secure livelihoods. As a structural alternative, the initiative challenges the centralising proclivities of the information age – creating new nodes that are resist the aggrandisement of capital. The distinctiveness of the experiment is in its basic principles of social enterprise that builds a new communitarian context, using networks to shift power to the edges rather than to the centre.

The information society also makes a new development dynamic possible by simultaneously creating space for voice and agency and for strengthening institutional responsiveness – in terms of transparency, accountability and openness for agenda setting by communities through new information and communication processes. In the state of Rajasthan in India, in the implementation of a very significant social security program – the National Rural Employment Guarantee Program (NREGA) – the government is holding consultations with grassroots movements, who have for many years challenged lack of accountability at local institutional levels, to seek inputs for setting up monitoring and tracking systems that are citizen-oriented rather than just management information systems-oriented (MIS-oriented). These new institutional developments, spin-offs no doubt of long struggles against the exploitation of the poor, are new 'contracts' crystallising in the new institutional relationship frames that are available in the information society.

While we do have some excellent emerging scholarship in the domain of gender, work and globalisation linking to ICTs, and also in the areas of cyberspace and identity, the deepening of participatory democracy at community levels in the information society is an area that needs to be researched.

The network society even as it underlies a capitalist (and even a statist) consolidation, also privileges values such as collaboration and institutional forms and modes that promote greater openness and inclusion. And therefore what is at one level a capitalist transformation may also be characterised as a democratic transition.

For developing countries, the new context provides a historical point for non-linear change and a discontinuity for new institutional frameworks, making "institutional leapfrogging" (UN ECLAC 2003, p. 32) possible. In this sense, new technologies are not just tools of efficiency within organisational structures but the bases of new forms of organisation, available as much to development endeavour as to business. The incentives for developing countries to get on to technology-induced change is captured in an UN ECLAC document (2003):

*Immature institutions and inefficient organizations are a serious obstacle to development. The digitization process in the different e-sectors of an information society constitutes a form of institutional reorganization...When people have less experience with the old solution they will more readily accept a new technological solution that offers them an opportunity to, first of all, tackle the old problem (satisfy their needs) and, secondly, even to bypass the previous top performer once the new system is in place (Brezis, Krugman, Tsiddon, 1991)...for example, whereas the 2002 presidential elections in Brazil were held entirely through electronic voting machines, this is an area in which the United States is still facing formidable problems. In the*

*areas of income tax payments and e-voting as well, Brazil through strong public sector leadership— has "leapfrogged" certain developmental stages. In times of normal, incremental technological change, increasing returns to scale tend to strengthen developed countries' leadership positions. However, when a new innovation arises or major structural changes occur, a temporary window of opportunity opens up for less developed countries to catch up (Perez, 2001) (p.34).*

However, as the UN ECLAC (2003) document also points out, developing countries will need to seize this window of opportunity in these times of flux by creating their own development paths, and obviously, through their own interpretation of the information society. The document argues:

*It should be pointed out that the ongoing debate in Latin America and the Caribbean regarding the transition to an information society and to the digital era is often based on "stylized facts" and theoretical constructs deriving from developed countries. There are various reasons to believe that such facts and constructs are ill-suited to an exploration of the region's position in this process. Firstly, the industrialized economies' macroeconomic fundamentals have been kept within a reasonable range of equilibrium, and economic growth has been modest but steady. This fact provides a basis for projecting the transition to the digital era along a given path, and the macroeconomic "backdrop" for that transition does not generate any major degree of uncertainty. Secondly, in developed countries the provision of public goods by the State and the existence of fairly mature regulatory systems and agencies creates an adequate institutional and market environment in which to examine the transition to the digital era (p.9).*

It would therefore be useful for developing countries to locate change at the points of inflection that allow for bypassing prescriptive macroeconomic growth models. Such change that alters institutional relationships provides a critical 'window of opportunity' for leapfrogging development. Also, the expanding public sphere and the institutional-relational basis of change inherent in this creates new meanings and new legitimacies not insignificant to the gender equality project. Essentially, these new arenas of change constitute the information society dialectic between democracy and development.

