Project Proposal

'ICTs for participatory local development - Exploring a systemic approach'

Submitted by IT for Change

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'ICTs for participatory local development
- Exploring a systemic approach'

(A proposal for a sub-project under UNDP's project - 'Use of ICT to foster participatory local development and support the achievement of the MDGs.')

1. Brief of the UNDP Project:

The proposed UNDP project seeks to understand the possibilities and implications of employing ICT based systems and processes for local development, in a cross-sectoral and integrated manner. Local development, in this context, includes both social and economic development dimensions as well the overarching institutional framework and participatory processes at the local level.

A four step strategy is proposed for the project:

1. *Taking Stock/ Assessing what works and what doesn't:* This will be an exercise of mapping existing initiatives that provide insights for assessing the impact of ICTs on local development processes, looking specifically at fostering 'a recognition of the need to promote a more systematic integration of ICT in keeping with its role as enabler and integrator'.[1]

2. *Looking Forward:* Going forward from the mapping exercise, the initiative proposes to provide a tool kit, including a practical strategy paper and briefs, to enable a more systemic application of ICTs for local development.

3. *Exploring Needs & Linkages with partners within UNDP and in the UN system:* This component of the project will explore cross-practice/ inter-agency linkages, in the context of the project's objectives

4. *Demonstrating options:* The project will seek to test the approach developed by it through supporting its implementation in at least one area.

2. Activities Proposed to be taken up by IT for Change

IT for Change's proposal focuses on the steps (or activities) 1 and 2 listed above i.e. 'Taking Stock/ Assessing what works and what doesn't' and 'Looking Forward'. In doing so the objective is to bring to bear an approach that can help to contribute to assessing and enhancing the citizen-centric and pro-poor dimensions of local development service delivery and development strategies; and to identify multi-stakeholder concerns and approaches for the development of the toolkit such that the deployment of ICTs at the local development level can be transformative for all development actors.

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[1] From the cited UNDP project document

2.1 Seeking a Systemic Approach to ICTs for Local Development

It is the hypothesis of the proposed research activity that if the full potential of ICTs to enhance local development is to be realised, an integrated and systemic application of ICTs at the local community level is essential. Such an application of ICTs further tends to trigger structural changes at the local level enabling a more integrated development approach. A proper understanding of how to tap this virtuous cycle can help synergise and enhance outcomes over a range of development objectives, encompassing social development, such as areas of health, education etc; economic development, including livelihood support, employment information, job creation and stimulating enterprise; and decentralised and self governance. A systemic approach to ICTs for local development therefore goes beyond the integration of IT systems and delivery platforms[2]; it also encompasses integrated processes of social needs assessments and citizen engagement, and the re-organisation of the ways in which services can be delivered.

At present development activities and service platforms are mostly organised in separate 'verticals', with separate institutional structures, cross-linking at some points in more or less ad hoc ways. Such vertically separated institutional systems are perhaps a necessary feature of what may be called as paper-pen-print-post ICTs. New digital ICTs on the other hand enable 'converged systems' that centre on the crucial impact points (customer, citizen, local). These systems allow for integration of parts of the existing vertical lines of activities across common horizontal layers that directly connect with these crucial impact points in a local community-centric (or, in different contexts, customer/ citizen-centric) way and allow for more effective use of potentially scarce resources. Such integration can facilitate both a high degree of efficiency as well as much greater participation – the key aspects of any local development approach. Some such convergences are already developing, for instance in:

- Community multimedia approaches – these combine community radio, community video and community computing/ Internet (telecentres)
- Open and participatory public information systems – public information is made more accessible over the internet often on common platforms across agencies, and many local initiatives for community-generated data and content have emerged
- Common public service delivery systems – some rudimentary efforts[3] for single window delivery of government services are taking shape in many developing countries; in this context, some questions arise as to the choice of services and their relevance for the poor and as well as assessing the various approaches for delivery (public, private-entrepreneur, social mobilisation/community-based) according to both citizen-centric and effectiveness criteria
- Online processes of citizen's and community's engagement in local development planning through ICT-based processes, often on common platforms – from policy level inputs and local participatory planning to specific service related feedbacks and general grievance redress systems.

