

# Open But Not Public - Social Membership in Information Society as a Club Good

## A critique of the concept of 'Open Development'<sup>1</sup>

(Early draft, not to be quoted)

Openness is an ability to go with the flow, as Taoism puts it, without expecting predetermined outcomes<sup>2</sup>. But, a counterpoint is, what if there are some predetermined outcomes, like social justice and equity, that are intrinsic to the project of development! Openness is one of those naturally nice sounding words. This spatial term evokes the human spirit of freedom. The concept of openness is uniquely associated with the new communication paradigm of the Internet. As the Internet spreads its disruptive influence across our social structures and institutions, it is hoped that it would spread more and more 'openness' and ensure greater freedoms for all. This is the typical techno-utopian view the emerging information society. A more sober social analysis looks at a much larger range of issues that inform social structures and institutions, and the changes in them under the undeniable force of the new ICTs. The key questions then pertain not only to how institutions can be made more open, but also what does openness mean generally, and in each specific context, and what kind of outcomes are sought, and can be expected from increased openness?

Development deals with social contexts characterized by weak and vulnerable institutions. Does this context make openness a more valid concept for development, or less valid? Even if valid, what specific qualifications may be required to be made to this concept? At the same time, developing societies do also generally show a keen desire for rapid institutional change, including through possible leapfrogging, for which the information society context may present an unprecedented opportunity. It is also an important contextual factor that not only is the ICT paradigm largely shaped in the North and then exported to the South, this is done almost exclusively in market or, rather, corporatist frameworks, driven by large, and often monopolistic, ICT corporations of the North. What danger does this paradigm pose to existing institutions in developing countries, and the possibilities of their transformation towards more progressive directions? Within all these contextual factors, the phenomenon of the emerging information society in its relationship to development has to be examined and understood with reference to specific issues and problems that development faces today.

However, we find with the 'open development' model proposed on the basis of the 'Open ICTD' paper<sup>3</sup> is that it does not begin by identifying the 'development problem' it seeks to solve, as per the well established practice of theory building. In fact, we suspect that if the antecedent problem(s) was sought to be identified, many of the issues that we point out in the present critique of the proposed model would arise almost immediately.

It is a fact that the arena of ICTD has been uniquely a theoretical. This field has been dominated by techno-centric approaches, largely dependent on the suspect methodology of best practices. Some more nuanced approaches from information systems studies and from sociology of technology too have largely failed to develop and present this field as something that serious theoreticians and practitioners in the area of development could associate with.

To that extent, it is likely that the primary objective in proposing the 'open development' model is to provide a theoretical anchor to ICTD, and thus make it more meaningful to development policy and practice. However, any new model cannot be built without a thorough analysis of the experience of ICTD in the last decade or so. In that sense the 'open ICTD' model is largely a historical. It almost

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2 <http://www.abqcs.org/service/306-open-sesame>

3 <http://itidjournal.org/itid/article/viewFile/692/290>

completely ignores the more substantial on-the-ground issues and experiences of ICTD like telecentres, business models, public private partnerships, multi-stakeholder policy making, techno-centricism of most approaches, poor involvement of and ownership by traditional development actors etc.

The proposed model does claim to be based on empirical foundations. However all the instances referred to come from two sectors or domains – technology models and information and knowledge systems. The concept of 'openness' has both a good existing usage in these areas, and in our view, is very valid, as well as important from a development point of view. There is a lot to be analysed and advocated under constructs like 'open ICTs for development', 'open information for development' and 'open knowledge for development'. These ideas are indeed well analyzed in the paper 'Open ICT eco-systems transforming the developing world'<sup>4</sup>, which first presented the access-participation collaboration formulation adopted in the concept of 'open development'. Many others too have treated these areas in good depth.

What is problematic, and not at all explained, however, is the uncritical slippage from 'open ICT eco-systems' to 'open ICTD'<sup>5</sup> and then, in fact, rather more precipitously, to 'open development'. What is valid for technology models and information/ knowledge models does not automatically become valid for 'new social arrangements' (which connotes a rather institutional setting requiring corresponding institutional analysis) in context of which openness is proposed in the 'open development' model.

..... there are many processes that can be made more open through the use of ICTs and that doing so will generate development outcomes that are accomplished: a) in a more efficient and/or effective manner, and/or b) in ways that earlier were not possible.

Openness is understood as a range of social activities that favor more access, participation, and collaboration. These principles guide us toward more inclusive, participatory, and collaborative social relationships between actors (governments, citizens, civil society groups, businesses, etc.). The hypothesis states that these open social arrangements provide the context within which the enabling mechanisms of ICTs can be most effectively catalyzed.

These hypotheses are subject neither to a rigorous social theory analysis – of category clarification as well as cause-effect relationships – nor to the empirical evidence from the considerable ground experience with ICTD. The next two sections make a small attempt in these two directions, respectively

## **The Theory of Openness**

We take openness to broadly mean more social interactions, across more axes. As mentioned earlier, the principle social impact of new ICTs is to reduce the cost of social interaction and transaction. In the emerging information society we do have a much higher level of social interaction. Broadly, this has also meant that there is not that much need to maintain spatially closed organizations and institutions to sustain meaningful levels of interactions for achieving any social function. Instead, a much more complex array of transactions outside the boundaries of existing organizations/ institutions can simultaneously be possible. This paradigm of structural change is the basis of the claim that networks are emerging as the principle organizational form of the information society (Castells).

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4 <http://itidjournal.org/itid/article/view/489/214>

5 <http://itidjournal.org/itid/article/viewFile/692/290>

Shift from vertical to horizontal structures, that are more flexible (in that they invest less in structuring relationships and can change more easily against appropriate stimulus), does give the feeling of better distribution of power in and through social structures. (This is the key fallacy of a technocratic world view also known as Californian ideology.) However, this is not automatically true. Castells makes a convincing case of how a network, left to autonomous functioning, leads to exclusions much worse than what we know vis a vis our existing social structures. This is an important point to note for any theorizing around new social processes and structures in the emerging information society.

