

Comments on IDRC's draft paper on 'open ICT4D'

What the paper, in our view, achieves

The relationship of ICTs with development is stuck between the extremes of techno-fascination and techno-skepticism. Both sides have some valid points (which may be 'the' problem). Those in the techno-fascinated camp are right that the impact of ICTs on development is (or should be) so structural that one cannot 'keep doing business in the old ways'. New ways of doing things and new frameworks at looking at things are needed to be found. The traditionalists, techno-skeptics, are also right in holding that frameworks and new thinking around the new technologies cannot be allowed to completely upstage development theory and practice, which have evolved over so many decades, closely tuned to the realities on the ground. The deadlock between the two sides has severely compromised the realization of new – probably transformational – development opportunities in the current times.

The present paper on 'Open ICT4D' addresses this most important development challenge. It picks from the most important 'essential' characteristic of the new ICTs, which gives them such social transformative force - 'openness'. New ICTs are unique in making possible a massive communication system which is open and equal at all its, unlimited, ends. This is unlike, say, telephony which is constrained in terms of massiveness or the numbers that can simultaneously be on, or broadcast technologies, which while reaching mass numbers are 'closed' to interactivity. The paper then seeks to transpose this characteristic of 'openness' of the new ICTs to areas and perspectives in development where this 'value' finds immediate echo – like participation, transparency etc. Through this process, it seeks to develop a new development paradigm which fully considers the fact that the new technologies are the central triggering factor and the underlying force of much/most change, but the basic imperatives and values of the desired change and activity need to be firmly entrenched in the 'traditional' space of development. In this manner it attempts to break the above mentioned deadlock in the ICTD¹ space, and provide a strong framework for moving forward effectively. It is in this respect that the paper is a path-breaking work, which can be expected to have great influence on the future direction and trajectories of ICTD.

In the ICTs space, there already is a growing appreciation that the 'openness' of new ICTs cannot be taken for granted, but has to be actively cultivated. Also that this has to be done not in narrow silos, but under an overall rubric that recognizes the 'social value of openness' whereby different techno-centric movements of 'openness'² collaborate and derive strength from each other. This underlies the recent accent on, and the vocabulary of, 'open ICT ecosystems'. The present paper takes this process a very significant step forward, whereby the openness with regard to social processes, and not technology, is framed as the central element.

What the paper stops short of

The paper while taking some important steps in negotiating the complex techno-social terrain of the emerging information society from a development viewpoint, during times which are admittedly characterized by befuddling change and uncertainty, however does not go far enough. Importation of the 'openness' paradigm from the technology space to the social/ developmental space is a fine innovation, however it still leaves unaddressed some avoidable burdens of a techno-centric worldview which can have important repercussions.

1 ICTD and ICT4D is used interchangeably here

2 Like open source software, open content, open hardware, open connectivity paradigms etc.

Openness, unlike, say participation, is a concept/ value primarily oriented to – as in being essentially the property of – an artefact (in case of technology) or institution (in case of an organizational system), and not to the involved people. This may appear to be mere hair-splitting were there not demonstrably important implications of this distinction.

Movements in the 'openness' space – be it open content or FOSS – typical treat people as users, whereby, evidently, the focus is on the 'used' – technology, system, or any other artefact. The main aim is to seek empowerment of the user, vis a vis the central artefact. This is no doubt important. However, the main problem about this construction is that it considers all people/ users as *ab initio* equal. This makes them all faceless users, in some strange (unreal) ways equal to one another, even if diverse³, at least for the purpose at hand. It is the basics of development discourse to assert that this is just not true, and, in fact, a very dangerous assumption. This is why the accent in development is not so much on equality as on equity and social justice (which so often requires unequal treatment, termed as positive discrimination).

An 'openness' paradigm very often assumes this false 'baseline' of equality among all people, who then are to be expected to seek, and/or to be given, their rights and power vis a vis systems and institutions. It is easy to appreciate how misleading such a framework of social analysis can be, especially in the field of development. Openness of technologies, social processes, organizational systems and institutions is indeed important. Such openness however by itself does not address the issue on inequity among people and groups.

It is this context that it is suggested that the proposed framework be extended to include the 'equity' aspect, clearly and visibly, to give it a complete and solid 'development' mooring. It will be appropriate to have its central slogan as 'openness with equity' which address both the artefact side (technology/ social process / organizational system/ institution) as well as the people's side (in their differentiated reality⁴). We appreciate that it is will be inelegant to use two adjectives before ICT4D in the main theme, whereby we suggest that the proposed framework/ paradigm be titled, more descriptively, as 'Open ICT4D – Openness with Equity'. The paper does already pull in and consider equity issues at many places. However, this aspect may need to be in there squarely as a part of the heading, and developed more systematically throughout the paper.

