

**Development in the Information Society: Exploring a Social Policy Framework
Workshop
Bangalore, 18- 20 January, 2007**

Feedback from Participants

1. Amin Alhassan (Assistant Professor, Division of Social Science, York University, Canada)

The entire experience dispelled my initial skepticism of bringing together Activist, bureaucrats in government and academics to workshop on the topic. The combination turned out to be the basis of the strength of the workshop.

For me, I benefited from the fact that it enabled me to see how Activists and government officials conceptualize the task of promoting social inclusion.

Despite our different approaches, in the end, I left Bangalore with a more grounded understanding of the problematics of IT and social equity. Sometimes academics need such encounters to balance the preference for abstraction.

ICT4D forums these days tend to be corporate-centric. More of a bazaar to promote new products. Bangalore was completely different for the better. Thank you all for pulling this through. I am planning to start discussing with some other Africanists here on how to replicate such a workshop on sub-Sahara Africa.

2. Bhupendra Badgaiyan (ICT Project Support Officer, UNDP)

The conference has been very interesting and very informative as well. The conference attempted to do a 'course-correction' in the present ICTD frameworks where the marginalised and those at the periphery may not be able to derive much benefits or the cost may be prohibitive for them. It cautioned against an exclusivist, elitist depolyment of technology and argued for more inclusive approach focusing more on the sectors rather than on technology. The development paradigm need not be dictated by technology providers.

However I feel that the present trend in ICTD dialogue within Governments and even in places, in the corporate sectors have tended to include such concerns - though we think that we have to go a long way.

The workshop also provided a critique of some of the present ICTD paradigms though at the same time providing some successful examples of ICT applications at the grass-roots. The aspect of wide spread use of the ICT for better management vis-a-vis as a tool for better service delivery and accountability from the citizens was also impressed upon. Put together the conference presented a case for more egalitarian and inclusive approach in the ICTD paradigms and argued for a view from below also in design of various ICTD initiatives.

I feel personally that with the present PPP approach being adopted in developmental paradigm some representations from leading private players would also have helped in enriching the debate further. However I found the proceedings quite stimulating and feel that it attempted to put ICTD debate in proper perspective for larger good.

3. Chanuka Wategama (Programme Specialist – ICT4D, UNDP-APDIP, Sri-Lanka)

If you want my frank opinion, the workshop was very informative and useful but you could have achieved still better results if you have kept the scope focused. The reason why we could not complete discussions in many sessions were that the scope was too large to be covered within a two and half day workshop. But yes, within those limits I would call it a success.

If you need more information, let me reproduce from the Back to Office report I did for UNDP.

The workshop had three key objectives and let us have a look how far these objectives were achieved.

A. Making connections between the development sector and wider socio-economic changes in the IS:

Three key areas that come to the mind of anyone who thinks about development are poverty alleviation, healthcare and education.

The workshop has been enriched by the input from the practitioners of healthcare and education on the use of ICTs in their respective fields. The comments were not necessarily positive. Some critically questioned whether ICTs play any important role in these two practice areas given the way it is being used now. There were both statistical and anecdotal evidence to support the axioms. However, the general agreement was that, in spite of the failures in previous occasions, ICT can still be used in a positive manner in these areas and what required to be done was to change the approach if necessary, instead of throwing the baby with the water.

With the exception of one Agriculture Economist, not much input came from the practitioners involved in the poverty alleviation. So it is questionable whether the issue of ICT making a contribution towards an additional income for the rural and poor communities was adequately discussed at the workshop. Little or no input ever came about efforts hoe ICTs are being used to uplift the life standards of the agricultural societies by increasing the quantity and quality of the agricultural production or by providing agricultural communities more information, including price information.

B. Exploring the new context of, and paradigms for, development in the IS

This objective was largely achieved. The old models were discussed, critically analysed and accepted or rejected depending upon their relevance. A gamut of new paradigms were proposed and discussed. These include the paradigms in FOSS, tele-centres (where a presenter from Canada described how the same can be merged effectively with retail marketing chains), community radio (what would be the prospects for India?), social audits (few interesting case studies were presented sometimes supported by video clips) and even Universal Service Funds where a presenter illustrated how the same had failed in Ghana. Apart from the Indian experience, the workshop was enriched by the experiences from many other countries like Brazil, Canada, Ireland, South Africa and Sri Lanka.

e-Gov solutions were discussed mainly in the Indian context. New paradigms have been proposed and discussed. Bhoomi, in Karnataka, was a project referred by several presenters. While few saw this as a complete success story, there were criticisms that even after implementing such a large scale project, most of the issues faced by the citizens have not been

addressed. There were anecdotal evidence that how the farmers are being exploited even within this system. This leads to the conclusion that implementation of a project does not mean simply setting up hardware and software. The participants discussed the importance of parallel developments to make projects like this a success.

