

What can ICTs do for the rural poor?¹

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First wrong assumption: *development is a matter of technology.*

Second wrong assumption: *development is a matter of information.*

Third wrong assumption: *information technologies are equal to development.*

I'm afraid these assumptions are leading the camp of the official representation at the World Summit of the Information Society (WSIS). During the long preparatory process, we have seen how reluctant are certain governments and agencies to deal with the issue of information from the point of view of society, and how inclined they are to keep the discussion limited to a wider distribution of ICTs in developing countries. We have seen the most encouraging participation from the organised civil society at the country level, and great willingness from all sectors of society to frankly discuss with governments and the private sector, the issues that are crucial for social, economic and cultural development. However, the results of all preparatory conferences are very poor. They just want to go ahead with the usual business, with little concern for a social and human rights based approach. In the minds of the profitable organisation "bureaucrats without borders", technology supersedes content.

Many governments and agencies have remained hard hearing or completely deaf to the argument that the "digital divide" is a social divide, an economic divide, a cultural divide and a political divide... Haven't I mentioned a "technological divide"? It is on purpose, because I believe this is the least important issue if the others are not taken into consideration. In the end, the technological gap will be easily bridged because it is market driven. If the market expands in developing countries, hardware and software companies will be glad to intervene, as they are doing already. However, if we are looking at ICTs supporting sustainable social development, access to computers and Internet is far from being the answer.

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Over fifty years of failed attempts to promote development in Third World countries, particularly Africa and Latin America, have demonstrated that the paradigms of development could not be dictated by the North, and that the development agendas of bilateral and multilateral organisations had not taken into consideration social, political and cultural factors that determine social change and development. People are poor because of social inequality, which embraces much more than just access to information. Development paradigms have gone through various phases to realise this.

The first phase, in the fifties and sixties, bet on the introduction of new technologies and techniques to improve agriculture, at a time where the rural population in most developing countries was still a majority. The assumption was: “Poor peasants need better technology to produce more crops, so they can sell them and improve their lives.” Little consideration was given to how the international market operates, who fixes the prices, and who, in the end, benefits from the work of those poor peasants that are now living in worst conditions than 40 years ago. Today, there is less productive land for the poor and more for the wealthy. The land more was productive forty years but has been exhausted by intensive harvesting of commodity crops such as cotton or sugar cane.

The second paradigm, during the seventies and eighties, recognized that technology alone is not the silver bullet, and that information and knowledge are also important to help the rural population to improve their living conditions. The assumption, however, had a dangerous arrogant slant: “we have the knowledge, we know what the poor need, we will gracefully share our knowledge with people in developing countries”. Actually, a very limited perspective this was, because it did not take into consideration the local knowledge cumulated over hundreds of years, by cultures that were alive and well while pests ravaged Europe.

In recent years, the role of communication in development and social change has been acknowledged. A number of development organisations began to understand that information and communication is not the same thing. Information alone does not generate changes,

whereas communication –which implies participation, sharing of knowledge in a horizontal way, and respect for diversity and culture- is key to social change.

Unfortunately, too many development programmes today are still basing their approach on the diffusion of innovations theories of the sixties, often mocking participatory approaches, but seldom really involving communities in the decision making process, because it clashes with institutional agendas and the “annual report” syndrome.

This last decade of incredible expansion of the new Internet based information technologies, was initially presented as the magic box containing the answers for poverty, exclusion and underdevelopment. We have seen a kind of competition whereby development agencies and corporate interests teamed to achieve equality through “Internet for all” or “e-mail for all”. We often read news or see reports on fascinating exploits of connecting Timbuktu to the web or sending e-mails between islands in the South Pacific, through satellite connections activated by solar panels. The marvellous technology feats that fascinate us all are promoted as the vehicle for knowledge dissemination and equal access to information. In other words, democracy could be achieved by accessing Internet. Computers along with the promise of a better life are parachuted over small villages where there had never been electricity or telephone, often not even safe water. Much is said about technology and very little about contents.

The emerging models range from the commercially driven Internet Cafés or Cyber cafés, to more socially oriented models that involve not only setting up computer stations, but providing adequate training and developing local contents. These are called Telecentres, Community Media Centres, Village Knowledge Centres, Information Kiosks, Public Cabins, Info Plazas, Telecottages, among other names, depending on the institutional sponsorship and the region of the world. Few, however, linked the ICTs push to existing organisations, existing development projects and existing communities that watched these developments from a prudent distance and were seldom really involved. For one success story of ICTs in development, there are fifty failures. Annual reports often claim success the very year when a particular ICT project was implemented, guided more by enthusiasm than reality check. We should go back and evaluate all these experiences after four or five years, to see if they are

really contributing to social development. Very few will pass the test. Already, some independent evaluations are generally critical of most existing projects.

