What are Development-Oriented Policies for a Socio-Economic Inclusive Information Society?

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The New Digital Divide

The United Nations (UN) Secretary General's report to the 11th annual session of the Commission on Science and Technology for Development (CSTD) on "development-oriented policies for a socio-economic inclusive information society"[2] is a very useful document, and in a way a path-breaking one in identifying a new digital divide in terms of access to broadband. It rightly observes that "many of the most desirable applications envisioned for the information society are only possible through broadband access". To understand what is meant here by the 'envisioned' information society one just has to read the 'Declaration of Principles'[3] of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), which describes it in great detail and richness. While not undermining the immense significance of the 'mobile revolution' of the last few years, it is important to appreciate that mobiles as we use them at present – with the information and communication architecture, and the possibilities, built around mobile telephony – constitute a small part of such an information society, and the major challenges in achieving an inclusive, people-centric and development-oriented information society still lie ahead.

It may be of some significance to note that the WSIS documents did not mention mobile telephony even once while noting that the Internet is "a central element of the infrastructure of the Information Society"[4]. This basic fact is not superseded by the 'mobile revolution', especially with the mobile as just a voice application[5]. We therefore need to refocus ourselves on the real vision that WSIS put before us for the information

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[2] http://www.unctad.org/en/docs/ecn162008d3_en.pdf
[3] http://www.itu.int/wsis/docs/geneva/official/dop.html
[4] Tunis Agenda, http://www.itu.int/wsis/docs2/tunis/off/6rev1.html
[5] More applications are beginning to be developed on mobiles, but it is important to understand that most of these are not on open platforms like we know the Internet to be, but on propriety platforms owned by telecom service providers. This fact has very significant implications for people-centric, inclusive and development-oriented possibilities.

society we collectively desire. And in this context we also need to examine the relative failure of dominant ICT for development (ICTD) approaches in most development situations, as experienced by numerous ICTD projects.

After the dot com crash, serious business did not give up on ICTs, acknowledging that ICTs were indeed a powerful phenomenon. It instead took what became known as the 'back-to-basics' approach: to thoroughly re-examine what is it that a business is really trying to do and re-evaluate its basic percepts, and thereupon build its e-business strategies from the scratch. WSIS Declaration of Principles speaks of a "people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society"[6]. Most often we take these terms for granted and then rush to embrace a technology-fascinated view of an emerging information society, where there seems to be but one way to go. The contention of this presentation is that we face important political choices in employing ICTs for development, and in making these choices we need to examine in full detail what it is that we have set out to achieve. **In this context, the vision of WSIS does not remain just some rhetorical terms but becomes the key guidelines for making ICT policy.** Therefore, in order to figure out what could be "development-oriented policies for a socio-economic inclusive information society", which constitutes one of the two themes for the CSTD's 11th annual session, we may need to do a political examination of the meaning of the terms used by the WSIS Declaration of Principles in calling for a "people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society".

What is 'People-Centred, Inclusive and Development-Oriented'?

The term development, as used in the context of a developing country situation, connotes a certain under-development of social and economic institutions[7]. This means that it may not be easy for a society to automatically benefit from the possibilities opened by the ICTs, which are shaped in, and mostly for, the mature institutional ecology of developed countries. **Consequently, information society (IS) policies[8] in the South cannot be a simple extension of such policies in the North.** This formulation is especially relevant in terms of the dominant ideology, which seems to hold that IS is primarily, or almost exclusively, a market phenomenon, and the best thing that public institutions can do is to stay as far from, and be as unobtrusive to, a free play of market forces, as possible. The implications of a relative lack of institutional maturity of a 'development situation' should therefore be built into what could be termed as 'development-oriented' information society policies. It is also significant to note that over the last decade or two, the accent in development discourse is on

[6] http://www.itu.int/wsis/docs/geneva/official/dop.html
[7] This formulation is framed in terms of the problematic notion of 'modernisation', but for the present this terminology 'problem' will be ignored.
[8] Information society policies include technology or ICT policies, but also those concerning social phenomena closely aligned to and/or affected by use of ICTs.

participatory processes, which means that this 'value' may need to be brought to the use and shaping of ICTs as well in their application to development.

