



Round table:  
Inclusion in the network  
society



Canada

## Concept Note

Round table:

### **Inclusion in the network society - mapping development alternatives, forging research agendas**

Bangalore, India

29th September –1st October 2014

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have transformed life in foundational ways, heralding the rise of networks as the dominant form of social organisation. Networked social architecture has made possible new opportunities for information and knowledge sharing, collaboration and social innovation.

For the marginalised, the emerging digital environment opens up new avenues for economic and social advancement. Capitalising on the spaces offered by network society for production and *grassroots innovation*<sup>1</sup>, it is possible for marginalised individuals and groups to renegotiate their social position, moving away from being passive beneficiaries<sup>2</sup> and forging alternative practices for social participation and engagement with development. Digital technologies also bring new opportunities for political awareness and mobilisation on the one hand, and transparency and citizen participation for enhancing participatory democracy, on the other<sup>3</sup>.

However, this potential for transformation is not a given. A large majority of women and the urban poor, for instance, continue to remain excluded from the advantages and benefits of the emergent network society<sup>4</sup>. There is, hence, an urgent imperative to work towards the inclusion of such

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1 Gurstein, M. (2013) [Community Innovation and Community Informatics](#), Journal of Community Informatics Vol.9(3)

2 Heeks, R. (2009) [The ICT4D 2.0 manifesto: Where next for ICTs and international development?](#) Development Informatics Group Paper 42, Manchester, UK: University of Manchester

3 Kuriyan, R., *et al.* (2011) [Technologies for transparency and accountability: Implications for ICT policy and implementation \[draft\]](#), Washington, DC: World Bank

4 Benjamin, S., *et al.* (2007) [Bhoomi: 'E-governance', or, an anti-politics machine necessary to globalize Bangalore?](#) A CASUM-m Working Paper, Collaborative for the Advancement of Studies in Urbanism through Mixed Media (CASUMM)

marginalised groups (especially from the Global South) in the benefits and opportunities that the network society offers, especially for equitable and participatory development.

The experience of first-generation initiatives in the field of ICTs and development has clearly demonstrated that the question of inclusion in the network society cannot be reduced merely to that of access to technology infrastructures<sup>5</sup>. The extent to which benefits and opportunities of the network society accrues depends upon the power that networks can bring, which in turn is dependent upon, “the ability to program/reprogram the network(s) in terms of the goals assigned to the network; and the ability to connect different networks to ensure their cooperation by sharing common goals and increasing resources”<sup>6</sup>. In a globalised social order, inclusion thus means the ability to substantively participate in the dominant networks of information, knowledge, production, and of cultural and resource flows. Network society theory also exhorts us not to lose sight of the mechanisms of global production chains, finance, scientific and research processes, and media, through which structures and rules of exclusion-inclusion get articulated, what some scholars refer to as, the global networked capitalist system<sup>7</sup>.

Therefore, meaningful inclusion in the network society may be said to occur only when, going beyond access, the structural barriers that lead to a lack of equitable opportunities are addressed. In talking about inclusion in the network society, therefore, it would be useful to explore what equitable inclusion is – that is, the manner in which opportunities and gains in the emerging network society are/can be 'programmed' into the structures of network(s). This is an urgent task that has received very little attention in contemporary multi-disciplinary research, especially in the Global South.

Going back a decade, when ICTD was a field that was very nascent, a preoccupation with connectivity and digital infrastructure guided programmatic efforts on the ground. Today, it seems that the question of connectivity has lost its pride of place, as mobiles become central to the network society paradigm. However, as the ITU report on Measuring the Information Society 2012<sup>8</sup> points out, what we are witness to is a gap between developed and developing countries – whereby 'connectedness' itself is a highly differentiated experience. Much euphoria seems to be based on devices or subscriptions, per capita. The story of 'bits per capita', however, reveals that disenfranchisement in the network society may not present itself, if we look at the wrong place. While the average inhabitant of the developed world counted with some 40 kbps more than the average member of the information society in developing countries in 2001, this gap grew to over 3 Mbps per capita in 2010!<sup>9</sup> While high speed broadband mediates everyday techno-social experience in developed countries, the vast majority in developing countries have to contend just with 'voice' functionalities on mobile telephony. Also, those who do have smart phones and can use 'data' on mobiles (like youth) opt-in by default into 'free' content and application lock-ins that come with their mobile service providers, an experience that can be deemed as qualitatively very different from accessing the free Internet.

