

Development in the Information Society - Exploring a Social Policy Framework

18th to 20th January 2007, Bangalore India

The three day workshop on **Development in the Information Society - Exploring a Social Policy Framework** held by IT for Change¹ in January 2007, attempted to bring together diverse development actors to engage with information society debates, critiquing current approaches and articulating sharply intersections between information society paradigms and development priorities, through an examination of what, how and why. The group of participants comprised representatives from government (of India and other countries), NGOs, social movements, academia and donor agencies.

The workshop was divided into thematic sessions. These sessions looked at:

- How the information society (IS) was impacting or could potentially impact core development domains.
- How ICTs could be used to revitalize governance – both in its service delivery and participation aspects – from a citizen-centric perspective, and what policy lessons have emerged from early initiatives.
- If and how ICTs could redefine development related systems; the ICT vision required for this purpose and the corresponding policy imperatives.
- The key cornerstone aspects required for institutionalizing a social policy approach to ICTD, rooted in the development context and experience of the South.

Some of the key ideas, which emerged during the 3 days were as follows:

- In the context of India specifically, and also globally, there was a consensus amongst participants for an interface between information technologies and the Right to Information (RTI) that can empower citizens, and move beyond a management information system (MIS) approach. This systemic approach was seen as the embedded ways in which ICTs can enable citizen participation in governance, encouraging an open dialogue between citizens and government.
- Closely connected to the above, but from a global systemic point, what emerged from the workshop was a serious critique of the market framework of ICTD and the need to reclaim a social inclusion framework. This would entail having community participation not only at the level of project implementation in ICTD projects but also at project planning and design stages. The need combining a

¹ in partnership with Bread For All, HIVOS, International Development Research Centre, Social Science Research Council New York and UNDP

policy architecture at the top with local innovations around ground level possibilities was seen as the necessary two sides to an ICTD framework that can be empowering.

- Rural development was also seen as a priority area for social policy in respect of ICTs. The fact that on one side, decentralization of government is bringing about structural changes and on the other side, ICTs are creating their own structural changes in which there is potential for every villager to participate in government processes, was seen as implicating questions of how to optimize these possibilities and ensure that rural government gets meaningfully restructured around new realities. If one department, is set up to be the 'lead' department through which other line departments deliver their services, there could be immense scope for an integrated development agenda.
- Another issue which was discussed intensely was the launch of the 1,00,000 telecentres (Common Service Centres), by the Government of India. It was felt that the current policy thrust toward private-public partnership is not in keeping with development priorities.

We at ITfC see this workshop as a starting point, a 'mother' workshop, that got participants thinking about policy areas within the ICTD discourse, deriving from the quintessential cornerstones of social justice and equity. This 'mother' workshop has thrown up ideas for smaller but more focused thematic workshops which will allow us to discuss and deliberate more sharply certain key themes, some of which are listed above.