Michael Gurstein (2007) provides a refreshing hypothesis by connecting community-driven telecentres and the revitalisation of local citizenship:

*If we see Telecentres as locae of self-development and self-management ..., then they equally can and will become locae of self-governance and local empowerment. Thus to a degree one can anticipate that the necessary role of the citizen in a democracy may shift in its focus, from centralized and more distant institutions to local institutions and to locally enabled modalities for aggregating and exerting influence in the larger environment.... One might expect (and in fact this is beginning to rapidly emerge) that the direction for the exertion of (exercise of) this influence of "citizenship" is as likely to be at a global supra-national level, at a "regional" level where no governance structures currently exist, or towards the institutional governance structures currently representative of a State other than one's own... This development of a sense of "pan" global citizenship accessible to those even in the*

*poorest and remotest rural regions is one of the possibilities most to be welcomed both for the very widespread sense of global stewardship one hopes will emerge as a result but also for the empowerment of the local in this way as a means for responding to the overwhelming forces of globalization that have been let loose (pp.17-18).*

From a feminist perspective, the information society provides at least three points of discontinuity, comprising the space for an inclusive citizenship (Kabeer 2002) – participation in an expanding public domain; new spaces and means for assertion of identity and group rights (as in the case of women from marginalised social groups); and the enabling conditions in new institutional alternatives, a revamp of institutional arrangements, for moving from equal opportunity to equal outcomes (where the enjoyment of political and socio-economic rights follows the making of claims). At the community level, appropriating and orchestrating new information and communication processes can be hugely empowering for marginalised groups, including women by triggering the conditions by which “legitimate rights gain formal recognition” and “formal rights are made ‘real’” (Kabeer 2002).

The notion of inclusive citizenship in information society theory enables the straddling of the spectrum of spanning the local to global, legitimising the necessity of disciplining economic practices for a redistribution of resources and power in a connected world. From a feminist perspective it also necessitates cognizance of the risk of gendered trade-offs in policy and practice, whereby women’s citizenship is treated as secondary to the rights of the social groups they belong to (IT for Change 2007). Therefore, the shifts in institutional norms and practices in these times of flux need to be claimed with a political commitment to gender equality in the larger project of social change, where social inclusion goes hand in hand with women’s citizenship.

The potential of the information society to exemplify a new inclusive citizenship also embodies the space for a feminist conception of development and rights. Gita Sen (2006) uses the social contract framework to emphasise how the present time of discontinuity also represents an opportunity for renegotiating the social contract. She asserts that this time around, this renegotiation cannot happen without recognition of women’s political and economic rights as citizens. Martha Nussbaum (2002) goes beyond the language of social contract to anchoring the social justice debate in the language of natural rights:

*We cannot solve the problem of global justice by envisaging international cooperation as a contract or mutual advantage among parties similarly placed in a state of nature. We can solve them only by thinking of what all human beings require to live a richly human life – a set of basic entitlements for all people – and by developing conception of the purpose of social cooperation that focuses on fellowship as well as self-interest (p. 459).*

These conceptions provide the normative basis of a new global polity that needs to underscore the information society, which so far has been constructed almost exclusively in economic terms. The feminist project in the information society therefore at a more fundamental level is to negotiate the democratic transition through a reinterpretation of rights and justice.

This section attempted to put forth a new basis for social change theory deriving empirically from the new community context of the information society. The complexities no doubt have to be grappled with at the community level. But there are important imperatives at global and national levels. At the national level the preeminence of social policy has to be recaptured as also the conception of development in the information society. At the global level, a revamping of global governance and sustained engagement of feminist advocates with institutions, to counter the growing governance deficit, is necessary. These are discussed below.

### **Reclaiming development in the information society – all about vision and public policy**

The information society opportunity can be realised by local communities only within an enabling environment – where national policy regimes recognise and value the significance of the new paradigm from a human capabilities perspective (Nussbaum 2000).

