

Concept Note for a Workshop on
Development in the Information Society
– Exploring a Social Policy Framework

The workshop plans to bring together leading thinkers, researchers, policy advocates and practitioners in the areas of development, and of information society, to discuss and debate the context of development theory and practice in relation to the emerging information society (IS). The workshop seeks to move towards greater conceptual clarity of, and examine concretely, the policy options for development in the IS. Specifically, the discussions are expected to:

- 1. Make connections between the development sector and wider socio-economic changes in the IS*
- 2. Explore the new context of, and paradigms for, development in the IS*
- 3. Construct a social policy framework for maximizing the development opportunity in the information society*

What is information society?

Information society is a much debated, yet elusive concept. On the one hand, it denotes the 'knowledge economy', fuelling corporate globalization and underscored by values of proprietary knowledge. This phenomenon of enhanced economic globalization, as is known, has the effect of greatly constraining public policy options, and among other things, has led to a radical shift in the terms of engagement between capital and labour. While productivity has gone up and has impacted economic growth in many countries, including some developing countries, growth has been concomitant with rising inequalities, even triggering social unrest in certain contexts. On the other hand, the term 'information society' is also used to denote a set of powerful possibilities for development, equality and social justice¹, enabled by paradigmatic shifts owing to the new ICTs. Although the present balance sheet is that the information society is mostly being fashioned by neo-liberal ideology, it is noteworthy that neither the dominant discourse of the knowledge economy, nor the progressive one represented in new development frontiers, has yet totally appropriated the 'information society' term.

Development policy in the information society

Development policy in the information society (IS) has mostly been a cooption into the dominant neo-liberal IS paradigm. Its genesis can be traced to North-dominated policy initiatives like the G8's Digital Opportunities Task Force² that attempted to define the context and the principles of development policy in the information society. In the absence of a coherent South-based engagement with the developmental potential of the new ICTs³, these policy frameworks got uncritically incorporated into national ICT policy structures/mechanisms, largely through donor programs. While this has led to the expected failure of most first generation ICTD initiatives, it is also a fact that the development sector has witnessed many new, and often path-breaking, ICT-enabled *possibilities* in these early interventions. In fact, one can compare the first generation ICTD activity with the dotcom phenomenon in this respect. While the world of business has long since moved on to a

¹ See the Declaration of Principles of the World Summit on the Information Society for such a conception of the IS (http://www.itu.int/wsis/documents/doc_multi.asp?lang=en&id=116110)

² See <http://www.g7.utoronto.ca/summit/2001genoa/dotforce1.html>

³ See the paper on "Political Economy of the Information Society – A Southern Perspective" for a detailed treatment of the subject, at http://wsispapers.choike.org/papers/eng/itfc_political_economy_is.pdf#search=%22Political%20economy%20of%20the%20Information%20society%20item%22

more mainstreamed incorporation of ICT possibilities, the arenas of development policy and practice are still to learn from, and build over, the mistakes and successes of the initial ICT interventions. This imperative requires a deconstruction of the neo-liberal hold over IS theory, an exploration of the 'progressive' elements and opportunities presented by the IS, and an urgency to proceed from the ethos and experience of 'traditional' development theory as well as practice.

The progressive context

It is important to recognize that the IS context offers many opportunities which when used appropriately and systematically, can provide solutions to many development problems and bottlenecks. The paradigms of much cheaper and more effective communication, democratization of information availability, many-to-many interaction possibilities, and digital platforms (software and applications) that can revolutionize system capabilities, are major breakthroughs and need to be used for social and developmental purposes through appropriate policy choices. Whether it is the changed context of IPR and the public domain in the IS, or new collaborative production models triggered by the open source software and 'open content' movements, community connectivity networks, or the power of the new media, technology-standards based rent-seeking, or the new context of civil society organization and engagement, the larger socio-political landscape of our societies is undergoing significant changes. Social policy in the developing countries needs to take account of these changes, and set the context for a new approach to a more inclusive, effective and equitable development practice.

The World Summit on the Information Society did challenge the North-based dominant discourse on the IS to some extent, but the alternatives to this discourse and its conceptual frameworks still need to be articulated. And for this, both intensive theoretical work for expounding such frameworks, as well as strong engagements at local, national and global policy levels are needed.

The workshop on "Development in the Information Society – Exploring a Social Policy Framework"

The workshop – 'Development in the Information Society: Exploring a Social Policy Framework' – seeks to deliberate on the social policy context of the IS in relation to development. It will also examine the political economy of the IS from a Southern perspective, especially with regard to reclaiming the 'public' and the 'commons' in the IS, and their relevance to development policy and practice.

The participants in the workshop will be from mainstream development sectors, from arenas with a closer connection with IS issues like IPR and global trade, as well as those who have engaged more directly with ICT for development (ICTD) and IS debates. The objective is to set up a constructive dialogue to evolve the contours of what constitutes development in the IS, exploring what has changed in the development landscape and what has not.

Objectives and outputs of the workshop

1. The workshop will try to develop the elements of a social policy framework for maximizing the development opportunity in the IS.
2. Moving beyond theoretical discussions, the workshop will also seek to develop an outline for what may be called second generation ICTD activity, where the focus will be on systemic approaches employing techno-social processes based on the new ICTs.
3. The workshop will also propose an agenda for research and action to realize the opportunity for, and to address the challenges to, development in the IS.