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[2] Too many ICT-enabled delivery platforms appear to crafted on the basis of 'technical efficiency' divorced from local planning systems and cultures, and choices of which services to prioritise sometimes appear to be based on perceived 'willingness to pay' rather than social priority.

[3] These are mostly confined to very basic transactions like bill payments and some kinds of certifications from governmental records.

The new ICT-based convergence processes described above, although affording useful starting points for greater across-the-system convergence, are still at present mostly conceived and implemented in isolation. For instance, public service delivery systems often do not take enough note of requirements of participatory public information systems, and other citizen input processes, and the latter are mostly not connected with community multi-media activities, which are shaping a new local 'public sphere'[4], very relevant to local development and participatory planning processes. And all of these processes mostly have little sustained structural connection with substantive domains of development and governance activity, which, by and large, remain organised vertically end-to-end.

At another level, all these vertical and horizontal processes and structures of local development ecology that we have described above, may have little systemic connection with other cross-cutting and very complementary areas of institutional reform towards greater accountability and citizen engagement – such as, right to information and decentralisation. In order to be really successful, both of these reform processes require strong and appropriate information and networking systems, as well as effective delivery platforms that can also service the poor and marginalised. In many places, ICTs are already being used to provide such support to these reforms, though still mostly in the form of stand-alone initiatives.

The above analysis describes the possible areas of integration of development processes through common ICT-based systems at the local level. Such ICT-based systems can also play as important a role in developing new networks among state and non-state actors at the local level, leading to what has been described as a networked poly-centric local governance[5] landscape. This has two principal advantages (1) it creates strong cross-partner accountability mechanisms, and (2) the synergetic effect of different actors working together can greatly increase the capacity at the local level to attain various development outcomes. It must be remembered here that poor accountability of actors who wield power in various social structures, and low local capacities for achieving development outcomes, are the two key obstacles to rapid growth in most under-developed communities across the world.

The required holistic and integrative approach for using ICTs in and for local development systems calls for a transformation in thinking and the approach to local planning processes. The first step that is necessary to proceed in this direction is in the context wherein most development actors – especially those who are not directly engaged in the area of ICTD – have little awareness of the real systemic possibilities that ICTs can provide even in under-developed regions and communities, where resource crunch is a major constraint. It is therefore important to map some good ICT-based local development initiatives that have begun to show clear impact[6], in terms of their evident systemic possibility of being mainstreamed. The second step will be to weave the possibilities shown by these initiatives into a comprehensive road-map for moving towards the adoption of effectively integrated ICT-enabled systems and processes that support local development and are participatory,

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[4] See the works of Jürgen Habermas for the critical importance of 'public sphere' for political institutions. New ICTs enable a new local 'public sphere' with key significance for local development and governance processes

[5] 'Local Political and Institutional Structures and Processes', a summary report prepared for the UNCDF symposium on Decentralization Local Governance in Africa by Dele Olowu, Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, Netherlands.

[6] Many such areas of possible impact are listed in the table on page 4 of the cited UNDP project document.

citizen-centric and pro-poor. This plan or roadmap should be directed both at policy makers, for shifting policy gears towards developing and supporting ICT-based development and governance systems, as well as at practitioners and implementers showing the generic and specific possibilities in various areas of development activities for moving towards such local integrated development and governance systems with transformative capabilities.

These two steps coincide with the first two steps of the project strategy as listed in the cited document on the main UNDP project, under which activities are proposed by the present proposal. We consider the next two steps in the cited document - (1) of developing linkages within the UN system, and possibly outside, and (2) demonstrating the suggested approach - to be as important, but these do not form a part of this proposal. However, we will separately state our interest in participating in these steps as well.

