

# ICTs and the MDGs: *On the Wrong Track?*

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The purpose of this article is to prompt some questioning of current "e-development" priorities. We have too readily assumed the Millennium Development Goals must be the priority for application of ICTs. Yet the MDGs themselves can be challenged, as can the relevance of applying ICTs to those goals. This article will argue that we ought at least to be considering some different priorities if we want to make most effective use of the opportunities that new technology affords.

## **Questioning the Millennium Development Goals**

The Millennium Development Goals are an attempt to directly address fundamental injustices and inequities that currently blight our planet. Like Mother Theresa they are on the side of the angels, and we should follow their lead without question. Right? Wrong: their heart may be in the right place but development should be guided more by the head than by the heart, and we certainly have the right to question these Goals.

We can firstly question them from a political angle. The MDGs arguably arose as a counter-blast to the perceived failure of the "neo-liberal" agenda – the one favouring markets, the private sector, and globalisation – to deliver for the world's poor. Yet the new agenda falls into many of the same traps as the old one.

Neo-liberalism was accused of being "hegemonic": of imposing a one-size-fits-all model that allowed no deviations from orthodoxy. But the new approach does just the same, forcing policies through the MDG filter and hammering them hard until they pass through. Where is the flexibility? Where is the consideration that there might be alternative, even better, paths to development?

Neo-liberalism was also accused of being an invention of the North imposed on the South by international agencies. Isn't that true of the MDGs as well? Developing nations have been dragged from one Northern-inspired orthodoxy to the next: a state agenda in the 1960s and 1970s; a private sector agenda in the 1980s and 1990s; and now perhaps an NGO agenda in the 2000s. Where is the breathing space and support for countries to construct their own individual agendas?

We can secondly question the MDGs from a practical angle. Take a historical perspective and point out which of the rich, industrialised nations got rich and industrialised by placing MDG-type goals at the heart of their development strategies. Can you find them? I doubt it. My adopted home town – Manchester – was the original laboratory, the original motor for the dramatic change that was the

industrialisation process. It catalysed England's transformation from a relatively poor agricultural economy to a relatively rich developed economy; much the same transformation that so many developing countries today seek to achieve. But this change was achieved not thanks to poverty-friendly policies but through an often unpleasant and unruly dash for wealth. Of course, philanthropy and social development played their part, but as after-effects of the transformation, not its driving forces.

So the development agendas emanating from the North are very much a case of "do as I say" not "do as I do". Political economist Ha-Joon Chang calls this "kicking away the ladder": denying for developing countries the very paths to development that industrialised countries used. We've seen it sometimes with the environmental agenda: Northern nations that were dirty-as-can-be while they got rich telling the South that it must take the green route. And with the neo-liberal agenda: the US and Europe – exhorting the developing world to "roll back the state" and "leave it to the market" – suffering collective amnesia about the central role played by government intervention in their own development.

With these cases there is the strong whiff of conspiracy. That's less likely with the MDG agenda though it's still a question worth asking: who benefits from promoting that agenda? Do all the similarities noted above mean that neo-liberalism is the wolf dressed in MDG clothing? Whatever the case, we have a consistent pattern: "we in the North took the high road, but you in the South must now take the low road".

If this "ancient history" referring right back to the Victorian era does not please, then we'll set a quiz from more modern times. Which developing country has lifted more people out of poverty than any other (some 200 million in the final two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century)? The answer: China, a country's whose policies do not fit the MDG mould.

China reminds us that development is nasty and that development hurts. The MDG agenda is trying to soften the blow. The danger is, though, that it will deliver no punch at all.

### **ICTs and the MDGs**

We can leave a question mark over the MDGs and move on to look at their effect on ICT priorities in development. Twenty, even ten years' ago, the ICTs and development agenda was a broad church, covering most conceivable ways in which the technology touched all aspects of socio-economic development. Today, the "e-development" agenda has been pressed through the MDG filter, leaving many elements behind.

We are left with an agenda that prioritises the use of ICTs in those domains in which they are often least able to be implemented, least able to succeed, least able to sustain and, hence, least able to make a contribution to development. One can just envisage the meetings in development institutions:

- *Boss*: "OK chaps, we need to apply ICTs in development. Where shall we put the computers?"

- *Underling no.1*: "Well, sir, how about in some high-tech firms in the city that could use them to create jobs and improve exports?"
- *Boss*: "You idiot, that's not what poverty alleviation and social development are all about. Get out of my sight."
- *Underling no.2*: "I know, sir, how about putting them in a small village where there's no electricity, most people are illiterate, and everyone is really poor."
- *Boss*: "Brilliant suggestion; here's \$100,000; go and do it."

Strip away all the hype about rural telecentres and e-government for the masses and telemedicine for remote regions and e-commerce for microenterprises and what you've got – when you apply ICTs to the MDG agenda – are the rusting tractors for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Most of these projects never properly work, and for those that might just get off the ground, go back two years later, and it's all crumbled to dust. Yes, there might be exceptions but they are just that – exceptions; occasional minnows swimming against a rip tide of failure.