These changes do provide a possibility to overcome what could have been some structural constraints of existing organizations and institutions towards more inclusion and participation, characterized by a more democratic distribution of power. This possibility, however, cannot be taken for granted. It has to be actively harnessed through appropriate institutional design, which follows, firstly, a basic normative vision of a desired society, and secondly, a keen and nuanced understanding of the implicated social phenomenon – the emerging information society. Doing this in a developing country context, with its peculiar circumstances, constitutes the key challenge to development theory and practice.

In this respect, call for more openness in development as constituting greater access ( to communication tools and information), greater participation ( in groups/ institutions) and greater collaborations ( over centralized production ) is at best simplistic. It does not engage with the strong new dimensions of power manifest in networked relationships, where all these three terms – access, participation and collaboration, are actively being sought to be re-interpreted to develop new institutional systems that serve the powerful. More dangerously, it willy nilly plays in the hands of an increasingly vocal and powerful constituency which decries the very concept and ideology of development, in suggesting that a more or less deterministic positive social change may be taking place by the very fact of greater interaction/ transaction intensity in the emerging social conditions – which can may be characterized as moving toward greater openness. We will discuss this larger development context of the present discussion a bit later in this paper.

As mentioned above, new models of access, participation and collaboration can indeed be regressive. In fact, new meanings are actively being constructed around these concepts today, and new institutions, which are embedded in structures of these newly formed meanings, are being created. This discourse level problem itself is a key challenge to development theory. More access can be to resources for the deprived, as it can be to new unexploited markets for the powerful. Means of communication and information can be used for exploitation as they can be used productively for development. Promoting some processes, as more open, outside specific context and institutional structures may therefore mean little. It does not provide the needed analysis of real exclusion and inclusion, since specific social phenomenon are much more complex in this regard. To take a very pertinent example – since mobiles are mentioned as one of the two key technology phenomenon behind the proposed model – it is important to note that in real practice, what is enhanced access to information provided by mobiles is most often done through commodification, privatisation and monetisation of information and knowledge. This kind of enhanced access obviously has a very negative overall impact on development, through increasing dependencies and establishing permanent channels of value outflow. Same basic model of 'information commoditization' characterizes most existing telecentre models. The above paradox is posted to show how when openness is, or even its sub-categories are, placed in real institutional contexts, no generic positive value can be prejudged for it/them. In fact different aspects of openness, as presented in the 'open ICTD' paper easily work at cross purposes.

Participation too is an increasingly abused term. It is already contested in development in relation to a certain depoliticisation of and through many project level participation practices. Fuchs describes

corporate participation practices – for both employees and consumers – where participation is completely subsumed to profit seeking interests. The information society context, with its early domination by private interests, is much worse. Tantalizing, but mostly superficial, issues are created, by media to obtain 'participation' through premium or higher cost SMS-es purely as a business model. On the other hand, many such issues can be 'proved' to have popular consent and further used to manipulate public opinion. All this may have business and entertainment value, but meaning and implications of participation in a democracy and citizenship framework is something entirely different. However, the heavy misuse of the term participation is causing strain to the democratic fibre. Facebook has come up with an open governance model – bringing up a statement of users rights and responsibilities, and allowing users to vote on it. This model of user participation has been greatly appreciated by many commentators on information society issues. However, apparently user participation does not extend to real hard issues. For instance, Facebook says clearly that it is not obliged to disclose whether the information it presents is of commercial nature or not; this issue not being open to any democratic process of deliberation or voting by user. It is important to note that clear separation between non-commercial and commercial is basic to almost all media regulation frameworks. So what is apparently greater participation may just be a ploy to avoid necessary political regulation, which would be much more oriented to user-citizen's interest. The real issue therefore is not to simply advocate more participation – which in some form or the other is perhaps quite likely to in any case increase in a networked environment – but to explore what kind of participation is it, and to what avail.

Collaboration necessarily means some element of 'commons', and non-private appropriation. It is about the dynamics of community. This implication cannot be separated from this term in any political and development usage. Without it, if we just mean perhaps processes like collaborating as suppliers of a TNC (and businesses do use the term in this meaning) it is important to make the necessary conceptual distinctions. Any unqualified and un-situated use of the term 'collaboration' cutting across such breadth of social and economic meanings may not have much analytical or explanatory value. Apart from 'collaboration' which may be implicated in networked production system, in which context the usage of this terms appears highly contestable (see Castells for an analysis of the systematic exclusions that networks produce), there is the new information society phenomenon of private platforms organizing collaboration of voluntary community effort, and then appropriating its common produce. Google search, Google maps, Google translation, Facebook, Youtube – all the high deities of Web 2.0 digital order, as also, to some extent, technology platforms like Apple Application Store, denote this model of collaboration. How does such meanings of collaboration correspond to our traditional understanding and theories of community and commons? Does 'opening' up new meanings of collaboration, and even community – where the private may encapsulates the public rather than traditional other way around – promote the ideals and imperatives of development or take them backwards?

Two things follow from the above analysis. One, that it cannot be the purpose of a development model to just recognize the increasingly networked nature of social relationships, and recommend uncritically that development structures and institutions also place themselves into this network, and according change themselves. More social interaction is a fact of the emerging social paradigm, and its new forms of social relationships and institutions have to be critically analyzed, particularly with respect to dominant conceptions coming from the hegemonistic discourse, in a manner that serve the best interests of development constituencies.

