

Development Goals & Technology Outcomes

Think Piece for Regulation/Access Session

Wolfson College, 18th July 2003

If ICT is to be successfully harnessed for development, policy should focus on development goals rather than on technology outcomes. Much of the current ICT for development agenda is provider-centric: the digital divide and 'access' frame a concern with pipes and points of presence. Our priority should be communication by and with poor people.

This shift to a user needs perspective not only helps to mobilise support from the majority of the international development community for whom ICT is an input of questionable value but also to shape more effective and sustainable investment, regulatory and access interventions. It starts with content: the *raison d'être* for ICT. At the local level the creation and exchange of content, whether spoken word, market data, music or text, is the basis of empowerment and income generation. Effective and transparent communication between governed and governing is the core of good governance.

From the user perspective it also becomes clear that the majority of the world's poor people do not speak the main languages of the global knowledge society, while a substantial proportion are not literate. This reality makes the internet in its prevailing form and other text-based media largely inappropriate for their use, so calling into question the criteria for access and the dominant telecentre formula.

What, then, should be the technology solutions enabling poor people to communicate effectively and what policy shapes the environment needed to enable them? Mobile telephony seems a stronger contender. Community radio is attractive, especially when linked to the internet, but suffers the limitations of a one way medium. Regulatory and investment constraints inhibit the spread of cheap telephony into poor rural areas while community

radio is still proscribed for a good proportion of the world's poor. Computing and the internet should clearly be accessible to poor people, probably at institutional level, but interfaces should accommodate oral, graphical and minority language access. Its social and institutional context should encourage cultural and functional appropriation.

The pro-poor orientation also widens the regulatory arena, bringing in different players and constraints. Telecommunications liberalisation along classical economics lines is only a limited response to the needs of poor people. Conventional universal service models, even when effectively applied, tend not to stimulate sustainable provision. Suppliers should be encouraged to explore C. K. Prahalad's injunction to TNCs to develop products for the poor. Multi stake holder packages should be created to tempt cautious investors into higher risk markets offering longer term returns. A focus on content further broadens the regulatory horizon to include freedom of expression, cultural diversity, IPR and convergence. Nor can it be assumed that northern models in these areas should simply be shipped south. Indeed, it is not fantastic to suggest that we might learn from traditional southern paradigms.

This approach has strong implications for national and sub regional ICT strategies. They have to be cross sectoral to achieve economies of scale at the user end and congruence at institutional level, which means ownership at the highest level of government. They should:

- create a sustainable enabling environment, which means in practice creating both a pro-poor investment climate and the means of income generation at local level
- span the range of content-related regulation
- incorporate a citizenship dimension to engender civil and consumer safeguards for the individual and community
- create space for effective collaboration between public, private and civil society sectors.

At macro level, content is the currency of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), whether as primary education for girls, health promotion, or the effective and fair management of natural resources. As the UN ICT Task Force's attention turns to measuring ICT's impact on the MDGs the value of content-related, qualitative indicators is becoming evident. In this way, ICT is locked more directly into the development community's primarily national and sectoral priorities.

The content focus is a necessary condition of global knowledge economy models, including those promulgated by the World Bank, now increasingly driving development policy. Again, however, a pro-poor focus challenges the orthodoxy that knowledge-based development consists of giving poor people access to northern scientific and technical resources. There is mounting evidence of the value of indigenous and traditional content in income generation, empowerment and social cohesion. It follows that ICT topology must facilitate communication in both directions to realise this potential and, equally, that the enabling environment should be configured to enable it to do so.

Many of the regulatory and access issues arising from a content-oriented approach are being engaged by the Open Knowledge Network (OKN), a OneWorld International initiative, supported by DFID and CIDA. Designed to create the technological and regulatory environment for the sustainable creation and exchange of local and global knowledge, the model consists of a series of local and regional hubs using a variety of media to gather and share content at levels appropriate to its value. Key elements are meta data tags enabling the origin of discrete units of information to be tracked, facilitating income generation, and a comprehensive IPR envelope to safeguard this process. Still in its inception phase, OKN contains an awareness raising and capacity building process to ensure that the value of local content is realised.

The knowledge agenda, delivered through ICT accessible to poor people, has profound implications for development policy and process. Just as the technology transformed some areas of business in the 80s and 90s by

enabling direct contact between producers and consumers, so it is possible to discern already the outline of an e development model in which development agencies, civil society, developing country governments and poor people themselves are brought into direct, interactive communication, with massive implications not least for transaction costs, monitoring and evaluation and policy making.

The World Summit on the Information Society agenda spans most of the themes touched on here. It will, however, be necessary to go beyond the text to delivery modes and spheres of interest to evaluate its potential contribution to knowledge-based development.

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