As argued earlier, leapfrogging in the information society is more a function of a reordering of institutions – a meso level change – in the paradigm shift for development that the information society opens up. As in the example of Brazil, vision and public policy become key ingredients to this process. Sean O’Riain (2004) argues that the state played a central role in developing the Irish economy in the past two decades, and particularly, the increasingly important Irish high tech industry. Typically seen as an example of successful market-led globalisation, high tech growth in Ireland has actually been promoted by a new form of state intervention in the economy – one that fosters local networks of support through decentralised state institutions drawing on extensive local, national and global resources. According to O’Riain the same model of network development can be inspired by very different political ideologies. He focuses the attention on neo-liberalism, conservatism (i.e. paternalism) and social democracy. Each of these three ideologies goes hand in hand with a different set of political bargains over socioeconomic inequality, risk, security and governance. Politics therefore does not stand in the way of economic development; rather, different political patterns shape the way a country achieves economic well-being and have distinct consequences for the distribution of new riches across the population. The developmental network state can successfully generate economic growth on the basis of different political structures and institutions, although it produces varying degrees of socioeconomic inequality (O’Riain 2004).

In fact until as recently as the eighties, most telecommunications in Europe was in the public sector. Even in the US, there has always been a strong role played by the government in supporting rural connectivity, a good amount of which is done through rural cooperatives. World over, a lot of community-based connectivity networks have sprung up, and hundreds of cities in the US have taken up public wireless Internet projects. Singapore provides free wireless to everyone. All of this shows that many different approaches towards ICT and information society policies are possible. Yet, these policy possibilities have not found their due place in the dominant discourse, following from neo-liberal prescriptions which express in the telecommunications sector as more competition and more liberalisation and requiring public authorities to minimise ‘interference’ in connectivity models.



The nascency of ICT deployment towards development entails building social processes – capacities, contextual uses and setting up new institutional arrangements, for appropriate assimilation of technology, towards development goals. This process involves interplay between top-down policy (for a range of issues covering equitable diffusion of basic ICT infrastructure, capacity building and regulation of business) and bottom-up community engagement. For instance, 'local content' is often talked about in donor initiatives. However, how such content is going to be available, used, shared and owned is determined by knowledge sharing frameworks and intellectual property (IP) regimes. The National Association of Software and Services Companies (NASSCOM) Foundation in India is planning to set up a national content consortium "to reach the products of initiatives in the business of creating content for rural India available" to their Rural Knowledge Network Centres.<sup>9</sup> They also plan to build "virtual social capital for community regeneration by promoting local issues, reestablishing a sense of identity and promoting communication". How the latter can be achieved through knowledge "products", and even if it can be, who will be able to access the knowledge products in the consortium's efforts of community regeneration within the highly stratified community context in rural India, is a moot point.

Communities cannot transform new technological paradigms into social ones without enabling structures; neither will a set of policy standards or new institutional arrangements in themselves result in social innovation unless the community with its heterogeneity and fluidity participates in creating localised meanings. Such techno-social processes therefore are more than a question of resources and investments that obtain in the interplay between policy mechanisms, existing institutional arrangements and community structures, and their embedded norms and values. Therefore "winning' in the information age, is not about the number of computers purchased but about how they are used within which organisational forms" (Powell 2001, p.18).

As Donna Vaughan (2006) emphasises, three fundamental shifts in current approaches may be seen as critical – focus on the goals of social inclusion, not simply access; on social, economic, and political development outcomes rather than purely economic inputs and outputs; and funding and partnerships based on who has an interest in the outcomes targeted. On the last point, it may be added that a public provisioning of basic technical infrastructure is also an important policy imperative.

From a development perspective therefore, public policy in a host of areas – which opens up spaces from above for bottom-up transformation – has a huge role to play in the realisation of the ideals of inclusive citizenship in the information society.

### **Taking the governance deficit by the horns**

While the social change project in the information society combines the imperatives of revolution with the pragmatics of reform, it demands an intense degree of engagement in the arena by the global South, especially Southern civil society. The struggle is obviously uphill

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<sup>9</sup> NASSCOM is an industry body of software companies in India. See <http://www.nasscom.org/> for more information. NASSCOM Foundation, which implements the Corporate Social Responsibility of NASSCOM has established Rural Knowledge Centres. See <http://www.nasscomfoundation.org/images/Communications/rkn%20publication.pdf> for more information.

since dominant interests so far have had an unchallenged ascendancy. For instance, in its reluctance to consider progressive measures to control profiteering and rent seeking by multinational corporations (MNCs) in the IT arena, powerful countries like the US have a big axe to grind. IT is reported to boost the US economy by some \$2 trillion a year (Thomas 2007). The engagement of the US in global ICT governance is guided by this economic interest, which requires pandering to the demands of US multinationals, more than anything else. This is the main stumbling block in moving towards progressive information society models and structures at the global levels.

