

# Political Economy of Information Society

*New ICTs have induced basic changes in so many aspects of our everyday lives that information society in the mainstream is seen primarily as a cultural phenomenon. Cultural-anthropological examinations and accounts of information society, which seek to look at it dispassionately, as a process signifying inevitable change, abound, and are no doubt important. However, these changes in which all of us are so centrally involved also require a political economy approach focussed on issues of shifts of power and differential gains and losses for different social groups. IT for Change has chosen to articulate a strong political economy view and analysis of information society developments, an approach we view as vital to deal with issues of exclusion and marginalisation, as well as those concerning new opportunities for equity and social justice.*

*We began by looking at how the technology arena is 'congenitally neoliberal' and how the business sector is seen as the default leader and benefactor regarding all issues concerning ICTs. Examples of this phenomenon range from telecentres run by corporates to e-governance policies drawn up by private sector consultants<sup>5</sup>, often from technology companies having a direct conflict of interest. Moreover, we increasingly see that it is not only the ICT sector that is neoliberal, but the information society phenomenon has a significant neoliberalising impact on most sectors, eroding the norms and institutions associated with democratic public life and citizenship. The political economy question here therefore is not just of production, ownership and distribution of and access to ICTs, it extends far beyond. It impacts the basic institutions of political economy itself, the nature of the state, role of the market and the distinctions between public/commons, on one hand and private/commercial on the other.*

## Political Economy of ICTD

IT for Change responded to IDRC's call for papers on the theme of 'open development' and our proposal was accepted for a presentation in a workshop on the same theme in Ottawa, Canada, in May 2010. In our paper, 'Open But Not Public: Membership in the Information Society as a Club Good', we wrote a comprehensive critique of the concept of openness, which comes from the technology discourse and is now being applied to the field of development itself. This paper critically analyses the elements of openness – greater access, participation

and collaboration, as articulated in IDRC's call for papers, citing empirical evidence from the field of Information and Communication Technology Development (ICTD) and Internet Governance. It argues that the superceding of the idea of public by that of 'openness' will have a serious exclusionary impact, with implications for institutions in the public sphere, democracy and development, as well as those of economic production and distribution. (A draft of the paper, being finalised for a book to be brought out by IDRC can be seen at <http://itforchange.net/development-and-icts/poleco-is/279-opennotpublic.html>)

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5 Both tendencies are central to most Indian e-governance plans.

A highlight of our work this year has been our participation in the Second Harvard Forum on ICTs and Development. Organised by IDRC and the Berkman Center, the event promoted a debate on the future of ICTD. Sharing a discussion space with two Nobel Laureates - Amartya Sen and Michael Spence - at the event was an honour. We were able to argue that the current ICTD outlook and practices are overly reliant on market mechanisms. We donned our advocacy cap at the event to suggest that ICTD needs to embrace a citizenship and capability approach, going beyond the simplistic celebrations of market miracles in ICT diffusion. We also made a case for telecentres as a public and community resource. Our paper, 'Social Enterprise to Mobiles: The Curious Case of a Propped up ICTD Theory' which is due to be published along with others from the Forum can be found in its draft form at [http://publius.cc/social\\_enterprise\\_mobiles\\_%E2%80%93\\_curious\\_case\\_propped\\_ictd\\_theory/091709](http://publius.cc/social_enterprise_mobiles_%E2%80%93_curious_case_propped_ictd_theory/091709).

At the ICTD 2009 Conference in Doha, we organised an invited panel on 'Tracing the Genealogy of ICTD Research: Premises, Predispositions and Paradoxes of a Field in the Making'. The panelists and participants critically discussed the overall factors that characterise the somewhat unique field of ICTD, especially with regard to processes of knowledge production. (The concept note of the panel and submissions of panelists are available at <http://www.itforchange.net/development-and-icts/cci/210-ictd-2009.html>)

IT for Change presented a 'Power Analysis Tool' to examine ICTD research and project design from the perspective of examining whose interests were served and whose ignored, at a Learning Clinic at the IDRC's Pan Asia Networking conference in Penang, Malaysia, in June 2009. We considered two specific case studies, (1) the e-Choupal project of the

Indian multinational commodities company, ITC, and (2) ICT in education policy making process in India. We used the two concepts of 'tech goodies' and 'tech power' respectively to draw out the salient differences between an apolitical and rights-based approach to ICTs. Tech goodies connotes a view of ICTs as low cost - high benefit artefacts or even freebies for the masses, over which however, people have little control. The idea of tech power conveys the desirability of creating and shaping technology in a manner that can always be controlled by users to their advantage, and as determined by them. Accordingly, we argued that ICTD discourse and practice should address issues of power and not just deal with the manifest benefits of ICTs.

At the Strategy Council meeting of the UN-Global Alliance on ICTs and Development (GAID) in Monterrey, Mexico, in September 2009, we critiqued the lack of clarity and development focus in GAID's work, also objecting to the manner in which positions in the governance structures of GAID were being openly linked with resource contributions. We were assured that not all members of the governance structure were expected to contribute. However, we do still consider an open call for contributions made to anyone aspiring to get elected or reconfirmed in GAID's governance structure highly problematic, on principle. We also continue to have issues with the domination of the private sector and a preoccupation with a solutions perspective, in GAID's work. However, since this is the only UN space on ICTs for development, it may not be pragmatic to completely disengage from it.