Secondly, social analysis, even if the change of such order and disruptive power as the emerging information society brings, cannot be done at a generic process level – access, participation and collaboration. These concepts are meaningful only when embedded it in specific institutional systems related to development theory and practice. In promoting access to more information and communication resources, are we speaking of relevance of new ICTs to the public sphere, and thus

about 'information society and public sphere', in developing countries? If participation is 'democratic participation' do we mean to examine the new contexts of democracy and citizenship in the emerging information society. If collaboration implies new relations of productions we are entering areas of deep political economy, which need to be examined through appropriate lenses. IT cannot be separated from the concepts of community and commons. Indeed, it is surprising, as a comment on the wiki devoted to the paper on 'Open ICTD' notes, that the paper goes to such lengths to disassociate the concept of 'open ICTD' from the concept of commons. A little further in the same section, less prominently, the paper also claims openness is not about open markets. The search for neutrality in a typical technical enterprise, but mostly in vain, since any concept or term with social analytical validity can indeed not be neutral.

At a time where increased level of social interactions is taking place, with changing context and 'meanings' of these interactions, the objective of development theory should not be to uncritically call for more interactions, or more openness, access, participation, and collaboration, but problematise these categories, in the context of development.

The unit of social analysis provided by a new development model, in the context of the emerging information society, must be social institutions and not formal, and largely meaningless and sterile, process names in their generic characterization. It will instead be useful to study areas like 'new public sphere and development', 'information society and citizenship' and 'production relations and institutions in the information society (with respect to development)'. Since an overall canopy term is not only attractive but taxonomically useful, one may look at 'development and (or in) information society', which one must admit is not as attractive as 'open development'.

As an architectural principle of institutional redesign for development in the information society, as mentioned earlier, openness is very important. New institutional designs have an important technical/ICT aspect and significant new elements of information/ knowledge flows. In both these areas the concept of openness is very central, and also much studied. It would therefore be useful to systematically draw out principles and models of open ICT ecology and open information/ knowledge systems in context of development. Going beyond these two areas, there apparently may also be considerable benefits in adopting a networked form of organizing systems, structures and institutions. However, the theory and practice of such new structures and institutions has to be carefully built with focus on actual outcomes in a development context, rather than be carried away by formalistic categories denoting some necessary, or even highly likely, techno-deterministic directions.

In this context the proposition by Thompson<sup>6</sup> that a window of dialogue must be opened up between web 2.0 way of thinking and social structuring and development theory and practice looks much more balanced. Especially because he insists that the hierarchy in this engagement must be clearly towards accepting the principality of development, and not that of the new set of possibilities. This indeed has been a major defect in the ICTD theory and practice. As mentioned, a new theory of use of ICTs in the development arena can only be built out of a thorough analysis of the current historicity of the phenomenon. In this context, we will now briefly visit some elements of experience of more than a decade of ICTD practice to examine the meaning in which the concept of openness may have been employed, and the very mixed, if not wholly unfavorable, results of it.

### **The Practice of Openness**

To address the formulation of openness in its three constitutive processes, we will briefly visit the context of multistakeholder model of ICTD policy making (exemplifying participation), business model accent of ICTD practice (access to information and collaboration for production) and some

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6 [https://www.jbs.cam.ac.uk/fileadmin/user\\_upload/research/workingpapers/wp0727.pdf](https://www.jbs.cam.ac.uk/fileadmin/user_upload/research/workingpapers/wp0727.pdf)

general observations of the field of ICTD research and other modes of knowledge production and exchange. The analysis will attempt to show how the basic terms – access, participation and collaboration – are used in a very co-opted manner, and have thus may not have contributed to positive development outcomes. It will also show how each of these processes very often works at cross purposes with another – whereby, for instance, more access may be at the cost of decreased participation, more open participation decreasing universal access, and collaboration leading to private appropriation and deprivation of majority (and thus decreased access to resources). Thus, while they separately may have little meaning outside specific institutional frameworks judged for their real outcomes, they together, in forming a composite concept of 'openness', have even less meaning, since they very often do not vary in the same direction.

### ***The open policy model of ICTD***

ICTs do create new opportunities in the political arena, which is a very complex social system. Limitations of a purely representational democracy have been obvious, especially in an increasingly complex society. The concept of deepening democracy is an attempt to address these limitation. However, such democratic ideals may be limited in their practical implementation not only because of elite resistance but also due to techno-structural constraints. Substantive participation outside elections is certainly not easy to organize. ICTs present exciting new possibilities to strengthen even transform the institutional structures of deepening democracy.

What is being witnessed instead is that in the name of 'openness', but basically an assertion of political legitimacy by powerful private interests, an entirely new political model is being developed – multi-stakeholder governance. This model of governance is more or less openly post-democratic while there are no reasons offered why the basic democratic ideals and norms need to be jettisoned rather than achieved better in the new situation. It is this kind of institutional subversion by dominant interest, using the pretext of rapid social change induced by new ICTs, that is the central theme of this paper. Here we will very briefly review two instantiations of the multistakeholder governance model – one at the global level, and another at national level.

Governance of the Internet, the central paradigm of the emerging information society, have presented major difficulties. It is in some ways fundamentally more trans-national than perhaps any other phenomenon that has needed governance (other than perhaps climate change). Also, it changes and evolves so quickly that typical slow governance responses may not be appropriate. For anything to be governed it has to be first captured in its basic form and substance, which is something the Internet keeps defying. However, while the governance challenge posed here is very unique and unprecedented, it is not insurmountable. While many states have given an expected knee jerk status quo-ist reaction to the emergent situation, it is also a fact that everyone does realize that things will really never be same again. While it is mainly some conservative developing country governments that are generally blamed for intransigence in this area, and thus blocking progress, the fact that Internet embodies the new economic domination strategy of the North is at least as important a factor preventing even the exploration of a needed global Internet Governance institutional system, which is democratic, and participative.