2.2 Proposed Activities

As stated earlier, the present proposal is for two sets of activities under the overall project.

1. *Case Studies relevant to taking stock/ assessing what works and what doesn't:* This will consist of mapping a set of local development initiatives employing ICTs from a citizen-centric and development effectiveness vantage point. The accent in choosing these case studies will be on positive examples of local development initiatives that have begun to demonstrate development impact, and clearly point towards systemic possibilities of integrated ICT-enabled local development processes. The mapping exercise will consist of five country case studies by different researchers having good knowledge of local ICTD and planning activities. Each researcher will be expected to study and present 3-4 such initiatives in each country. Apart from describing and drawing insights from these case studies, each research will present a general survey of the mixed results (on the assumption that they are mixed) of the overall ICTD and e-governance activities in the country of her study. These results will be examined in relation to the hypothesis about the need for an integrated approach to ICT application in local development. One country case study, for India, will be done by the proposing organisation, IT for Change, and the other four will be through its existing global networks of partners. However, new partnerships may also be explored for the case studies, based on an open call.

2. *Looking Forward:* Under this activity head, IT for Change will outline elements for a toolkit which brings together insights and practical elements from the country case studies, especially from the preliminary engagement with practitioners as regards methodology for effective multi-stakeholder engagement for determining priorities and issues related to integration of ICTs in local planning and service-delivery, and weave them into a strategy and a possible roadmap to move forward. This will consist of a practical strategy paper as well as a kit of specific possibilities and tools for implementers, practitioners and interested citizens. It will outline a case for policy makers to consider options towards a strategic and holistic approach to ICT-based systems for local development. It will also describe the broad set of policy and other institutional requirements for such an approach. It will also set out specific possibilities and tools that can help implementers in different areas of development

activity to move towards integrated ICT-based systems, enhancing both, the efficiency of and participation in their respective activities. This document will also point to new processes, partnerships and other institutional possibilities and/or requirements that may cut across the domains of existing development actors, and suggest appropriate roles and structures, and 'points of anchorage' of these in the local development landscape.

A third activity would be a workshop for presentation and validation of the draft of proposed strategy and roadmap based on the research activity to be carried out. This activity is not budgeted for in this proposal but would be a useful second-phase to validate. We are seeking separate funding for this workshop including from funders other than UNDP.

2.3 A Note on Methodology

2.3.1 Research Framework

The research framework will be prepared by IT for Change and shared with the researchers, and finalized after getting their input. Very briefly, the research framework will be designed to test the hypothesis that a more integrated and systemic application of ICTs across the full (or a broader) swathe of development activity at the local level is needed to obtain the real gains that these transformative technologies can bring to local development. These gains will be judged in terms of the specific outcomes sought by any line of activity, which can be in different domains – for instance, education, health, employment creation etc. However, outcomes in terms of cross-cutting issues of increasing participation, citizen-centricity and reaching and integrating marginalized groups and people, will be considered key. Specifically, considerations of gender – as an independent important objective, but also as a marker of social inclusiveness - in new process or system designs that are enabled by ICTs, will be an important area of investigation. At another level, issues of decreased costs, in the mid- to long-term, and increase in the capacity of development and governance interventions will also be examined.

2.3.2 Selection of countries for case-studies

The research is based on country-level analysis undertaken by in-country researchers in five countries. In each country, 3 to 4 ICT-based local development initiatives will be studied. The rationale for a focus on a cluster of initiatives within countries, rather than on discrete initiatives from across different countries is as follows: one, the project seeks an in-depth study of the selected initiatives in their complete socio-political context, and it is more likely that in-country, rather than external, researchers demonstrate such an in-depth contextual understanding. Secondly, since the research basically looks at initiatives with potential for integrated and systemic application of ICTs, 3 to 4 initiatives within a given set of socio-political conditions of a country, provide a better chance of drawing broader insights for what kinds of integration and systemic approach can work, and what may be the necessary conditions for it. Also, country-level studies allow for the framing of research findings within the specific socio-political context of the country, which is not possible when the sample of initiatives is drawn from a broader geographic region.