The Strategy Council meeting was held on the sidelines of the annual assembly of GAID, where one of IT for Change's directors moderated the session on 'Affordable Computing Models for

I consider IT for Change to be one of the most significant contributors to the ICT for Development policy discussion both from a "South" perspective, but also in full awareness and contributing to the larger global discussions on those issues. I should add that almost uniquely their policy contributions are deeply embedded in the practical experience of working directly at the grassroots in implementing community informatics programmes at the village level.

*Michael Gurstein, Ph.D.  
Director of the Centre for  
Community Informatics  
Research, Development and  
Training, Vancouver,  
Canada*



*IT for Change at the Harvard Forum on ICTs*

Schools', which had ministerial and CEO-level participation. He also actively participated in the meetings of the communities of expertise on governance and on gender.

## Political Economy of Knowledge

One of the most important aspects of the political economy of information society is the political economy of knowledge. Developed countries see proprietisation of knowledge as the bedrock of their continued global domination. Developing countries are mostly caught between the increasingly oppressive global and bilateral trade and intellectual property (IP) agreements and the fear that if they themselves do not develop strong IP frameworks, they will simply lose out in the knowledge economy race.

IT for Change submitted a proposal to hold a workshop on 'Cross-border Enforcement of a New Information Order: Issues of Rights and Democracy' at the annual meeting of the Internet Governance Forum in Vilnius, Lithuania, in September 2010. The proposal has been accepted. The panel will have representatives from governments of Brazil and Spain, Google, European Broadcasting Union and Consumer International, with IT for Change moderating the workshop. The workshop will examine how the Internet can

become a means of enforcing IP policies of dominant nations across the world through questionable means, which can include third country communication interception and private policing through Internet Service Providers. Some such provisions are feared to be included in the pluri-lateral treaty called Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement, being negotiated among Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries. Since the Internet is essentially global, any treaty agreed to by the most powerful economies is expected to become the default for the whole world.

The Third World Network, one of the global organisations through to which our South-South alliance is getting strengthened, organised a meeting of a few Southern NGOs and experts in May 2009 in Geneva for developing a framework for 'development friendly IP policies'. We attended the meeting and argued that while legal frameworks of IP are important to ensure democratic flows of knowledge, equally important are issues arising from the very design of global ICT systems which provide the infrastructure for the knowledge flows. We described how, even without resorting to IP based restrictions, dominant players can skew knowledge flows to their advantage through the manipulation of ICT based techno-social infrastructure. We also attended a national-level meeting on IP and development among activist groups dealing with IP issues in different sectors, held in New Delhi in February 2010, and presented similar perspectives, as well as concrete areas for advocacy.

In September 2009, we participated in the workshop on 'Good Planning or Benign Imposition? Innovation, Emergence and Risk in Development Research: Learning from ICTD', organised by IKM Emergent

(IKME). IKME is a programme sponsored by the Dutch government to explore the significance of local knowledge and perspectives in development cooperation. The association with IKME has since expanded in two directions. We are now a part of the evaluation team of the IKME programme itself as southern development actors. We are also working with the group within IKME that looks at the semantic web and is exploring how online architectures of information can privilege knowledge generated by southern actors.

## ICTs and Human Rights

Human rights debates are increasingly being permeated by information society transformations. While it is clear that the contexts of many freedoms and rights are mutating, the big picture is still in a historical flux. However, hitherto, the accent in human rights discourses around the Internet has been on negative rights like freedom of expression and the right to privacy, with social, economic and cultural rights being largely ignored.

While the national governments will need to grapple with these new contexts, global institutional frameworks also need to be revisited. The UN has begun to engage with this need to articulate the meanings of various rights in their information society connotations. The independent expert to the UN on cultural rights approached IT for Change this year for inputs to inform her report to the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) on how the information society context compounds the category of culture as a concept and as an everyday practice. Our input makes recommendations for further action in the areas of: 1. Internet Governance and Cultural Rights; 2. Public Support for Culturally Diverse and Local Content Production; 3. Educational

Content and Information and Communication Technologies in Schools; and 4. Engagement with 'Digital Natives'. (See, [www.itforchange.net/images/anita\\_unhrc.pdf](http://www.itforchange.net/images/anita_unhrc.pdf)). We participated in a seminar organised by the UNHRC in Geneva in Feb 2010 and since then we have been continuously engaged in a dialogue with the independent expert to the UN. We have sought to alert the independent expert to debates on the increasing threat of corporate control of the Internet and how this complicates the challenges and possibilities for diversity of cultures online.

## Looking Ahead

We have been able to re-look at what doing advocacy is and felt the need to also reach out to local academic spaces for engaging students and their experiences of new technology to build a wider discursive arena for a southern information society. We have delivered lectures this year in local colleges in Bengaluru as well as presented our work at various institutions abroad, like Brown University in the US, and the Institute of Development Studies, Sussex, UK. We have begun to have rewarding associations with students from local and non-local colleges, and we are getting many requests for internships from students.

We now have a robust set of basic frameworks for a political economy analysis of information society developments; concepts like publicness versus openness, citizenship versus a market-consumer framework, and a rights based approach versus efficiency based ones. Over the next year, we plan to build a comprehensive political economy theory of information society from a Southern perspective. We are also now able to frame our practical project level work more neatly within this larger theoretical framework.