We can exemplify the kind of concerns implicated in the above discussion by considering the all-important issue of 'content' in the digital space. This issue is briefly considered by the present paper, and the possibilities of commons-based production vis a vis market or state based production are discussed. While an 'openness' paradigm will mostly (at least apparently) seek out new ICT enabled systems and processes that allow (without specifically enabling) all users to contribute and produce collaboratively, an 'openness with equity' paradigm is likely also to look at how public funds can enable and support commons-based production in an equitable manner, without undue influence on the 'product' or the 'content'. The equity aspect therefore brings in the role of public as well as community (real and extant, as opposed to only virtual or those emergent around ICT based possibility) action

³Diversity is clearly different from inequality – the latter is in terms of power.

⁴ See for instance the concept of 'differentiated citizenship' in gender and citizenship work (Jayal). IT for Change has critiqued the inadequacy of moving from a consumer framework, in information society analysis, to user framework (which transition is no doubt useful). It has advocated a citizenship framework for this purpose. 'Open ICT4D' paradigm still appears too close to a user framework – which we consider progressive, but techno-centric, with attendant faults

which are important issues in development.

In some ways, the 'openness' versus 'openness with equity' discussion may also parallel the debates concerning freedom of expression and communication rights. Freedom of expression in itself only equates to an open and (nominally) uninhibited process, and is therefore a negative right. Communications rights, on the other hand, bring in the issue of equity, adding the angles of positive as well as collective rights.⁵

As important angle that accent on 'equity' will add to the proposed new framework is the need for analyzing the crucial element of 'power' in all information society and ICTD based changes. Such an accent is badly needed to correct the theoretical inadequacies owing to the largely apolitical nature of current ICTD discourse, with relatively unbridled enthusiasm for win-win situations.

Is it not pragmatic to move a step at a time?

'Openness' as a theme for social change may still be appropriate for developed societies, and advocating an 'open society through ICTs' is a good slogan in this context. However, since IDRC specifically focuses on 'development', it is important for it to take this progressive ideal/movement of 'openness' forward by associating the 'equity' aspect to it – clearly and visibly. There are a lot of well-resourced, or at least better resourced, groups and organizations propagating 'openness' in developed countries, and even in developing ones. It is important to use scarce development funds to shape the specifically 'developmental' aspects of the 'openness' movement. This, in our view, is done best by strongly emphasizing the 'equity' complement of 'openness'.

We posited the original ICTD problem as the deadlock between techno-skeptics and techno-enthusiasts in this space, which this paper seeks to address, in a path-breaking manner. In the process it offers an innovative framework to use new ICTs for addressing some key development problems. One may argue that in the face of the importance of this original problem, it may be advisable to move one step at a time, and make the paradigmatic transition to 'open ICT4D' as attempted by the paper before attempting too strong a break from the present techno-centric framework of ICTD. The latter attempt, it can be reasoned, may fail because of the inertia of the entrenched models, even if we discount the vested interests.

It must, however, be kept in mind that such times of theoretical reconceptualization also have deep implications of shaping and concretising discourse, giving it new, and often renewed, legitimacy. It is therefore important at such crossroads to consider all critical issues and implications thoroughly, with the responsibility associated with a path-breaking theoretical work. In this context, one has to be very aware of how the dominant ICTD discourse has contributed significantly to neo-liberalise development activity, vocabulary, and, increasingly, theory as well. Where would a new ICTD framework get located in this intensely contested landscape is an important question to consider. The political responsibility of such location, and influence on overall development practice and theory, cannot be over-emphasized.

Conceptualization of a new ICTD framework therefore may need to be seen as an opportunity to align ICTD more closely to 'mainstream' development theory, addressing the significant distortions set in by

⁵ The attempted use of capability rights analysis in the paper appears very promising and can address a lot of issues highlight here. However it will need to be further developed, in a more systematic manner, to explore its full interface with the techno-social terrain of ICTD.

the currently dominant ICTD discourse. At the same time, such is the social-transformative impact of ICTs that, there can be no doubt that the 'mainstream' theory will itself be changed significantly by new 'realities' and understandings.

'Openness' for (undue) political legitimization

An extension of the above point, on the responsibility associated with discourse forming, is the issue of how discourse and new concepts can provide new political legitimacies. It is our experience in our almost daily interactions with many information society related civil society groups that a new ahistorical conception – of the 'end of history' kind – in relation to most structural social inequalities is becoming a very entrenched notion, which is increasingly more difficult to break through. It is as if that the open communication platform of the new ICTs have suddenly rendered all such 'old' conceptions based on old technologies, and the ensuing social structures, irrelevant. It is now between 'the individual' and the usurping systems and institutions. Correspondingly, it is supposed to be not so much about structural inequalities among people and groups, nor about engaging with and building and sustaining new empowering institutions - which are perhaps the two 'central' developmental concerns and issues. Such a discourse is clearly anti-developmental, and needs to be countered strongly.