The term 'inclusive' is relatively straight-forward. Our policies should aim at including all, which can make a simplistic 'reaching the next billion' kind of policy thinking problematic. The 'next billion' term comes from the business sector, seeking to scan the next market horizon, which is very well for business players driven by market forces. But for public policies the focus needs to be on the last billion, or the last person - how can we 'include' her? Therefore the term 'inclusive', if applied in any meaningful way, completely changes the focus and orientation of information society policies. It may not always be possible to include the last person, but the issue here is whether or not policies are oriented towards that objective, or aim somewhere close by. In this context, it is important to note that ICTs are not just 'services' from which one may or may not be excluded, they are the very 'means' of exclusion or inclusion in an information society. **An inclusive IS therefore may mean a rights-based approach to access to basic ICTs as the very condition of inclusion in the emerging information society.**

Being 'people-centred' is also not merely a rhetorical assertion in the context of IS changes. Many businesses used ICT based work processes to restructure themselves in a consumer-centric manner. Similar organisational and institutional restructuring opportunities are available throughout the IS landscape. Citizen-centric governance is one such possibility. **The use of the term 'people-centric' underlines the fact that information society changes are accompanied with important power shifts at every stage, and do not just contribute system-wide efficiencies.** IS policies need to ensure that such power shifts are towards ordinary people and not away from them. It is significant to note in this context that ICTs often have a strong centralizing, and sometimes dehumanizing, tendencies which means that IS changes may not necessarily be people-centred, and quite likely, the opposite of it.

Making Inclusive and Development-Oriented ICT Policies

The above analysis of the terms used by the WSIS Declaration of Principles, and mentioned in the CSTD's main theme for its 11th annual session, has been made to emphasise that it is the vision of an information society contained in these terms that needs to shape our ICT policies. Which kind of an information society we may be moving towards is not a techno-deterministic given but is politically determined by us. What we want our information society to be like, as captured in our information society policies, will determine our Internet policies – as the Internet is the main socio-technical infrastructure of the Information society. Internet policies go beyond technology infrastructure issues to include issues of content and applications, as well as issues of participation on the Internet. From these Internet policies can we derive our technology infrastructure policies – whether they are about mobile telephony

infrastructure or broadband. **Therefore, is perhaps even more appropriate to speak about and focus on the new 'Internet divide' rather than a new broadband divide.**

At present, however, the technology policies are mostly made *sui generis*, i.e. on their own, just with the broad guiding principle of 'more ICTs to more people' in mind. This is an important policy principle, and so is the strong reliance on market forces to achieve this objective and important policy position. However these two policy principles do not exhaust the policy space in the ICT arena. ICT policies need to be further guided by the political principles of the information society that WSIS envisioned, which informs the present theme put up for the consideration of the CSTD. Such an approach will lead to a change of orientation and focus in our ICT policies.

One of the principal policy issues here is to consider whether policies that enabled the 'mobile telephony revolution' need merely be extrapolated to ensure the 'information society revolution' that the WSIS documents envision. It must be appreciated that mobile telephony is a simple technology infrastructure that can be used equally well by anyone who can speak, and who knows some others owning a mobile to speak to. The information society is much much more than people using telephones. It represents a complex socio-technical system on the Internet, which triggers a great extent of social-structural changes in the wider society. Just 'providing' ICTs is not enough for these changes to happen in the desired directions. In fact the desired direction of the changes, which should be embodied in our IS policies, should determine the nature of ICTs and their provision and distribution. It is the information society dog which should be able to wag the ICT policy tail, and not the tail wagging the dog.

The Indian Example

India is a developing country with huge development challenges but fairly advanced ICT capabilities. Its experience can be instructive to understanding the context and requirements for effective 'inclusive and development-oriented' IS and ICT policies. We can identify four kinds of connectivity and access policy approaches over the last few years in India.

The first kind was to trust the private sector to bring Internet to the villages, where most of India lives, as it has been able to reach mobile telephony. Soon, however, governments realised that this was unlikely to happen and that they would have to take some pro-active steps in this regard.