Our evidence base on this does need strengthening but a recent survey suggests at least one-third of such projects are total failures and one-half are partial failures, leaving little room for success. We are often blinded from this reality by the blizzard of e-development pilots, prototypes, plans and possibilities where "would" and "could" replace "does" and "has".

A classic example is Gyandoot; an initiative of computer kiosks in rural India. In 2000, amid much fanfare, this won awards from the Stockholm Challenge and the Computer Society of India. Later studies of Gyandoot in 2002 did not hit the headlines, but they found kiosks abandoned or closed; absurdly low usage rates of once every two-three days; and few signs of developmental benefits.

### **What Future for ICTs and Development?**

Despite the lack of exposure given to realities like Gyandoot, the message of ICT failure has trickled back to some development organisations. The result has been a backlash against e-development. As we know from gender, talk in these agencies of "mainstreaming" ICTs can be a code word for "ignoring".

The idealists – and good luck to them – are continuing to chase the dream, and believe there is gold at the end of the ICT/MDG rainbow. For the cynical realists, what is to be done? Should we join the backlash? I think not.

It is understandable that ICTs should be marginalised in the MDG front-line: Bill Gates' decision to support Africa by pouring millions into medical initiatives rather than into ICTs is both symptomatic and appropriate. What is inappropriate is the more general threat that technology is marginalised in the development agencies. It is technology that generates the wealth of enterprise which, in turn, pays for all social development. It is technology that has delivered the productivity gains that enable lives of material comfort for many in the world that would have been unthinkable just two centuries ago.

So ... let us question the MDGs, and let us question the role of ICTs in delivery of those goals, but let us not throw the baby out with the bathwater and abandon ICTs altogether.

Instead, let us see where ICTs are having a positive development impact. To move forward on this, we must divide out two parts of the ICT-and-development relationship:

- ICT consumption: the use of technology in applications like e-commerce and e-government.
- ICT production: the creation of hardware, software and other components of the ICT infrastructure.

Our evidence base is once again weak but the straws in the wind all point in one direction: the developmental gains from investing in ICT production are greater than for investment in ICT consumption. Put simply, agencies and governments with, say, \$100,000 to spend would better use it to incubate new IT firms rather than to create a service delivery Web site. Put another way, if you do invest in that Web site, look for the benefits in the firm that *made* the Web site more than in the government department that *uses* the Web site.

Supporting ICT production doesn't just mean helping large hardware and software firms in developing countries. It includes that but the ICT sector can be a much broader, much deeper development activity. It encompasses IT consultants, IT trainers, Web designers, Internet service providers, data services providers, etc. And it runs from the top to the bottom of the economy. India's Tata Consultancy Services may be nudging the global Top 10 in software but it sits alongside tens of thousands of tiny backstreet database developers, PC assemblers and the like.

For an example of what can be achieved, take a look at that part of Kerala's Kudumbashree initiative that is inducting women from below-poverty-line families into the ICT sector through hardware and services enterprises. These create real and direct benefits for poor communities – jobs, incomes, skills, empowerment, gender equalities – in a way ICT consumption projects cannot. Yet this most valuable aspect of ICT's role in development falls under the radar of most development agencies.

Those agencies need to take a closer look at what ICT production has to offer. They also need to reconsider their ICT consumption priorities. Some suggestions, then, for those still investing in ICT consumption projects:

- *Break the MDG hegemony*: the MDGs may be necessary for development but they are certainly not sufficient. We need a continuing emphasis on economic growth, and this covers ICTs too. To take just one example, the current MDG-inspired prioritisation of ICT applications for small- and micro-scale firms seems odd given these are the enterprises that have the least impact economically in terms of growth, incomes, efficiency and exports. At least equal weight should be given to assisting medium- and large-scale firms. They still need help but they are far better equipped to make sustainable use of ICTs, and are the main engines of wealth creation and competitiveness.
- *The back office not the front office*: ICT initiatives reaching out to citizens are beloved by politicians and agencies because they grab media attention. They are also the ones that fail. Far more effective are the back office applications that help

better planning, decision-making and management. They may not attract the limelight but they are more likely to sustain and to have a mass-scale impact. Here, the motto could also be "the data centre, not the telecentre".

- *Follow some cowpaths*: sometimes agencies need to lead countries and communities in new directions they would not go by themselves; but they don't always have to do this. With ICTs it often makes sense to take the organic approach of following fashion, rather than the inorganic approach of trying to create your own fashion statement. The ICT fashion already being followed in so many developing communities is the cell phone, not the PC. So agencies should be paying far more attention to the development potential of mobile telephony.

### **Summing Up**

The MDGs are not the devil's brew, deliberately cooked up for the purposes of under-development. But nor are they tablets of stone that "shalt not be questioned". They do run the risk of skewing the development agenda, and they also run the risk of marginalising ICTs. We must have the courage to challenge the MDGs and to take a broader look at ways in which ICTs can contribute to socio-economic development. If we do not, we may miss a generational opportunity to properly harness new technology for the good of all.