Any new ICTD framework therefore has to pro-actively confront such wrong, and dangerous, conceptions. Other than, and often forming an insidious alliance with, these techno-fascinated notions are the neo-liberal shadows on development – which also attempts at a similar individuation of the development discourse. There are other parallels and conceptual alliances between the new techno-centric and the neo-liberal discourse, but to go into that here will be a detour.

Ill-informed (if not deviously deliberate) notions of new forms of 'openness' are already being used for undue political legitimacies. Problems concerning legitimacy and representativeness of many multi-stakeholder forums and processes is one such area, though this may not be the place to elaborate on them. One may however use one particular example, that of ICANN⁶, to illustrate the point. ICANN has a very elaborate 'open' participation structure which is quite helpful in its task of managing many technical governance issues by obtaining the benefit of widely distributed expertise. However, it has repeatedly sought to use the 'apparent openness' of its structure as a basis of global 'political' legitimacy for deciding political issues that impact people across the world. While ICANN's 'at large' structures, promoted to enlist 'open' public participation, work through open email lists that are easy to join, a cursory look at the elist postings over a month will show that less than 5 percent postings are from people from developing countries. But ICANN, and its supporters, would like to believe that all who care to participate do participate, and that their participation system is completely 'open', and, perhaps, also that distinctions of developing/ developed, north/ south are no longer relevant. This shows the limits of the concept of openness, even as a social process, and the strong need to consider the complementing aspects of equity in all social analyses and frameworks.

Some sundry issues, and some connections to ongoing work at IT for Change

As we read the paper, and absorbed the analysis of the multiple ways in which the openness of the new ICTs can promote openness of social processes, the issue of the reverse impact kept coming to our mind – the way existing social, economic and political process are influencing the openness of the Internet. We found the last sentence/ question of the paper partly address this issue. However, this issue may need to be discussed more directly and centrally, because it will have a great impact on the

6 Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers

emerging possibilities of greater openness of ICTD related social processes. Moreover, some very crucial decisions on the openness of the new ICTs, as also noted by the paper – for instance, regarding network neutrality – are going to be taken very soon. (The fact that these decisions will largely be taken by the new administration of a single country itself is a sad comment on the 'openness' of the political decision making process in the information society paradigm.)

The paper mentions that a basic constituent of 'openness' is egalitarianism. Coincidentally, about exactly the same time that this paper was released, IT for Change coordinated a campaign for 'protecting the publicness and the egalitarian nature of the Internet' at the IGF⁷, Hyderabad. We were deliberately employing these two terms from socio-political and developmental discourse to a technical arena, because merely speaking of the 'openness' of the Internet had become either largely meaningless in being too broad, and/ or otherwise missed some crucial and important aspects of the issue. More importantly, the concept was not adequate to meeting some urgent policy issues, like that pertaining to network neutrality, and the growing monopolization by Google of many aspects of the Internet.

It is quite interesting that while the present paper attempts to use a concept and value from the technology discourse to improve the egalitarianism of development space, our campaign tried the opposite tactic. Concerned about the threats to openness of the new ICTs, it sought to use a concept and value from social and development discourse in speaking about political shaping of new ICTs. This dialectic is important to keep alive, and invest in.

On another count, IT for Change recently hosted a workshop on 'ICTs for participatory local development: Exploring a systemic approach'. The workshop, and an associated detailed roadmap/toolkit document that is being developed, sought to wed a systems approach, more associated with a techno-managerial world-view, to values of local-ness and participation, typical of development discourse. The planned outcome of such a composite framework is to develop new models of 'local development ecology'. Relatively technical issues and concepts like information systems, telecentres, technology platforms like sms, etc, were examined at the workshop from a strongly social and developmental viewpoint ((for instance the examining the new techno-social possibilities of bottom-up 'people's information systems' in contrast with management information systems used in governance), to understand the various emerging possibilities of new techno-social underpinnings for local development activities.

Our, recently established, 'Centre for Community Informatics and Development' in Mysore, near Bangalore, is also based on such an intermediate/ composite framework that attempts to bridge the big gap between the new technological possibilities and development practice. This Centre works with grassroots NGOs and CBOs for helping them appropriate new, and often innovative, techno-social processes in their development work. This is sought to be done in a manner that is closely controlled and owned by these organizations, with traditional development thinking and practices, and the communities they work with. These activities of IT for Change are being mentioned here because they are motivated by a similar purpose as drives the present paper; to bring the world of new ICTs and that of development closer together in order to shape new possibilities of effective development practice, and enabling policies. And to do so in a manner that while appropriating the best qualities and possibilities of the new ICTs remains firmly anchored in development ethics, imperatives and theory.