The second phase was informed by a belief that if governments help extend broadband connectivity to every community, others things will take off on their own. In this phase, a few state governments entered into partnerships with the private sector (mostly with new players and not the existing telecom majors) for bringing inexpensive broadband to all

villages. India has a very extensive fibre optic backbone, and the effort of reaching out to most villages was not that difficult in terms of a simple infrastructure rollout. However, it was soon found that most communities did not use the broadband connectivity in any substantive way. Consequently, these projects – which can be considered of the kind that believed that 'if you lay the pipes, they will come' – lost political drive and most were folded up.

The third phase is represented by the massive ongoing rollout of the 'Common Services Centres' under a central government scheme throughout India. This scheme seeks to develop an institutional framework and mechanism for service delivery – of both government and private services – as creating the necessary context and 'meaningfulness' for connectivity. This mechanism, developed with private sector partnership, is initially subsidised by public funds. While the scheme has a lot of promise, there are significant limitations to such an 'Internet services model', which seeks to bring externally produced services into the local communities. One may also call it a 'plug-in model' that seeks to plug local communities into the global or national information society. However, the opportunity for these communities to determine their own modes of participation in developing a local information society, and in shaping ICTs, remains very limited in this model.

The fourth model, or approach, is as practiced in some pilot projects in India where the ICTs are seen as a local resource for the local community's appropriation. In these projects the local communities are capacitated to develop their own content and applications, in addition to accessing outside services, and to find the best ways of using and engaging with the new ICTs. To characterise these initiatives, one can extend the concept of 'community radio' to speak of 'community ICTs'. It is significant that community radio policy in India, as in most other countries, stipulates that at least fifty percent of the content should be local. However, centralised ICT initiatives underplay the 'local' and participatory aspects of development. These aspects are important to establish centrally in all our ICTD initiatives, and the ICT policies should be informed by these imperatives. For instance, very large amounts of Universal Service Funds that lie un-utilised in India, as in many other countries, should be used to develop capacities of the local communities to engage with ICTs, shape them, and employ them for what the communities find are the most appropriate uses. Such capacities, and locally developed uses of ICTs, will create the all-important 'pull-factor' for rollout of broadband infrastructure, which as discussed above, is missing in case of marginalised communities at present.

Institutional Requirements for Development-Oriented ICT Policies

People-centred, inclusive and development-oriented IS policies are thus highly contextual to different societies and communities. To develop such policies, one needs to understand how communities interact with ICTs for empowerment and achieving other self-determined goals.

The normal tendency is to extrapolate the ICT-mediated social changes of the dominant globalised world to surmise the context and needs of marginalised communities as well. ICTs are powerful general purpose technologies that people and communities use in different ways, and technology policy makers mostly do not have sufficient knowledge about these uses and their contexts. This makes it imperative that IS and ICT policies for development are part of local development policies and are guided by development and social experts, and not exclusively by technologists or technology policy makers. Typically, ICT policies, especially telecom policies, are made by central or federal governments, whereas development activities and policies are increasingly the responsibility of local levels of governance. Effective ICTs policies for development can only be ensured if anchored at such local levels, or at least greatly influenced by these levels, which is an important institutional change that is required in ICT policy making in developing counties.

At national levels, therefore, there are two institutional requirements for making effective 'inclusive and development-oriented' ICTs policies: (1) to have development ministries and actors inform and lead such policies, and (2) to move ICT policy making towards local governance levels.

At the global level, while globalisation squeezes national policy options in many areas, especially for developing countries, it is even more so in the area of ICTs. ICT arena is much more global than perhaps everything else, and in many important aspects of ICT policies individual countries have little policy leeway. ICT policies get shaped in the North, among the Northern governments, and/or among global ICT companies, and they very often do not address the interests of developing countries. Greater South-South cooperation therefore not only gives space for sharing experience and quicker learning in this fast changing area, but can also help to employ the collective strength of developing countries to shape more people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented ICT policies at the global levels.

Specifically, it will be most worthwhile to create an institution for research, analysis and policy support for developing countries in the crucial area of information society policies in general, and policies regarding 'development in the information society' in particular. There have been some proposals, and activities, for pooling capacities and resources among developing countries for global policy negotiations in the WTO and WIPO arenas, but the emerging area of information society policies has not seen the same level of efforts at South-South cooperation. In this area, the initial work of identifying the challenges and opportunity areas itself has not taken off. In the fast changing and very political context of the emerging global IS, such lack of effective global policy engagements can greatly compromise the interests of developing countries.