Reflections on Digital Technologies and the Internet

A note to the Women's Major Group

for the UN OWG on SDGs meeting – Dec 9th 2014

Submission by IT for Change

The role of the Internet and of digital technologies in structuring our lived reality is beyond doubt. As a core facet of contemporary society, the Internet is central today to the enjoyment of our rights and freedoms. ITU statistics point to how the Internet has developed unevenly throughout the world - 77 percent of people from developed countries are Internet users, the corresponding number for the developing world being 31percent. This gap obviously has implications for development parameters in relation to education and work, and of course, for democracy and wellbeing.

As an axis of global power today, the Internet is key to aggrandising wealth and consolidating hegemony. The WSIS Principles heralded "connectivity (as) a central enabling agent"... in their vision for "an equitable, development oriented information society". More than ten years since the commitment to creating this new society through"universal, ubiquitous, equitable and affordable access to ICT infrastructure and services", remains a distant dream. In fact, the Internet has rapidly lost its public good character, instead evolving as an enclosed commons at the service of global capitalism and rather ironically, as the next frontier of intellectual property control.

It has recently been suggested that a good measure of the 'access divide' would be the amount of kbps per actor. This approach (rather than looking at number of subscriptions per capita) has shown that the digital divide in kbps per capita is actually widening in relative terms. As ITU analysis shows, while the average member of developed countries counted with 29 kbit/s more than a person in developing countries in 2001, this difference got multiplied by a factor of one thousand (to a difference of 2900 kbit/s) in a decade! As the developing world gets connected, its experience of the online world - in terms of citizenship and access to e-participation or easy access to public information, social networks, e-commerce and other dimensions of socio-economic and political life - is dramatically different from the developed world!

At this critical juncture, (especially with the WSIS plus 10 round the corner), the SDG debates need to reclaim access to the Internet as an agenda that goes beyond bland utterances about mobile phones and affordable broadband. The goal is about equitable participation and full citizenship for all in the information society - a task that needs us to think of connectivity from the standpoints of individual rights and freedoms; civic association and democratic participation; and public-institutional capacity to make digital citizenship intrinsic to citizen rights. These are all unique and interrelated dimensions of Internet access that go beyond simplistic calls for smart gadgets and jazzy apps.

The quality of citizenship in contemporary society is predicated upon the quality of digital enablement in social and individual terms. How 'quality of connectivity' is defined and en-gendered will determine women's participation, as equal citizens, in the information society. 'Access' therefore means access to the Internet, *and* to its benefits.

1. Reliable, high quality connectivity is a basic resource and an important public good. A minimum standard (or minimum kbit/s per capita) to measure quality in connectivity, is vital.
2. As an enabler of the effective delivery of other public services, the Internet is crucial for public-institutions. The number of public services with online presence for what is called 'C2G' interactions, per local administrative unit of the government (a district, for instance), is one important indicator of the institutional ecology of ICT enablement that can trigger new citizenship cultures. (See for instance, a web measure model of e-government at http://unpan3.un.org/egovkb/print/printpage.asp?ref=http://unpan3.un.org/egovkb/egovernment_overview/webmeasure.htm).
3. Another vital axis is the civic ties that the Internet can promote. Measuring this freedom, will require measures like tracking websites blocked by the government in a year.

The SDGs discussions need to also account for local and community control over the commons – traditionally critical to women's well being and to their very pursuit of life and livelihoods. To this cherished list of commons - Water, Forests and Land - must be added Spectrum, a resource over which there is heavy contestation in the legal and policy arenas.

The governance of the Internet (as knowledge commons), and the preservation of its public character, are not separable from the issue of people's access to the Internet. Substantive equality in 'access' cannot obtain unless the public character of the Internet is preserved and women's contribution to its benefits is encouraged actively. Open standards, public/ free software and open hardware are non-negotiable bottomlines for ensuring sustainable progress in terms of equity in access. The architecture of the Internet requires urgent policy attention, if an open, Internet-mediated world must also be inclusive, participative and equitable.

Also, as the Internet becomes more and more significant to social, economic and individual advancement, the regulation of spectrum (as natural commons) becomes key to the quality of human life in a digitally-mediated society. For example, The Digital Agenda for Europe - http://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/en/rspp-roadmap-wireless-europe - avers that "access to radio spectrum is essential for a vast range of activities: from telephony and broadcasting, through to transport and space applications. But it is also crucial to ensure that EU citizens in both urban and rural areas can benefit from digital technology and fast broadband connections." In most developing countries, the policy scenario is still playing catch-up, derailed by vested interests and ill-informed about the public interest and equity related dimensions of the regulation of the informational and communications commons.

The inadequate development of broadband and shrill rhetoric around placing mobiles in the hands of women, without corresponding attention to digital literacy and digital enablement at meso-level institutions, haunt the framing of the access debate. The discourse of affordable access to broadband does not imagine equal citizens in the information society - it is a depoliticised, laissez faire vision of market led ICT growth, where the excluded shall be left to experience an altogether different information society, as compared to the mainstream that enjoys high-speed Internet and a life that is connected, mobile and networked on a completely different magnitude.

The global governance of the Internet

The North-South divide in the quality of access, must be seen as a central issue. The Internet allows the wealthy and powerful countries today to build on their historical geo-political advantage. Two questions are central to any debate on SDGs – How are those in the margins affected by this? How is the socio-technical architecture of the Internet perpetuating and reinforcing social, economic, cultural and political injustices. Conversely, what kind of Internet can promote social justice and equity becomes a key question.

Data and information

It is vital that we unpack the rhetoric around openness and interrogate the assumption that Open Data initiatives will always have transformative outcomes - openness opens up the potential risks in the context of unequal access vis-à-vis the capacity to use data – in other words, the risk of the consolidation of existing power structures is very real. Also, the question of the kind of partnerships that are emerging for data development between governments and private sector players needs some investigation. Our (IT for Change's) engagement with the Indian e-government context has alerted us to a worrisome trend where the government is setting up new class of 'body corporates' – information utilities that will access data sets generated by the government, process them and sell them back to the government departments. This move will be coupled with the Indian government's decision to set up a privatised telecentre architecture across the country, that will also be centrally involved in micro-local data collection - a solid recipe indeed, for privatising the heart of the governance system!

We most certainly need a data revolution that can bring the most marginalised to the centre of the governance process, giving power to the periphery, as it were. This paradigm is one about small data as much as big.. data that can harvest and nurture wisdom of all communities for sustainable, local development rather than drive development towards a homogenised vision where 'data' will 'manage' destinies.