Shifts in global governance of the information society can be seen at two levels. One is at the level of existing global governance institutions which have a strong bearing on core information society issues – like knowledge and connectivity. Two, structures of governance in new technology areas (such as Internet governance) have critical significance as forerunners to new governance forms for a highly connected global society.

While the information society is witness to an exacerbation of the governance deficit – through devaluation and bypassing of political governance and public policy arenas – it has also opened up new opportunities for governance reform and restructuring. For instance, the debate on access to knowledge has assumed greater significance and centrality today and thus marks a new chapter in international IP regimes. The World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO), for instance, has been considering a "Development Agenda" for some time that seeks to benefit developing countries; and this was further discussed, with positive results, at the most recent WIPO meetings. WIPO members agreed to "consider the preservation of the public domain within WIPO's normative processes and deepen the analysis of the implication and benefits of a rich and accessible public domain" (Love 2007).

Similarly, the discourse around FOSS and open content has democratised debates about software and knowledge, highlighting issues of corporate monopolies in the ICT arena and their connections to development. These areas connect directly to feminist agenda on knowledge access, production and ownership.

Continued and aggressive engagement with issues of development in existing arena – including development finance and reform of international institutions – is critical, especially to make the financial system a key component to a "global partnership for development" rather than the problem it now is (Khor 2003). We see new trends in development aid policies and these are useful to note for their political import. The European Union (EU) has recently announced plans to create a trust fund to disburse European aid to Africa without depending on the World Bank, arguing that European aid money should be spent according to European policies, but the EU does not have the influence it should in the World Bank. The development finance debate needs to account for the emergence of the Internet as a global communications infrastructure and to view access to basic ICT infrastructure as a global public good, with its policy implications.

Shaping the governance of the information society arena is an important agenda. The South Centre (2007) for instance stresses the need for a greater focus and research by UN agencies on the governance challenges of the knowledge society, including the IP implications and also observes that:

*Deciding on the shape and structure of the regulatory regime for innovation, access to knowledge, and intellectual property, the detailed rules that shape it, the balance of interests to be met and the measures by which it is judged requires the involvement of broad range of stakeholders and inputs than those from legal and technical groups, which are North-focused and acting under the strong influence of corporate lobbies, that make up the intellectual property today. Although the UN has a wide-ranging mandate to address these issues, the overall approach in the last two decades has been disparate (South Centre 2007).*

Among the new ICT global governance institutions, two significant outcomes of the WSIS process are the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) and UN Global Alliance for ICTs and Development (GAID). The IGF is still an evolving institutional mechanism, and there still exist many openings and possibilities of using this forum effectively to promote the interests of the South. The next annual meeting of IGF is in Brazil, which has been a key player in the Internet governance arena from the South. Similarly the UN GAID represents the only UN forum dealing with ICTD issues, and therefore an important space. Meanwhile other UN entities, like the UNDP, United Nations Educational Social and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), Commission on Science and Technology for Development (CSTD) and ITU, are still grappling with their information society related agenda, with strong political pulls and pressures from different sides. This is an important time to keep engagements with these organisations because their policies can have a significant impact on the shape of the emerging information society.

ICANN is a unique private governance structure with important public policy implications with regard to the technical infrastructure of the Internet. More recently, the legitimacy of ICANN and its governance structures have come into question more sharply. It is being argued that since ICANN's "representative structure (such as it is) is designed around merely technical matters, but the policy domain has crept outward to extend to political matters, there is a systematic mismatch between the representative structure and the policy domain" (Krimm 2007). Such contestations challenge multiple hegemonies – of the North, of technocracy, of patriarchal frames of reference,<sup>10</sup> of Northern conceptions of rights and are part of very critical struggles to assert the rightful claims of 'people of the world' to the Internet as "legitimate stakeholders in the political process" (of Internet governance).