A non-state globalist management of the basic infrastructure of the Internet has had an important role in shaping the Internet as it is. However, as Internet governance now moves into much more substantial social, economic and political issues there is a stalemate in terms of its governance. This vacuum has been filled with efforts at multistakeholder global Internet governance. The UN Internet Governance Forum – a policy dialogue forum – is one of its chief institutions. It has a strong presence of the business sector, and the 'technical community', which sides almost blindly with the business sector, not only because there is a very large overlap of the actual actors involved across these two constituencies, but also in their shared acute mistrust of governments. They have a single

politics at the IGF – 'governments are out to take over the Internet; stop them at any cost'. This may not be an entirely misplaced concern, but Internet Governance goes much beyond. However in all the important governance requirements of the complex social, economic, political and cultural issues that Internet brings up, the multistakeholder model has basically been 'obstructionist'. It has resisted development of any policy or institutional frameworks, to help in which direction IGF was indeed set up. The multistakeholder governance system has unilaterally defined the IGF as basically a capacity building forum, circumscribing all its political and governance role by the simple expedient of claiming 'absence of consensus'. It is though not difficult to see why private business interests who are making the best out of an ungoverned interest for setting new structures for sustained dominance, and capital accumulation, are never likely to agree to a consensus towards political governance of the Internet in global public interest. It is obvious that multistakeholder governance processes are essentially conservative, and development have rather more progressive needs.

At the same time as its political functions are circumscribed, IGF is held out as an exemplary model for enhancing participation of developing countries and marginalised sections in global Internet Governance. Meanwhile real Internet governance is either done by industry cartels, US government through its prime location in the digital ecology, or by to plurilateral treaties among the rich nation, the best example of which is the ACTA treaty process. Later, when finalised these treaties (or governance systems), which due to the inherently trans-national nature of the Internet would tend towards global application, are offered as 'technical tools' (as per an ACTA document) to other countries. Participation without politics, as voice without agency, are the kinds of key emerging concepts that require theoretical attention, rather than uncritical advocacy of more access, participation and collaboration.

The enormity of the problem can be judged from the fact that in the Civil Society Internet Governance Caucus – one of the main global Internet Governance civil society groups – many prominent actors openly tout multistakeholderism as a replacement of democratic institutions. The concept thus is posited as post-democratic. This shows the problem with dealing with concepts like openness and participation outside specific institutional locations and analyses. One may not be sure of the full import of use and meaning of the these concepts in specific reference to development outcomes, which are of course mediated through institutions of various kinds.

Another example, from the Indian national context, is of the process of multistakeholder consultation for 'ICT in schools' policy by the central government. In the new spirit of openness of ICTD arena, the whole process was initiated and anchored by two civil society groups (one of them a multi-donor initiative of a few countries of the North, and another an Indian civil society organization a good part of whose funding seem connected to the large number of ICTD conferences it hosts, which are largely funded by ICT businesses). The process was dominated by industry interests, and educationists, who are important sources of expertise and legitimacy in this process, were mostly ignored. Little surprise then, that the policy draft that came out of the process appeared more of an attempt to institutionalize avenues of ICT industries exploitation of India's public education system as one of its important markets. All the important progressive possibilities like free and open source software, open and collaborative content, communities of teachers and students developing software and content in the constructivist model of education recommended by education policies in India etc were glaringly absent. On the other hand the concept of private public participation was pivotal to the proposed policy, which could have been expected.

As a result of concerted efforts of some civil society groups, the education minister scrapped the multistakeholder process, and asked a departmental committee to develop a policy draft. Not at all to recommend closed bureaucratic processes, but the new draft turned out to be rather progressive on the all the counts mentioned above. This example once again shows how the apparent 'openness'

of a process, not see critically in its full institutional implications, can lead to less rather than more openness-es of other kinds – in the present case, open source, open content, teacher collaboration etc, and to poorer development outcomes.

Multistakeholder governance model is a good example where the seductive concept of openness has been employed to subvert democratic norms and institutions, including those of deepening democracy. Openness may become the pretext of jettisoning long reverend concepts of democracy, equity, public interest, conflict of interest, politics, and even public financing of policy processes (a new concept of multistakeholder funding has taken root in the IGF, which is simply private funding of political institutions, an anathema in democratic systems we have been used to).

### ***Telecentre as the centerpiece of ICTD***

The same kind of uncritical push for multistakeholderism that is seen in policy spaces has been used in ICTD practice to throw 'open' areas and activities to big business that were traditionally dominated by public and community roles and actors. Telecentre has been the centerpiece of ICTD thinking and strategy. Basically an ICT outpost in marginalized communities, it is supposed to ensure integration of these communities into the mainstream and thus facilitate their development. In the dominant ICTD practise, a telecentre is run on a business model, and often is a part of a chain of telecentres owned by companies, big and small. The community level business model is supposed to ensure efficiency and innovation, considered as much needed for this new development practice. The larger business model of the company owning a chain of telecentres is seen as required to ensure development of required services, which not only serve the local needs directly, but also help integrate marginalized communities into the larger market systems.

One of the main salable items at the telecentres is information, which is considered key to developing and transforming communities. Commodification of information, through privatisation and monetization, is of course important to run the business model. And this applies even to information – like development information, and many other kinds, which hitherto were freely exchanged within the community.

As can be expected, such new 'development' practices, promoted in the name of openness and multistakeholderism, do not go too well with traditional community-centric development thinking and practises. An instructive instance of this fact is that community media groups and the ICTD practioners, whose areas of interest and activity indeed have a good amount of convergence, have had a difficult relationship, if at all. It is not easy to reconcile a business model based development model, built on management and business practises of the private sector, with community-centric development models. Primacy of profit motive is quite antithetical to such traditional development practice.

It is not only that information is commoditised, but in the corporate business models with limitless greed, monopolies over information and communication means of marginalized communities are used in much more devious ways. E-choupal, perhaps worlds largest telecentre chain, is owned and run by an multinational commodities company into agriculture procurement. Its village telecentres were opened with much fanfare as a public service model, but combining public service with business objectives, in the typical win-win formulation of ICTD. In fact the telecentre franchise takes a public oath of public service.