C. Constructing a social policy framework for maximizing the development opportunity in the information society

What the organizers had in their mind while designing this objective is not very clear, but if it meant drafting a detailed or even high level framework as a document to be taken forward to national governments and other stakeholders, it was not achieved within the limited time of the workshop. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the workshop paved the foundation for such a social policy framework.

One general drawback of the workshop is that the scope was too large so the focus was lost. Had there been a focus, there is no doubt that much more would have been achieved. Perhaps this can be one area the organizers can concentrate as a follow up. What they might have missed can perhaps be achieved through further online discussions.

4. Michael Gurstein (Executive Director, Centre for Community Informatics Research, Development and Training, Canada)

Some Thoughts on the Development in the Information Society: Exploring a Social Policy Framework workshop

One of the very specific challenges which the Information Society must address is the role that ICTs can play in supporting democratic governance.

In the more developed countries where the introduction of an ICT infrastructure is more advanced, although there is little direct empirical evidence, the impact of ICTs seems to be associated with a withdrawal of individuals from direct involvement in the conventional processes of democracy—i.e. participation in political parties, attendance at rallies, watching political broadcasts, and even voting. The overall decline in these activities within developed democracies has been given the name “the democratic deficit” and the “discovery” and expansion of this has coincided with the widespread assimilation of ICTs in wide areas of daily life in these countries.

Alongside this there has been a parallel development in unconventional forms of democratic behaviour including through the use of on-line means for recruiting participants to various political events, for facilitating political contributions, for propagating political ideas and analyses (blogs) and so on. What is notable about this is that the activity which has arisen has been largely in the virtual sphere although many of those most directly involved are recognizing that the real value and strength of this type of political involvement comes from finding ways of linking these with physical activities.

What was of particular interest to me as an outsider to India and a newcomer to many of the activities and institutions presented in the workshop were the institutions which had been established in India in support of democratic processes and how ICTs were being integrated with and adapted into these institutions and in support of these processes. What is of course, almost overwhelming to an outsider is the sheer size and complexity of India including the religious, regional, ethno-linguistic and most recently level of “informatization” as a basis for such diversity. Integrating all of this into a single democratic framework while striving in some sense to enable and empower the poor is a seemingly almost overwhelming task but one where the opportunities and facilities of ICTs may in fact provide some directions and solutions.

The topic of the Workshop was ICTs and Social Policy and the discussion of the specifics of the Indian context along with the variety of international and more generalized presentations provided a fascinating opportunity to both link into the specifically Indian social policy context and also to in some part through comparison and analogy to inform discussion concerning international and global contexts as well. For example, the specific discussions concerning the ways in which ICTs can enable the activities of the local Panchayats (highly democratic structures) and provide means for both internal and external oversight over the activities of the Panchayats gives a very useful insight into how ICTs can enable local democracy and also how ICTs can empower those who are concerned to ensure that local democracy is kept relevant and responsive.

It was of course, interesting to see that similar dilemmas and pressures are surfacing in India as in other countries as for example, around the issue of e-Government as the delivery of government services to “consumers” or “customers” and e-Governance as the provision of public services to “citizens” or “communities”. It was extremely interesting to hear the presentation on the Indian e-services program and to recognize the similarities in language (and the underlying perceptions and approaches) with those in Canada where the challenge of e-Government as the application of private sector “service” provision models is well advanced with its related reduction in the capacity and opportunity for citizen participation and control over the nature and design of such services.

Equally it was fascinating to hear how ICTs were being used by Civil Society organizations as ways of ensuring accountability and transparency in the operations of the Panchayats, land registries, and the implementation of the Right to Information legislation. The creativity with which these applications are developing is extremely interesting and suggests the manner in which ICTs release energies and vision.

What also interestingly came out and which is so often overlooked in discussions of ICTs are the ways in which ICTs interact with, impact and produce (or reproduce) the variety of social power dynamics and distributions. The issue of how ICTs interact with power both political and social, (the significance of economic power was only touched upon to a limited degree) raised the level of discourse and interaction much beyond the norm for such events and revealed additional opportunities and divisions which ICTs are presenting both in India and beyond.