There are several reasons for that, although we will not expand on them now. Briefly, we have referred already to the development paradigms that are vertical, that show a certain level of arrogance from North to South, and that respond to institutional agendas rather than to the real needs of the communities. To understand the failures we should seriously concentrate on how the Internet and the World Wide Web have been shaped: largely in English, with contents that have little to do with the interests of the poor in developing countries. I have written elsewhere that 90% of the contents of the World Wide Web is irrelevant to 90% of the population of the Third World.

Are we saying that there is no role for the New Information and Communication Technologies to improve the lives of the rural poor? There is an important role for ICTs at the service of rural populations, but only if they are envisioned from the perspective of users and through their active participation. The discourse on ICTs for development is often well crafted for institutional reports, but seldom corresponds to what is really happening on the ground.

A smaller world with bigger communities

For ICTs to contribute to the development of the rural poor, certain conditions have to be met, which are seldom found today:

The first is ownership and appropriation, which can only be achieved through a process of participation from the inception of each project. This is a foremost condition particularly when seeking for sustainability, which has been the weakest aspect in most of the current experiences. However, it is important to get it right when we say “ownership and appropriation”. It does not refer to technology alone. It refers to the ownership of the *communication process*, as opposed to a badly defined “access” whereby the conditions are dictated by external agendas. Ownership and appropriation refers to strengthening the local capacity to understand the importance of communication, knowledge and networking in social

development. It refers to communities acquiring the necessary skills to manage ICTs as a tool at the service of well-defined areas of development and education.

The second condition is the development of local contents, equivalent to “localizing” the World Wide Web. Rather than an ocean of information that is irrelevant to local needs, communities need small ponds of sweet water that are suited for their consumption. Access to the World Wide Web should not prevent each local experience to develop its own demand-driven content, as it is done at the Village Knowledge Centres in Chennai, India. Farmers need to know the price of their crops at the city market, if there is a veterinarian at a walking distance, or if the local government has credits available for them.

The third condition is language and cultural pertinence, which relates with the development of local contents. Rural poor need to have access to information in their own language, and presented in a layout that they can understand and that is culturally appropriate. Language is the vehicle that communities use to communicate; but it is also the essence of their identity. Strengthening cultural values through communication tools, including ICTs, can only benefit long-term sustainable social development. Communities are often menaced and at risk of internal divisions because of external influences, religious or political. By bolstering local identity communities are better equipped to face the ongoing cultural negotiation process.

The fourth is convergence and networking, both essential for sustainability of the communication process. We want to make the world smaller and communities bigger, however, it is a paradox that many of the ICT for development projects are born as deserted islands, with very little rapport with other similar experiences in the same province, country or region. *Networking* is important not only in terms of information exchange, but also to contribute to capacity building of newer experiences. As for *convergence*, it is important to acknowledge the opportunities that exist to build on existing communication processes, such as community radio, which has grown enormously in the past decades, and seems to be better culturally pertinent and adapted to the need of communities. ICT projects have a lot to learn from community radio in terms of local management, creation of local contents, networking, or the use of appropriate technology. However, convergence should not be understood as a

technology challenge alone. ICT projects must converge with local schools, local libraries, local development projects and local social organisations to be effective in helping to improve the lives of the rural poor.

The fifth condition, appropriate technology, also relates to sustainability. During decades we have discussed the need of appropriate technologies for development, particularly in the fields of agriculture and health. However, when it comes to information technologies, projects are easy preys of hardware and software companies willing to penetrate new markets. We have seen so many projects equipped with expensive computer equipment and software, which are used often at less than 5% of their capacity. Anyone of us is responsible for that distortion, because in our daily lives, we also use our computer equipment at less than 5% of its potential. Independent evaluations have shown that in rural multimedia projects, users often pay no attention to computers, but are keen to use the telephone or the photocopier. Partly, the reason is the lack of useful contents but it is also the type of technology being utilised, which is not appropriate to the local context. The Simputer project may help to bridge this gap.

If I had to synthesise the substance of the above participatory approach in one sentence this would be: leave *access* behind and adopt *process*, mind more about *contents* and less about *machines*.

I will end with some questions that could guide our reflection every time we face a new project:

- Who is setting the agenda: international agencies or communities?
- Which are the mechanisms of consultation with the intended beneficiaries or partners?
- Do they participate in the decision-making process since the inception?
- How much of the effort is devoted to technology and how much to content development?
- Are ICTs benefiting the poorest segment of society?
- How is the international cooperation dealing with community ownership?