The telecentre almost exclusively serve the needs of better off farmers in buying their agriculture produce, and have thus not reduced social disparities within the community. Perhaps worse, it is developing a strong dependency of even these farmers on one company. While the company was able buy produce for higher price initially by using the cost-efficiencies of the ICT-enabled



platform, it has starved off traditional alternatives of procurement, and thus will soon be in a position to exploit its monopoly, which can only be of great disservice to the interests of the farmers. The company through its e-choupal telecentres also controls both the nature of information that villagers access, and nature of services and products that they are able to access, thus providing very useful, if exploitative, additional revenue models. Such abject dependency of the local communities on a single corporation for its information needs and market linkages, which also tends towards monopolistic corporatisation of agriculture activity, is obviously a dangerous trend. However this aspect is hardly ever mentioned in the din of celebrating perhaps the world's most 'successful' (as in financially sustainable) telecentre model, incorporating the tenets of openness and collaboration across social sectors – profit and non-profit; public, community and private.

Interestingly, the Indian government is well on its way to build 2,00,000 village telecentres, on a model similar to that of e-choupal. The primary actor in this scheme will be a private company which runs a chain of telecentres across a large geographical area. While these companies are encouraged to develop collaboration with local community and non-profit groups, they are largely unrestrained in developing any kind of business models out of their ICT-enabled presence in the communities, importantly, under a quasi-public label coming from the collaboration with the government. Looking at the kind of large companies that have entered the fray, the game looks like far from a community-development effort. Huge new business ideas and models appear on the anvil, and local communities are left largely unshielded from potential dependencies and exploitations.

Real 'development outcomes' from pursuing open collaboration models may thus be in the direction of commoditizing erstwhile public information (militating against openness in its other meaning/ aspect), displacing the centrality of concepts of community and commons in development (thus, again, reducing openness in other ways) and building dependencies which will no doubt lead to more closed and interest-mediated channels of information in the long run (more closed information systems) and thus reducing 'effective' access to informational, and other, resources. The new avenues of development information and other services being developed through these market models may, in fact, be leading to scaling back of traditional public extension and support services (like marketing support for agriculture produce) the likely impact of which structural changes has not been examined enough.

Interestingly, the imperative of depending on private companies for running its telecentres has meant that the Indian government's e-governance scheme is working on models of governance services delivery that completely bypasses village self-governance bodies, thus going against what is otherwise the mainstream trend in Indian governance reform efforts. This case is a clear instance of how democratic participation is actually reduced in pursuing what is passed off as open collaborative models of development. Obviously, open collaborative models do clearly seem to co-opt and exclude actors and institutions as per the interests of the most dominant interests.

In the present phase of ICTD, increasingly, the telecentre model is being seen as having failed. Instead of looking at real reasons of failure (which are alluded to above) the dominant discourse has latched on to mobiles as the new wonder-kid of ICTD. The new approach jettisons the woolly-minded social enterprise (or collaborative/ multistakeholder) approach of telecentres, and its collective/ public consumption model, as key reasons of failure. This may look like going back on some key aspects of openness. But since openness is a very malleable concept, it is now measured in terms of the astronomical increase in access that mobiles have provided. Mobiles have no doubt revolutionized peer-to-peer voice and simple text communication, and these underpin important structural shifts, very meaningful to development. However, all higher level services, that may have the real transformative potential, require Internet over mobile platform. This however typically tends to veer towards models that subvert the traditional openness of the Internet. Internet over

mobile telephone model seems to be especially beset with all the three potential structural problems threatening 'openness' as mentioned in the paper on 'Open ICTD'. These are; incumbent's role (unlike on the Internet, the telecoms very strongly control mobile infrastructure), vertical integration (from hardware, to software, to applications and content, vertical integration is typical of mobile telephony model) and cloud computing (with the mobile being a thin client, much intelligence will be remote or in the network, which is troubling from 'openness' point of view).

Further, taking from the earlier analysis of how telecentres have worked in the situated context of ICTD practice, it can easily be seen that the mobile model incorporates all the problems with 'real openness' that telecentres had, mostly amplifying them. These are of commoditising information, disconnection with and subversion of community-centred development models, and vertical integration and monopolisation creating dependencies, which are prone to be used for exploitation of the marginalised groups.

Importantly, mobile telephony is stated to be one of the two contemporary ICT phenomenon on which the 'open development' model is built (other being Web 2.0, whose dominant characteristics vis a vis openness are critiqued elsewhere in the paper). In light of the above analysis, it is difficult to understand how the concept of openness gets so centrally associated with mobiles, just on strength of the fact it has revolutionized the number of people connected to ICT infrastructure in developing countries. What about the monumental dangers to 'openness' that the phenomenon of mobile telephony poses? The analytical value of the concept of 'openness' does not look particularly useful in this complex situation.

### ***The public sphere of ICTD***

What we mean here by the public sphere of ICTD are the spaces and means of deliberation, knowledge exchange and creation, and formation of public opinion and policy options – social processes that are antecedent to and inform ICTD policy and practice. The dark shadows of open collaborative models cutting across sectors of society – more fashionably called multistakeholderism – are as evident here as in policy and practice arenas of ICTD.

The degree of corporatist presence, one may even say domination, in the ICTD sphere is unprecedented. And it is again facilitated by promoting the virtue of openness and multistakeholderism. The overlooking of basic cannons of academic independence (as of policy making process, in other contexts) and conflict of interest issues is rather stark. So much ICTD research, and even more of ICTD conferences, is conducted with money from corporates directly interested in the outcomes, And in the new spirit of openness, representatives of these companies mostly make no bones about negotiating the actual levels of participation and visibility in research and in discussion forums.

