Thoughts on the critical research agendas in ICTD – a practitioner's perspective

At the opening plenary of the 2010 Conference on Information and Communication Technologies and Development (ICTD, London, 13-16 December 2010), Anita Gurumurthy shared her opinions on research agendas in ICTD from a practitioner's perspective. She asks critical questions about the ethics and the social impact of the network society, beyond a mere economic approach.

'Wealth is evidently not the good we are seeking; for it is merely useful and for the sake of something else'.

Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980, book I, section 5, p. 7.

1. *How to make sure ICTD initiatives are owned by 'communities'?*

'Community' has become an unbounded category because of the network society which constructs locality.

In ICTD, there is an over-valorisation of the digitally-mediated anarchic community that is unhinged from the material realities of life which is the community - as it is situated in geographic localities of social practices, relationship architectures and technological infrastructures. We seem to lose the woods for the trees in our enthusiasm to claim the anarchic-digital, and jettison therefore the geographic-material.

Perhaps much research seems successfully to have de-naturalised people's identities from specific associations to geography, affiliations and solidarity. There is a 'development literature' which takes the utopic perspective of the new solidarities (e.g. through Facebook), and the new space of flows – e.g. sloganeering about the rapid diffusion of mobiles – without due attention to a more systemic anthropology, mediated as much by institutional realities as by technology. If what we are talking about is how ICTs can bring well-being and choice – human rights, human development, equity, sustainability, empowerment and new visions of economic and social policy to address production and distribution –, how do we ethically look at the notion of community?

2. *My second question would be: how do we make sure that the structural analysis of social exclusion is brought to bear upon the explanatory tools in ICTD research?*

It is not about the 5 billion mobile connections nor the billions who are digitally disenfranchised.

- It is really more about what Ethan Zuckerman writes in his recent [interview](#) about limits to online protests and to our analysis of information society and change. We need to go beyond the mere celebration of social media, which can also be seen as the shopping mall in which your protest can be squelched.

- It is about Sami Ben Gharbia's appeal in his [mind-blowing analysis](#) of US co-optation of Arab digital activism, where exclusions in the network society are complex and so inclusions are not just about propping up projects.

- It is about how we measure exclusion. Just like the Human Poverty Index developed in 1997 to address gaps in the Human Development Index which did not reveal much about exclusion.

3. *My third question is: how do we make sense of the numbers, the projections, the*

econometric models, etc.? How to get the same truth differently? How do we make sense of democracy in the network society?

- our ethnographic work must combine the intoxicating possibilities of network society theories (open possibilities) with the wisdom of knowledge from political philosophy and political economy

- and our macro-economic number crunching must be placed right at the centre of how we see institutions and democracy – the big picture of our hybrid realities and multiple localities.

I also have a methodological input for researchers and donors. Huge monies are being invested in studying market-led phenomena and in supporting the so-called 'pro-citizen' networks – the latter basically being the means of political control of developed countries. I would appeal for are new-generation of pilots, which can help us study action research models. This new-generation step forward in ICTD research must be based on the language of imagination as much as on the arguments about needs