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5 Helsper, E. J. (2008) [Digital inclusion: an analysis of social disadvantage and the information society](#), UK: Department for Communities and Local Government

6 Castells, M. (2004) Informationalism, networks, and the network society: a theoretical blueprint, in M. Castells (ed) *The Network Society: A Cross-Cultural Perspective*, Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar

7 Prey, R. (2012) [The network's blindspot: Exclusion, exploitation and Marx's process-relational ontology](#), *tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique*, vol 10, no 2

8 ITU (2012) [Measuring the Information Society](#), International Telecommunication Union

9 Hilbert, M. (2011) [Mapping the dimensions and characteristics of the world's technological communication capacity during the period of digitization](#) (1986 - 2007/2010), ITU Working Paper presented at the 9th World Telecommunication/ICT Indicators Meeting (WTIM-11), International Telecommunication Union (ITU), Mauritius, 7-9 December 2011

## Themes

The political economy of inclusion raises serious questions about the much touted cornerstones of the “*networks of hope*”<sup>10</sup> - openness, collaboration and participation. It exhorts us to re-think continuities in social architectures between the real and virtual, examining power as an essential element that produces specific outcomes in network society. It seeks an urgency in addressing the access question with policy alacrity to go beyond access-for-all, examining exclusions arising not only out of not being connected, but being connected in particular ways.

It is essential that we examine the 'buzz' around network society constructs that inspire development strategies, however legitimate such enthusiasm may be. Open government does hold promise for democracy – but whose claims to data drives the open government imaginary? The social media 'revolution' has redefined freedoms – but do emerging cultures of representational politics make room to articulate social justice? Communities online, like wikipedia (and in free software) kindle hope for collaborative knowledge endeavour – but are they free of gender bias? Big data may have demonstrated utility in specific development interventions - but how does it correspond to community and individual rights for control over data and local autonomy in decision making? New 'apps' may bring 'solutions' to old development problems – but what are the interests that mediate these new futures for marginalised communities? And indeed, if the network society ignites ubiquitous social paranoia around 'negative' rights to privacy, censorship and surveillance, what does this mean for the implicit obscuring of discourses of 'positive' rights – 'free access', 'public good', 'public content', 'community media', 'local knowledge', and indeed, 'right to livelihood' or 'right to health'?

There is – more than ever – the need to place informed, critical and normative discussions on ICTs at the centre of the development debate, where ICTs are not exogenous referents, but intrinsic elements of development discourse on inclusion and equity. In order to build a research agenda around equitable inclusion in the network society, IDRC, in partnership with IT for Change, would like to propose a two-day round table of a diverse group of researchers and scholars. The round table will identify critical areas for future research that examine how marginalised social groups can benefit from the unprecedented spaces for co-construction, collaboration and sharing, that network society offers, and explore the structural dimensions that frame inclusion. Evaluating dominant conceptions underpinning the ICTs and development debate, the round table will also propose conceptual frameworks to address inclusion and equity, highlighting dilemmas and directions for policy, as well as critical agenda, for future research.

## Key questions

The key questions that the round table will examine are listed below:

1. What is the emerging structural-institutional ecology framing inclusion in the network society? What readings of the current paradigms of ICT diffusion, use, production and policy allow us to trace power and exclusion?

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10 Castells, Manuel (2012) *Networks of outrage and hope. Social movements in the Internet age*, Cambridge: Polity Press

2. How do we map continuities and disjunctures in development practice when technology meets society, to build a 'new' narrative, in which all people matter?

3. Under what conditions can digital technologies bring about 'equitable inclusion' in the network society? What kind of a structural-institutional ecology can facilitate efforts for 'equitable inclusion' in the network society?

4. What broad questions and specific themes would comprise a pertinent research agenda on networks, development and inclusion? What methodologies would be appropriate in this regard?

These questions will be grounded in cutting-edge debates covering diverse themes and 'entry points' of inquiry.

## Outcomes

The following outcomes are envisaged from the round table:

- Field-building that deepens theoretical inquiry on 'inclusion and equity in the network society'.
- Research agenda-setting on themes at the intersection of networks, development and inclusion.
- Network building to explore possibilities for further work to build a systematic body of knowledge.
- Knowledge products in the form of papers/essays, that can be the basis of a special journal issue.

## Participation

The round table will bring together around 25 participants – leading scholars, development practitioners and thinkers, as well as young researchers and practitioners in the 'ICTs and development' domain – from different regions. Senior practitioners and scholars, who have extensively engaged with the core questions of development – participation, choice, autonomy, equity and ethics; as well as with critical themes pertaining to inclusion in the network society, will be invited to participate. Additionally, the round table aims at creating a space for researchers and practitioners who are starting out in their careers, to be selected to participate, through an open call for abstracts.



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