An important additional continuing theme was the role that ICTs can play in enhancing organizational transparency and overcoming what was seen as being the endemic corruption within the Indian system. In this area it would appear that India is moving into largely uncharted grounds but ones which have very wide application and value elsewhere among Less Developed Countries. While the specifics of the strategies (and softwares) discussed were oriented to the particular Indian context the overall strategy of seeing ICTs as a tool for anti-corruption is one which is of wide interest and value.

It is a measure of the maturity of India's commitment to democracy that these questions are being raised (even if, as was mentioned, those participating particularly the government officials were the exception rather than the norm) and I should say a measure of the strength of that democracy that solutions in these areas are being sought which could usefully be applied throughout the length and breadth of a country representing 20% of mankind.

The presentations concerning international experiences provided a very useful contrast with the focus on the Indian experience. The discussion of the ways in which non-democratic China is proceeding into an “Information Society” highlights once again the significance of democratic processes and commitments as a way of ensuring that the benefits of the Information Society are not simply accruing to the few. The discussions concerning Brazil and South Africa provided contrasting strategies for widespread ICT inclusion with Brazil in particular indicating a highly evolved strategy and a keen sense of the political strength that comes from decentralized and community based processes.

I found the Workshop of particular interest from a Community Informatics perspective. A variety of the presentations discussed community based applications whose results were to empower local citizens within the broad institutional framework of developments within India surrounding the Panchayats, accountability (and anti-corruption) measures within the Panchayats and their communities, and the most recent developments concerning the Right to Information legislation. What would be particularly interesting would be the interlinking of these local application developments into broader grassroots ICT enabled networks both nationally and globally as the issues being addressed through these applications—accountability of local elected representatives, transparency of legislative and administrative processes, equitable enforcement of the rule of law are universal ones, and local efforts will in many cases be reinforced and given additional weight when they are part of these larger inter-communicating networks.

As for directions with respect to “Social Policy for Development in an Information Society” I came away from the Workshop with a strong sense of both the force of overall social change being precipitated in considerable part by access to and use of ICTs and also a sense of the degree to which the specifics of social policy development are necessarily mediated through local and national institutions and policy (and political) processes (which of course, are a direct reflection of national histories and cultures).

Clearly in a country such as India where government services appear to suffer from endemic corruption in addition to limited resources and thus limited and at times discriminatory access, ICTs and ICT enabled service delivery can act as an enormous amplifier—widely extending the availability (particularly of information intensive services). The making available of such services will in many cases serve an absolutely beneficial function as for example in making government information more widely available and providing cost-effective service delivery wherever suitable infrastructure is in place. While this in itself is an enormous challenge (and opportunity), the real benefits from ICTs will come when (if?), they are integrated into the broader range of existing services as a support and enabler of the effective delivery within existing or restructured organizational and human resource contexts of such services as primary and secondary education, local health care, economic development (including financing) and others. Thus for example, developing local health care programs designed to provide enhanced information and diagnostic services at the local (village) level using existing service delivery systems but ones which are significantly reinforced through the addition of specially designed ICT enabled supports for these “effective uses”.

It is these types of community based servicing applications (as already are appearing by means of existing community ICT networks such as the ophthalmological assessments being offered through kiosks and the iLogue initiative) where the dramatic gains in village level servicing may be achieved. However, it is certainly the case that the initiative being currently promoted through the Indian governments “service centre” program will provide a necessary local technical and organizational infrastructure for these longer term developments..

What I learned from the Workshop that would be of relevance to Social Policy for Development in the Canadian context is that others globally are confronting parallel issues—opportunities, risks and struggles—and that the responses to these issues are on the one hand necessarily local/national and on the other hand there are significant opportunities for collaborative thinking through, idea sharing, and mutual support as these issues are raised and challenges confronted. There is also I believe, a role for India as the world’s largest democracy and its collaborators in the other major less developed country democracies—Brazil and South Africa—(collectively known as IBSA) to provide significant leadership in a people-centred approach to ICT development and implementation. The currently dominant commercial and individualistic orientation of ICT development is largely a function of its history and initial deployment in the wealthier segments of the wealthier societies. The general absence of an interest in community (or collaboratively) focused and development friendly applications reflects these origins and IBSA

have a significant opportunity to provide leadership (including or especially in the area of reinforcing democratic governance) in the world in these areas and with these approaches.

5. Mokwining Nhlapo (Chief Operations Officer, Presidential National Commission on Information Society and Development, Government of South Africa)

The dialogue that you have started in your country among the different role players is very important. I have learnt something especially around the engagement of government with other stakeholders other than business. In terms of the content of the workshop, I believe you were successful in securing speakers of high caliber and discussions were very informative.

