Information Society Paradox: Reflections and Actions

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WSIS set the tone to create a true global Information Society. However, achieving it will be a complex task. Being involved in the WSIS process, it is my intention, on behalf of the International Research Foundation for Development, to present some thoughts and actions about creating a sustainable global Information Society.

Let me begin with the fundamental issue pertaining to the Information Society dialogue. The information communication revolution has brought with it a digital divide phenomenon as one of the major problems of the contemporary world. This problem is not an independent phenomenon, but an integral part of the structure of inequality at all levels: international, regional, national, and local. The digital divide tends to reproduce the basic elements of the structure of inequality along the lines of traditional patterns of socio-economic and political stratification. The major challenge is a growing paradox of the Information Society, which is mirrored in the process of the digital divide and the unfolding rift of social-spatial spectrum. I highlight here a few of these paradoxical tendencies.

Despite the global consensus on the dramatic developmental potential of the ICT technological hubs, some countries in Europe, Asia, and Latin America have created few technological hubs peripheralizing vast territories of the world and their population. Most of Africa, Latin America, vast landlocked parts of Asia, significant areas of the former Soviet Union, and Eastern Europe are technologically excluded.

The pattern of technological diffusion is parallel to other forms of capital flow and is marked by uneven global economic integration and development indicators. Therefore, people living in peripheral regions are trapped in a vicious cycle and face severe constraints for development. Underdeveloped markets and the lack of infrastructure, such as energy grids, international bandwidth, and high costs of access to equipment, are the main constraints to providing communication technology to the rural masses and deprived urban communities. In addition to the lack of basic physical infrastructure, the limited human and institutional capacity and outdated or weak regulatory frameworks are common to most parts of the peripheral territories. Furthermore, rural economic sectors and small and medium-scale industries have not been properly connected to the national and regional chains of production and services, and thereby, not integrated into the global economic system. The informal sector, particularly in developing economies has been largely deserted. Backward and forward linkages are virtually non-existent.

Despite the potential for e-governance, technology penetration in the government sectors, reform of the governmental institutional structure, and human resource development are still low in many parts of the world. Furthermore, the global survey conducted by the UN stated that two thirds of the people think that their government does not represent them, do not trust their government, and feel that their country is not governed by the will of the people.[1] There are two major reasons for these phenomena. 1. Most of the governments engage in destroying public value. 2. Governments fail or do not want to articulate clearly people's preferences. It is important to note that the technology per se does not promote e-governance nor ensure a degree of transparency and accountability, nor does it promote people's true participation. In the absence of organizational innovation and policy guidance, ICTs may lead to the supremacy of the traditional political and commercial forces, instead of following people's true preferences, which recognize the supremacy of the societal context. According to the World Public Sector Report (2003), e-government is at the crossroads, either "leading us towards world making, or towards just measuring the tread marks left by the technology-led governmental bulldozer" (World Public Sector Report 2003, 1–2).

There is a growing awareness that cyberspace has become a venue for cultural and linguistic diversity. However, there are two dialectical tendencies in ICT application with regard to cultural domain and development. On the one hand, there is a tendency of hegemonic domination in cultural accommodation. On the other hand, there is an opposing trend that will result in resurgence of cultural and religious fundamentalism, thereby using cyberspace as a new breeding ground for race, caste, creed, religion, and gender discrimination and negative tribal elements, which will renew old animosities. Some of us may

1. http://sts.scu.edu/nexus/Issue1-1/Castells-DimensionsOfTheNetworkedSociety.asp

question these dialectic tendencies and emerging responses. Are we heading toward constructive global hybridization with diverse cultural enrichment that promotes equality and human dignity, or are we near experiencing "cyber tribalism"? Will the emerging concept and approach of "glocalization" resolve this paradox?

Rapid actions and structural transformation are necessary to break the vicious cycle of infrastructural deprivation and marginalization. Otherwise, the marginalized world will experience a huge time lapse for catching up as reflected in the age of the industrial-agricultural gap while we are having cyberhysteria. The only way the world can break this vicious cycle is to embark on a radical developmental departure, which demands true international cooperation. It also demands the mobilization of enormous resources to develop physical infrastructure, human development, organizational innovations, and the education of the world for peace and development.

To this effect, the global community must emphasize the following to address necessary remedies:

- Examine variations on ICT physical and institutional infrastructural development (threshold of ICT investment in terms of human capital and intellectual capital) and economic performances of enterprise at all levels (large, medium, small, informal sector economy), and the need to integrate them into the global market.

- Shed light on socio-economic and politico-cultural implications of the information revolution and digital divide.

- Formulate critical policies, strategies, and advocacy efforts within an interdisciplinary and integrated framework to bridge the digital gap, creating a necessary ICT threshold for economic development and political democratization across the globe.

- Develop an integrated approach to create sustainable development and peace, and a global Information Society for the 21st century.

In conclusion, I would like to reiterate five forms of ICT paradoxical tendencies:

1. global integration and technological peripheralization;

2. global cooperation, economic conglomeration and small and medium entrepreneurial marginalization;

3. e-governance and non-articulation of public preferences;

4. hegemonic universalism and cultural particularism;

5. global economic integration and social-spatial disintegration.

Having considered paradoxical tendencies discussed above, IRFD (www.irfd.org) has embarked on a comprehensive ICT application for global education and development by establishing partnerships with many development organizations. This partnership effort will result in establishing ICT Centers and implementing a comprehensive "e-Community Development Strategy."

E-Community Development Strategy through ICT Centers is an integrated approach. ∎