The above has been the reason for creation of an environment in ICTD theoretical and deliberative spaces where alternative views find few avenues of expression. There is largely a monopolistic discourse, whose contours seem to shift only as the interests of the funding principals shift – as from telecentres to mobile telephony, described above. Whether the openness to providing interested parties, with clear conflict of interest, a central and often controlling seat in the 'ICTD public sphere, has promoted openness in its normative meaning, may not be that difficult a question to answer. There may not, however, be any ICTD space available to offer that answer, where the speaker is not encircled by the giant logos of the sponsoring parties.

This context of ICTD research and theory has been one of the main causes of its nonintegration with mainstream development theory and thinking, which must come before the much needed integration in development practice.

The multistakeholder model – applying across areas of policy making, practise and and research – has been central to the above critique because the 'open development' model, in its extension to areas beyond technology models and information systems mentions “collaborative social relationships between actors (governments, citizens, civil society groups, businesses, etc” as its key principle,

### **Openness and the Larger Problem of Development**

Hitherto, we have been critiquing the concept of 'open development' from within the area of ICTD. We did agree that there is great relevance of the concept to technology systems and information/knowledge systems. However, its uncritical extension to the practice of development – implied in the notion of more 'open social arrangements' – is beset with considerable amount of problems, and may not be useful. We also accept the need for development theory and practice today to open a line of conversation not only with Web 2.0 way of thinking, but with the whole range of new structural opportunities opened up in the emerging information society, in a manner that focuses on real issues and problems of development.

At another level, the concept of 'open development' may already connects in some important ways to what is emerging as a central problem in development, which possible connection will be examined in this section. This problem emerges from strong postmodernist critiques of the very concept of development as being violative of people's subjective notions of what is important to them, and how they should obtain it. In an environment where there is an emerging strong 'performance-based' discontent with many institutions, this ideology has gained some mainstream traction. This process has been greatly helped by a very strong, and considerably successful, neo-liberal attack on all non market- based or -oriented institutions. Together, this has lead to considerable skepticism towards the very idea of development, as traditionally understood. This extension of laissez faire approach to development claims that people should be left to themselves to sort out their development path and strategies, and no external plans or assistance may be required. The only thing that may need be done for this purpose is to remove all constraints to such autonomous and self-propelled possibilities. Some people of this view are basically anarchist, and anti-institutional, which thinking seem to have a strong hold among many ICT technical practitioners (or techies). Others, the more powerful group, are of neo-liberals, who see public and community institutions as most likely to be constraining and market as basically liberating. What is significant is that there is a considerable coming together of these two, rather different ideologies, in terms of the assault on institutions of development – which certainly has a strong element of plan and intervention, however participative, emergent, flexible, reflexive etc, and also a strong role of public institutions. An ideology, or even a proposed model, of openness in development, in this context, may willy nilly carry strong connotations of supporting such subversion of the very idea of development. It is therefore important to make its intent clear in terms of these larger debates in development.

The paper on 'open ICTD' quotes William Easterly on how there are two kinds of development workers – searchers and planners.

Planners attempt to impose from above via top-down plans and structures. In contrast, searchers are the ones close to the ground who search for solutions to local problems. It is only through searchers, Easterly argues, that locally appropriate innovations can emerge. Here we posit that the enhanced spread of information and opportunities for innovation should – theoretically – enable (provided the other contextual supporting aspects are available, for example, bank credit) more opportunities for this type of local searching and innovation.

This at its face is all very good. However, even good searches have to be planned. So, it not so much of how not to plan and structure, but how to keep the necessary flexibilities, and expand participation and collaboration, in a contextual and meaningful way. Participatory development, like deepening democracy, denotes serious attempts in this direction, These should be strengthened by use of ICTs. It is not clear, what would open development add that 'participatory development' does not already have, other than bringing in actors with questionable stake into nodal roles in community development, and legitimizing them, as discussed earlier.

Interestingly, William Easterly, quoted above as favoring 'open' approaches, in his paper 'The Ideology of Development', calls this "ideology" as 'almost as deadly as the tired ideologies of the last century -- communism, fascism, and socialism -- that failed so miserably'.

Like other ideologies, this thinking favors collective goals such as national poverty reduction, national economic growth, and the global Millennium Development Goals, over the aspirations of individuals. The only "answer" to poverty reduction is freedom from being told the answer. Free societies and individuals are not guaranteed to succeed. They will make bad choices. But at least they bear the cost of those mistakes, and learn from them.

While Easterly is certainly entitled to his views, and to his credit, he is very consistent, the above quotation shows how the idea of 'openness' is not fully specified and contextualized, can be rather problematic. Easterly certainly appears to be very much speaking about 'openness' of a high order, in condemning the very idea of development.

The 'Open ICTD' paper comes close to articulating sentiments of freedom and openness in a manner that of Easterly does above.

If development consists of per-poor innovations and peer collaborations – what does this imply for development and development research? Most likely, this is an acceptance of a loss of control, and an increase in trust in the process – that is, the process of openness to lead to relatively unpredictable (hopefully positive) development outcomes.

While this statement may appear quite valid in itself, an overly strong accent on unplanned bottom-up processes of development can easily veer towards anti-development views, especially if presented as part of a new development model. And if openness is in service of promotion of such processes alone, 'open development' may be an oxymoron, the way 'development' is traditionally understood. If radical new ways of looking at development, or something else on its place, is indeed intended, the discussion should focus on that, before going to its sub-domains and specifics.

We discussed above how the anarchist antipathy to institutions and neoliberal push for marketisation of all or most institutions may be in an unholy alliance in the area of new approaches to development. This alliance is most potent in the area of ICTD. Techies, a large number of them of anarchist disposition, who wield considerable power in the shaping the emerging techno-social constructs, tend to co-opted by neoliberal forces. Barbrook and Cameron in their 'The Californian Ideology' analyses the cyber-libertarian thinking in the Silicon valley, which had spread quickly across the globe among techies. They describe the neoliberal tendencies of this ideology, even if there are differences in areas like IP issues.