The countries selected for the case studies will require a certain maturity of ICTD and e-governance activity. This is necessary because the research seeks to look at second or third generation initiatives that point to systemic possibilities, and also because a sufficient range of different initiatives will be needed to draw broad insights.

India, Brazil and South Africa have been identified as three of the five countries. The selection of these countries takes into consideration the fact that ICTD praxis and interventions in these countries have reached relative maturity and there is sufficient extent and range of ICTD and e-governance activities to allow for a better conceptual grounding of the research framework. The choice of these countries is also influenced by the fact that they have a South-South cooperation framework (IBSA) in the area of ICTD activity, and the research efforts can possibly be linked to initiatives under this framework with a view to developing ICTD lessons relevant to countries of the South. Two more countries, other than these will be selected on the criteria of maturity of ICTD and e-governance activity at the local level, and a sufficient breadth of initiatives on the ground.

2.3.3 Selection of case studies

The selection of case studies within each country will be informed by the requirements of the research framework that has briefly been described above in section 2.3.1. A preliminary set of criteria for the selection of interventions is provided:

1. Projects led by local development authorities, or which have well-defined integration of local authorities in the designing and implementing of the intervention.
2. Process transformation that reflects convergent systemic possibilities, wherein the intervention is not restricted to stand-alone efforts or mere demonstration of technical possibilities.
3. ICTs are used for enabling new processes of participation, or strengthen existing ones.
4. Reaching out to and integration of marginalized communities is clearly an important parameter in the system re-engineering process.
5. Structural changes are driven by conscious efforts towards community- and citizen-centricity.
6. Outcomes of the intervention are clearly discernable along one or more aspects of social development, economic development and governance reform.
7. The intervention has sufficient scale, or a clear plan and possibility of a scaled up operation.

2.3.4   Format of the case studies

Country-level analyses of case studies will be written in three parts. These are;

Part 1: An overall country-level assessment of the ICT for development and e-governance experiences, in the context of local development based on desk research. The researcher will first undertake a survey of the broad social, economic and political context to lay out the current imperatives for local development. A broad overall analysis of ICTD and e-governance efforts will be done both for their standalone impact and degree or potential for

mainstreaming and systemic integration, as well as other key parameters given in the research framework.

Part 2: Case studies, of a set of 3-4 initiatives, constituting an in-depth examination of the issues raised in the research framework. The research methodology will largely be qualitative, involving the scoping of secondary data and background literature of each initiative, recording of observations based on field visits to each of the project sites, conducting in-depth interviews with a wide range of actors involved in the project – from project visionaries, to implementers, technical experts, local authorities, sectoral representatives, local elites, community groups, and so on. Interview guides will be developed by the country-level researcher in consultation with IT for Change.

Part 3: Analysis of the case studies. Based on the data collected, a qualitative analysis of the initiatives will be undertaken, particularly in terms of cross-comparison of experiences and models, so as to test the hypotheses. The insights and conclusions will also draw from the general survey and assessment of ICT based initiatives in the country.

2.3.5 Workshop for firming up the findings

Once the country level analyses are completed, a workshop will be held to firm up the emerging findings of the research. This will provide the researchers an opportunity to get into a dialogue with various actors involved in local development. These may include UNDP staff in different practice areas, government officials, both at policy and practice levels, civil society organizations and ICTD and e-governance experts. The emerging findings will be presented at the workshop for a discussion. This will be followed by the finalization of country case studies by researchers, with incorporation of new insights that may emerge from the workshop.

2.3.6 The Roadmap and toolkit document

The insights and practical lessons from the country assessments and cases studies will be pulled together into a roadmap and toolkit document. This will be in two parts, one addressed to the policy levels, and another to the implementers of various development activities at the local levels. See more details about this document in section 2.2 above.