Meanwhile, political backlash against neo-liberal policies has been seen in many developing countries and may be a phenomenon gaining some ground. Many Latin American countries have seen such political changes lately; China has embarked on a focused phase of addressing social issues arising out of its high economic growth policies of the last decade; and governments in India are under electoral pressure to move towards more socially-inclusive policies. In this context, it may be possible to develop new political and governance frameworks for ICTs specifically, and for the wider information society context, generally. To cite an example of this, a few Indian state governments have announced aggressive open source software friendly policies, and many of them are looking to locate ICT-based governance services systems in the local self-government system rather than the corporate sector based franchisee system promoted by the central government. At the global level, new

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<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, much of the context of debate around the separation of the technical and policy domains in Internet governance owes its origins in the .xxx issue. The issue was dealt with by ICANN without any contextualization in feminist perspectives.

South-South cooperation frameworks, like the India–Brazil–South Africa agreement on cooperation on many issues including information society issues, hold promise for defining new information society paradigms that are more inclusive and development-oriented.

Especially since the WSIS, the Internet itself has gained a lot of attention as a vital global institutional infrastructure, inviting contestations as well as opening up spaces for the internationalisation of its governance.<sup>11</sup> “ICANN and the US government have a unique chance to introduce a new and innovative global governance model, which should address a few open issues including involvement of other governments and internalisation of ICANN’s status. They are no longer under “siege” as they were during the WSIS. It should provide them with more space for creative and forward-looking solutions. A promising sign was ICANN’s presidential debate on the future of ICANN” (Kurbalija 2007).

Again, at national levels, we see positive signs in the greater comfort of Southern countries with the debate, a shift in the technology discourse from technologists, and the private sector, to development practitioners.<sup>12</sup> The engagement of the latter with FOSS is also increasing.

A development framework in the information society needs to be based on a progressive theory of social change and on the notion of inclusive citizenship that allows for the emergence of new meanings for rights, social justice and equity. The governance of the information society requires immediate attention – not only to address the vacuums and democratic deficits in the technical and social dimensions but in terms of a clear and direct alignment of new frameworks of information society governance with the larger discourse of development and debates on development finance and the reform of international institutions. There is also urgency for a shared vocabulary that bridges the schism that separates activists and researchers working on specific information society issues and those who are not. The former need to claim the body of knowledge in traditional development theory and practice, while the latter need to see beyond the naïve dichotomy between ‘technology’ issues and ‘development’ issues. These times are not only about technology; they constitute the new discursive space for development and therefore the social content of the information age needs to be understood for its political nuances. Thus,

*...it is important to see that most...issues like .xxx, geo TLDs, trademarks and DNS, may get highlighted in ICANN's context, but their real nature is different (.xxx concerns content regulation, geo-TLD is about national sovereignty, cultural expression etc, and trademarks and DNS issues pertain to IPR)... and their legitimate spaces lie elsewhere (these may be existent, or require institutional innovations or new institutions altogether) (Singh 2007).*

In a fundamental way, the information society discourse represents both the depoliticized context of development as also the cusp of change. Feminist concerns in this domain comprise both a challenge – relegated as they are to the periphery, and an opportunity –

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<sup>11</sup> ICANN is at present governed through a contractual relationship with the US government.

<sup>12</sup> In the Indian context we see development professionals from different sectors talk about technology now. This is clearly evidenced in email platform called Solution Exchange, set up by UNDP and UNESCO, India.

where gender can be constructed as a marker of the political economy of the information society and the inherent hierarchies between the economic and the social.

Critiquing feminist interventions in the WSIS, and noting how 'men have been a missing link in WSIS advocacy', Heike Jensen (2005) reflects on moving beyond "a consideration of women's subordinated places and roles in society and for temporary special measures on behalf of girls and women to counteract their subordination for an insights into how gender, masculinities and femininities work as intricately interrelated concepts." She asserts that such a move has decisive implications for the kinds of analyses and political demands that need to be generated and for potential political coalitions. This project of politicizing the information society debate from a feminist perspective and seeking gains for gender equality in the global arena requires the synthesis of frameworks encompassing macroeconomic and political economy analyses on the one hand and a scholarly unpacking of institutionalised patriarchies on the other. One without the other is not befitting of the connected times we live in.

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