One of the major defects of current ICTD theory and practice has been its technocentrism. However, it appears that in attempting to make a break towards a relatively social theoretical mooring, the 'open development' model does not do much more than apply tenets of Californian ideology to development issues, even if with much greater soberness regarding the need of policies to ensure continued openness. An uncritical belief in openness would perhaps best serve a Californian ideologue, for whom every institution is constraining.

What may work for the technology space may not be the appropriate model for social institutions. For instance, open ICT models for education may be highly recommendable, and rather clear in their import and implication; and the same can be said about open educational resources (OCR) model. However, to make a critical extension of these to call for 'open education' runs into severe theoretical and practical problems. Open education is often related to open universities and open schools, which provide largely disintermediated education to groups with such needs, and who cannot be served with normal education processes. Does then in advocating (or even formulating the concept of) 'open education' the 'open development' model seeks to promote new education models that minimize the role of the teachers. It so happens that many educationists in developing countries are fighting such attempts, which come both from neoliberal quarters – with their accent on end-results, and commodification of knowledge processes, and techie enthusiasts – who see the technology as taking the place of the teacher. It would be little surprise that many educationists will find it pretty difficult to engage with an 'open education model'. Also there is much struggle regarding privatisation of education systems, and the multistakeholder model implied by openness again becomes an issue of significant contestation. It is obvious that merely adding open to 'development' or its sub-domain does not serve much analytical purpose, while it does look like tending towards certain neoliberal views of development, which may not be at all meant by the proposers of this model.

The disconnection of the proposed 'open development' model with the traditional and contemporary concerns of development theory and practice becomes even more stark in the section on 'dark side of open ICTD' in the 'Open ICTD' paper. Even if the concept of 'open development' can be taken to have some validity in specific meanings and contexts, this section was the place to articulate the problems that an uncritical application of 'openness' paradigm to development can mean. However, this section speaks of just four issues, all from the mainstream, largely North-based, information society discourse – state surveillance, privacy, Internet addiction and quality of information. Not that these issues are not important for developing countries, but being the mainstream information society issues in the dominant discourse, they do not represent the 'development differential' contributing which is the main job of any development theory. As brought out in this paper, the dark side of 'openness' for development relates much more to issues arising out of a general vulnerability of weak institutions to the onslaught of dominant interests riding the globalized information and communication infrastructure, and co-opting the vocabulary of techno-utopian conceptions of the information society. Specific instances of this can be found in the threat to democratic institutions from free-for-all multistakeholderism in policy spaces; the vulnerability of weak local markets suddenly exposed to globalised business systems, producing various kinds of dependencies; displacement of community-centric development models; curtailment of the crucial enabling role of public institutions in development; threat to academic independence; and subversion of democratic public spheres and pluralistic independent media, including community media.

### **(Re-)Claiming the 'Public' and Citizenship in the Information Society**

We took the hypothesis of an 'open development' model as an effort to develop a theoretical framework for ICTD, which is in great need of one. To cast away the 'open development' model will not solve this problem. In the concluding section, therefore we attempt to propose some directions towards a possible new theoretical model for ICTD.

We mentioned that institutions should be the unit of analysis and not abstract processes, especially when these are not properly described in their theoretical and practical implications. It would be useful to theorize larger institutions like democracy, production/ distribution systems and public sphere in their relation to development in the new context of an emerging information society, but

also more specific ones like governance, welfare services, community media, education, health, livelihood support systems etc. An overall theoretical framework of 'development and information society' may be employed for this purpose.

Any such overall framework may require some higher level conceptual tools and categories. Information society changes are specifically so widespread and granular, that the need to seek such basic tools and categories is even greater in this case. The proposal of 'openness' as a value and structural principle in the 'open development' model, and its analysis into categories of access, participating and collaboration, is indeed seen as such an attempt. The present paper examined, against practical experience in ICTD and information society arenas, the meaning and context in which these categories of 'openness' may be being used, or abused, and found them to be inadequate, and often quite problematic. We suggested that more access (to information and means of communication ) may only mean voice without agency, more participation may just provide participation without politics, and more collaboration may only amount to productive labour without appropriation.

If we examine the context of abuse through co-option of these terms of 'openness' – which seemed basically to always have had a good normative meaning, we do see some common elements. It is mostly that some fine institutional balance between private and public institutions that has been historically achieved seems to be getting greatly disturbed<sup>8</sup> , in a manner so as to malign public institutions to be ineffective/ irrelevant other than for the most basic minimalist functions.

The above terms of openness – access (universal access), participation and collaboration are historically all terms of public/ community institutional space. However, in all our example of abuse of these terms they were being co-opted by private/ business institutions. It is in this respect perhaps a central question to ask – can anything really be open, in its real social meaning, without it being public? Even an open market is open through its enabling and regulatory public institutions. (A private business house, or a set of them, cannot by themselves constitute open market.). Can private enclosures support the concept of 'openness' meaningfully? If so what is saved, and what lost, from the concept of 'openness'?

'Private openness' is a club good – non-rivalrous but excludable. And it is a fact that much of the digital phenomenon, because of its early capture by neo-liberal forces, in most of its areas of apparent openness represent a 'private openness'. (The much vaunted Web 2.0 phenomenon largely builds on this model, and its problems will be apparent as the private rent-seeker builds more and more power through appropriating collective resources and labour, and then using this power for higher levels of appropriation in unending, and perhaps unsustainable, cycles<sup>9</sup> .) This is because the concept of public has largely been sacrificed in the emerging information society institutional thinking and ecology, after being thoroughly maligned in both neo-liberal and techie Californian Ideology discourse. The mix of the two, which between them have almost monopolized the emerging information society space, have been rather potent and successful in this endeavor.

Public is the socio-political framework and condition of openness. It is openness with the qualities of rights and responsibilities, possible enabling conditions, and a necessary element of sociality. A clearing in the deep jungle, with all its dangers and alien-ness, may be open, but not public. Apart from its connotations of space for open social interactions, the term public is also used in the symbolic realm – in the meaning of space for democratic discourse. In both its meanings, or rather connotations, the concept of 'public' is very important and perhaps central to new theorizations of information society with respect to development.

