

Is the Communication/Rights Agenda Damaging eDevelopment?

Four straws in the wind that a communication/rights agenda has a strengthening hold on debate and direction of e-development (use of ICTs for socio-economic development):

- The domination of rights-focused organisations and discussion at UK WSIS preparatory meetings.
- The breadth and depth of views and experiences outlined in i4d's July 2005 issue on human rights and ICTs.ⁱ
- The key emphasis on "people-centred communication" in the ICT for Development Platform.ⁱⁱ
- The metamorphosis of ICT-for-development units in some donor agencies into "information and communication for development" units.

This agenda – rooted in the rights-based approach to development, and incorporating the right to information and communication as a core entitlement – has positive features. It integrates e-development into a broader development agenda. It links e-development to a history of actions on rights, information and communication. It avoids a techno-centricity that can be naïve and blind to broader context.

But now the bad news. The communication/rights agenda can damage e-development in three ways.

One, by losing support for e-development if it fails to deliver anything new. 1970s-style calls for more community radio and reruns of a decades-old communications agenda will not deliver political or financial support. Just a "been there, done that" feeling among key stakeholders.

Two – and related – by failing to convince. Constant exhortations that information and communication are transformative forces in development sit uneasily with a lack of convincing evidence. Repeated anecdotes about "those poor people in Gujarat with their photocopiers" or "that man who saved his whole village from the tsunami" or "that cool Zapatista Web site" do not constitute convincing case history.

Three, by sidelining key developmental roles of ICTs and thus narrowing the e-development agenda. So what's going missing? One thing's missing because it's boring:

- a) **Data processing.** Before the Internet, there were things called "computers" and these machines used to process data inside organisations and deliver information that could help staff make better decisions. OK, not very sexy but quite important if those internal decision-makers are policy-makers or growth-oriented

entrepreneurs or NGO managers or disaster coordinators, etc. A pity to lose all headway on MIS and DSS because everyone's gone Webby.

Another thing's missing because technology has been relegated to the background, allowed a role only as a tool of consumption and not seen from a production perspective:

- b) **Value chain core.** ICTs can be the core productive technology of an enterprise: used for data entry work, Web site development, cybercafe operation, etc.; or the core service technology for an enterprise: used in IT training, IT consulting, computer maintenance, sales of consumables, etc; or the core output of an enterprise: assembling hardware, writing software, etc.

Evidence is limited but it is growing about all these "IT sector enterprises". It suggests that, compared with ICT applications under a communication/rights agenda, this type of ICT application delivers direct development benefits that transform livelihoods – jobs, incomes, skills and empowerment – even to marginalised groups.ⁱⁱⁱ

The answer to the title question, then, is "potentially, yes". If it fails to show what is new and credible about ICTs in development. If it skews funding and action away from dull-but-worthy data processing. And if it skews funding and action away from exciting-and-transformative IT sector enterprises.

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<http://www.manchester.ac.uk/idpm/dig/briefings.htm>

ⁱ <http://www.i4d.csdms.in/>

ⁱⁱ Weigel, G. & Waldburger, D. (eds) (2004) *ICT4D - Connecting People for a Better World*, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation & Global Knowledge Partnership, Berne, Switzerland

ⁱⁱⁱ Arun, S., Heeks, R.B. & Morgan, S. (forthcoming) 'Improved Livelihoods and Empowerment for Poor Women Through IT Sector Intervention', in: *Cinderella or Cyberella?*, N. Hafkin (ed.), Kumarian Press, Westport, CT.