6. Paula Chakravartty (Assistant Professor Communication, University of Massachusetts Amherst, USA)

What follows are my comments/reflections about the workshop and what I hope will be on-going possibilities for collaboration and discussions.

My impressions overall of the workshop were very positive and I felt the level of discussion, constituency of presenters and range of issues covered, was very impressive. From the perspective of an academic, my interest (and I believe also Zhao and Amin share this view), would be to find productive points of research intersection that could be mutually beneficial--both in terms of producing scholarship but also influencing policy. I think figuring out these potential shared research objectives and then identifying parts that we can do to help each other, would be very beneficial.

The discussion in the last session seemed to focus much more narrowly on immediate policy outcome in India, which of course an imperative given the government officials and others you were attempting to engage with a direct "outcome". I hope in addition, there will be some room to think about broader policy/academic research reflecting the themes of the workshop--and the emphasis on a social policy alternative to ICTD theory/practice.

7. Rahul De (Hewlett-Packard Chair Professor, Indian Institute of Management Bangalore, India)

The workshop presented a diversity of opinions that was refreshing. It helps us Indian researchers to see and hear experiences from different parts of the world. It helped me, in particular, to locate my own work in the larger body of work being done.

8. Rodrigo Ortiz Assumpcao (Assistant Secretary for Logistics and Information Technology, Ministry of Planning, Budget and Management, Government of Brazil)

It was a great pleasure to attend your workshop, as I mentioned before it was very rewarding to be able to plunge back in the NGO atmosphere and mode of discussion. Governments can be incredibly boring some times.

I would like to thank you all for the warm welcome and your efficient support during and after the workshop. Also I must mention how happy I am whenever I get the chance to know a little more of your fascinating country.

Concerning the workshop itself I felt it was very interesting and dense, in general a high quality event. It helped me immensely to understand many of the issues, postures, attitudes and positions assumed by the Indian Government in the context of IBSA.

As usual in these events the tension between the demands of a highly packed agenda and the impulse of all participants to discuss and take part, oscillated greatly. I usually prefer fewer presentations and more discussions. However this poses a great demand for a high quality reporting process and a great commitment to manage the outcomes. So I have good expectations on these two points.

9. Saswati Paik (Reporter, I4d)

I appreciate the discussions on different policy issues with various country perspectives. I personally think that you might get the users of grassroot levels also involved to some extent in such interactive workshops. Also you can arrange a open space session on the issues to make such events more interactive and participating.

10. T.R. Raghunandan (Joint Secretary, Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Government of India)

I enjoyed the conference, because of the completely new perspective it gave me. Being in the government and in Delhi, one is insulated often from the outside perspective. It was therefore enjoyable to hear from people with diverse experiences, ranging from the technical to experiences in community mobilization and activism. For me there have been clear takeaways from the seminar, the most important being to use the knowledge and contacts gained to pursue community radio for Panchayat member training and mobilization. I hope that I was also able to contribute meaningfully, because quite often, the government perspective is also not available to others, in an atmosphere where one can discuss with frankness, away from the immediacies of office.

11. Vickram Crishna (Promoter, Radiophony, India)

I really enjoyed being there, although paradoxically enough, the time felt short for the amount of work we all accomplished together.

I am so glad you got such a good mix of international workers and government people to be part of this. Unfortunately, the format of such a meeting means that our own government people, who are crucial to taking innovation forward in India, do not feel empowered to stay through all the sessions and get really involved.

Yet without spending the time, there is no way we could even begin to appreciate how much is being done in other nations, examples that we will all learn from.

12. William Currie (The Association for Progressive Communications, South Africa)

I really enjoyed the workshop, especially that you were able to bring together a broad range of actors in the Indian environment - some of whom were skeptical of the value of ICT for development and some who were experiencing the complexity from differing perspectives. The outcomes broadly reflected the various dimensions of the debate and with hindsight it may have been better to arrive at these broad directions (national policy framework, delivery and community participation, monitoring) a little earlier in the process so that the threads could be fleshed out more or alternatively to have kept a small think tank on for an additional day to reflect on the workshop process and think the issues further. But I realise that workshops are a huge intellectual and emotional effort and pushing the issues too far may not work either when everyone is happy to have achieved the immediate goals of the workshop.

I think it would be worth pursuing the national framework question further and to consider opening a Delhi office for more on the spot advocacy with the government.