We have earlier seen that the hostility against, and subsequent creeping withdrawal of, public institutions is a key contemporary problem in development. It is true that the institution of the State has its problem, but discarding concepts of public (which should include the idea of community, in its full political meaning) because of it neither wise nor reasonable. We do not discard the concept of free market, because markets today are dominated, and thoroughly manipulated, by big business.

We instead partly seek evolutionary improvement to the institution of market, and partly learn to live with its imperfections. Why should public institutions then not merit similar indulgence? The illogicality of the unsymmetrical treatment that public institutions get makes it a political economy issue - dominant sections side with market institutions, which help them maintain and enhance domination, and the marginalized ones with public institutions, which is their hope of great equity and social justice. Development addresses the context of those who are marginalized from dominant social structures and systems. It is therefore quite appropriate that development theory and practice seeks to re-establish the need, context and meaning of public institutions in the emerging information society institutional space.

We described the key social element of an information society as increased social interactions, across many axes. These changes of intensity and possibly, directions, of social interactions cause enormous strain on social structures and institutions, and set the ground for considerable social transformation. To try to influence these changes in progressive directions, so that they better serve the interests of marginalized sections, we need to theorise the very nature of these interactions. A broad attempt was made in the 'open development' model towards placing normative value on more access, participation and collaboration. We saw that these terms are quite problematic as operating largely in the private realms of information society. As per the nature of interactions in private realms they are best captured in a private contract framework, rather than of rights and entitlements, which is required to frame meaningful access, participation and collaboration.

It is therefore necessary that the concept of citizenship, rather than of relationships based private contracts, be established as the basic context and form of social interaction in the information society, as it is the 'normal' (pre-digital) socio-political contexts that we live in. Private contract based relationships would exist within this citizenship/ public framework and not outside, as some kind of self-sufficient and self-legitimizing system.

Reclaiming the basic categories of 'public' and 'citizenship' in the information society is necessary to conceptualize equal membership for all in the emerging information society, moving away from its present club goods model of social membership. This is most important for developing countries and marginalized groups because it is they who would be selectively excluded, at different points and levels of exclusion, on the club membership criteria, which is expressed in the currency of existing power and dominance.

Concluding on a practical note, some specific measures in order to build and (re)claim public institutions and citizenship rights in the emerging information society are very briefly mentioned as follows.

Public institutions must ensure all basic conditions of access and 'effective use' of ICT capabilities and possibilities by all. To the extent good regulation of the markets is effective for this purpose they should be supported and encouraged. However, basic access to and facility of using digital tools is a basic citizenship requirement, and must be provided to all as a right, and it is obvious that public institutions will have to take a much more direct role in this regard. Interestingly, more and more developed countries, from Australia, to those in Europe to US, are getting public institutions/ funds directly involved in extending access and other forms of digital disablement. However, the dominant ICTD model, shaped largely in the North, still seems to promote a hands-off policy for governments in getting directly involved in ICT provisioning and enablement.

Many digital institutions (or applications, in their technical aspects) will need to be supported by public funds, like local language Wikipedia, translation tools, basic everyday computing applications, local language fonts, very basic social applications (in local language and incorporating local cultural contexts), development content, common applications in development like self help group accounting, open education resources, public health information systems, and many others. There are two key problems in this regards. It appears that astronomical amount of funds will be required, and in any case the supporting public institution will not be able to keep

pace with rapid technology changes. There is a single solution to both these problems. It is not possible for public institutions to work in silo-ed stand alone way that do today. They need to learn to coproduce along with citizens and communities. The free voluntary labour of citizens and communities should go towards co-producing public goods, and not for private appropriation, as is the dominant model today, in absence of any 'public institutional ecology' at all in the digital world. Also with free sharing across and with other public and community groups, the task is quite possible, if proper institutional systems are built. This however is a challenge. Most importantly, public officials will need to develop ways to work with community contributing its free labour, and to organize it purposefully and productively.

The above only deals with the requirements of citizens and communities that are basic, and not being met by markets, while being considered necessary entitlements for all in the emerging information society context. What is considered as such entitlements will keep changing in our societies, but a theoretical framework of such entitlements is in any case required. However, such conceptions do not mean to supplant market activity in these areas in any way. In the same manner as public health and public education etc systems do not preclude private provision of these services.

Lastly, it is important for public institutions to get their heads out of the proverbial sand, and develop competencies and means for public interest regulation of ICT development, and of digital spaces. It is obvious that many of the contexts and needs of ICT and digital space regulation are very new and unique. This uniqueness should be understood properly, and public interest articulated in their regard. It will be required to base policy making on very open and participative, but centrally democratic, models, while strongly avoiding undue influence of vested interests. Policy frameworks also need to remain sufficiently flexible, taking into account rapid changes in this area.

One of the most difficult problems of ICT regulation is the inherent global nature of ICT paradigm, but the absence of needed political structures at the global level. On one hand, governments of the North are vary to move towards the inevitability of a global governance system for a global phenomenon, because of their shared interests with mega ICT corporations based in the North, who profiteer in this unregulated arena. Most Southern countries, on the other hand, rather than directly confront this hypocrisy of Northern governments, as is increasingly done in other global for a like at WIPO, WTO and climate change forums, seem most interested in defending statist status quoist positions from the threatening power of the Internet within their domestic spaces. The problem is classical – of constructing the needed global public institutions to manage a global public. Any progress will depend on the motivations that will push both sides to the policy table for shaping up necessary global policies in this area. The contribution of 'development in the information society' theory and practice here is to highlight how such global public institutions are important to serve the interests of developing countries and the marginalized groups. Once again an approach based on 'citizenship in the information society' provides valuable directions for such analyses and possible ICT governance models.