Theory

From Social Enterprises to Mobiles—Seeking a Peg to Hang a Premeditated ICTD Theory

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An uncritical, bandwagon approach to policy and practice has, unfortunately, upstaged deeper explorations that connect the social theories of ICTs with the experience and values of development. This essay critiques the affinity the ICTD discourse holds for technodeterminism and neoliberalism. It is largely based on what was originally a reflective input into the Harvard Forum II on ICTs, a stock-taking exercise about ICTD that also examined possible directions for the future. It draws mainly from the Indian context, which is not only home to many an experiment in ICTD, but is also a relevant case study for discussions around poverty and human development, topics that were in focus at the Harvard Forum II.

Discussing the dominant approaches to policy and practice, the essay traces how the ICTD discourse has moved away from its initial overvalorization of telecenter "enterprises," to a new hype around mobile phones. This shift—coming from the inevitable failure relating to many revenue-driven development models—glosses over the likely reasons for why telecenters, as they were conceived in their early stages, did not take off. The essay argues for a more fundamental inquiry into the ideological content of the dominant policy and practice in ICTD, while also suggesting tentative alternatives for ICTD policy and practice that come from a rights and citizenship approach to development.

A disclaimer is in order. The essay is not intended to be an in-depth analysis of the literature in the area. It is intended to offer a macro-structural critique that derives from an analysis of some policy texts, as well as from the first-hand experience of IT for Change,[1] an organization based in India and engaged in research, advocacy, and community-level work in ICTD.

1. ICTD as Social Enterprise—A False "Win-Win" in an Ecology of Unequal Actors

The history of ideas influencing ICTD and its political lineage is a useful point to start with. At the turn of the millennium, the Report of the Global Digital Opportunity Initiative (DOI), which came out of the Digital Opportunity Task (DOT) Force of the G8 countries, presented an ICTD framework that, in its main elements, advocated a "strategic compact" (Accenture et al., 2001, p. 39) among various stakeholders. Widely adopted by the funding and aid establishment, the DOI report's prescription for such a "win-win" (p. 39) multi-stakeholder approach among actors who were divided deeply not just in their aspirations, but also in their relative power, was in keeping with the flavor of the times: a chang-

1. The author is a founding member and executive director of IT for Change (ITfC), an India-based NGO.

ing global political economy of development in which business models were at the center, and partnerships with the business sector were becoming a necessary ingredient in the emerging development compact. The DOI Report also advocated, without any evidence (and despite evidence to the contrary in other public infrastructure sectors like health) that initiatives that are planned and managed using a business model are likely to be more sustainable and have a more substantial impact (Accenture et al., 2001, p. 17).

The cascading impact on national policies in these directions emphasizing private-sector involvement and business models for ICTD were soon evident. A World Bank Project Information Document on funding support for India's National e-Governance Plan, for example, opens with the following unequivocal assertion:

> India has both the urgent need and the clear opportunity to improve governance and the welfare of its rural population through Information and Communication Technology (ICT)-enabled reengineering of government processes and by engaging the private sector in the provision of innovative service delivery, communication and information technologies. Facilitating this process is the main rationale of this project. (World Bank, 2005, p. 1)

ICTD discourse thus evolved around an unholy mix of technodeterministic and neoliberal ideology. In the early times, "social enterprise" emerged as the favored mode to realize the ICT opportunity for development through telecenters. The enterprise method meant a marketization of development and governance services and a focus on the financial sustainability of the telecenter. But many of these early telecenter initiatives have now folded up, while others have stopped e-governance services they started off with because expected revenue streams did not materialize. One of the largest private sector-led initiatives, Drishtee, which began by working closely with many local governments to provide e-governance services, now seems to have moved completely into business services (IT for Change, in press). Drishtee's present approach focuses on higher-income groups in the villages, selling goods and services in partnership with corporations, and does not appear to be engaging the socially and economically marginalized communities (Tiwari & Sharmistha, 2008). Evidently, the expectation of compatibility between business viability and widespread access to government information and services has not been achieved through the social enterprise approach to ICTD.

The only other telecenter initiative that could compare with the spread of Drishtee, other than e-choupal (discussed later), was Chirag of the N-logue group—at one point, India's largest operator of for-profit rural kiosks (Dossani et al., 2005). Chirag also went down the Drishtee path, and the entire profile of users changed over time, with a shift toward up-market users whose literacy and nature of employment was different from that of initial users (Kannabiran et al., 2006). While Drishtee seems to have reinvented its model, focusing on the relatively higher-income market segments, Chirag closed down a couple of years ago, leaving a large number of franchisees seeking legal and governmental redress to recoup their investments.[2] Judged too soon as successful models, Drishtee and Chirag have both been widely acclaimed and bestowed with several awards. However, Drishtee's shift in user profile and Chirag's closure have been ignored by the funding and policy communities. The "best practices" rhetoric has, in what has been a classic bandwagon approach, crowded out careful scrutiny around the meaning of effective use of telecenters for inclusive development. The Indian government's large-scale telecenter scheme (discussed later), launched in 2006 and meant for reaching e-governance and development services to India's villages, has been oblivious to the lessons from Drishtee and Chirag, and has followed the same business-model approach.

While the marginalized may have much to gain through a possibly transformed institutional culture that ICTs can bring about, one where greater access to information on livelihoods, entitlements, and rights can directly impact their well-being, the dominant social enterprise model is not geared to this kind of deeper institutional change, nor to developing a new local information ecology. Although some alternative public finance models like Akshaya in Kerala did show (Gurumurthy et al., 2005a) that

2. See, for instance, the experience of a Chirag center operator, catalogued by C. Umashankar, an Indian government bureaucrat and an e-governance expert (http://groups.yahoo.com/group/India-egov/).

policy could have a role in designing a context that could make telecenters and the Internet useful to the poor, instead of following up on the relative success of these models and the demonstrated failure of private telecenter initiatives, the dominant discourse in ICTD rather chose to conclude that the Internet may not be the most relevant technology for those in poverty (*The Economist,* 2005). In what has been an ideologically one-sided ICTD discourse, it was never addressed whether the poor and the marginalized could find a transformative opportunity through the Internet and telecenters, outside of business models.

One concept that has been much touted in the field of ICTD is that of the "bottom of the pyramid." E-choupal has been a much-celebrated case in this genre. An initiative of ITC, a transnational corporate entity, e-choupal (e-village square) is seeking to become the Wal-Mart of rural India. It is a network of more than 6,000 centers spread across 40,000 Indian villages. These centers or hubs are a gateway to an expanding spectrum of agriculture commodities, acting as channels to sell fast-moving consumer durables, and banking and insurance services to rural India (Annamalai & Rao, 2003). Based on a business model providing connectivity and services to a closed network of farmers through an entrepreneur—whose role, interestingly, is projected by ITC as a "public office" (Prahalad, 2006, p. 179)—e-choupal exemplifies the win-win *problématique.* With monopolistic control over an entire local agriculture ecology, it represents a "development" model where a transnational corporation deploys a captive, unregulated ICT network that locks in a large number of farmers, crowding out the small and marginal land-holding farmers. E-choupal has only been established in larger and more prosperous villages (Kumar, 2004), and in some villages, it is set up in houses where lower castes cannot enter (Dossani et al., 2005). Also, e-choupal promotes corporate dependency of local agriculture and monoculturation of agro-production systems, issues which concern the public-private ecology in agriculture, food security, and marginal farmers' rights to a livelihood, and which are thus central to the very choice of development models.

It is indeed paradoxical that the government of India, in its new flagship program called the Common Services Centers (CSCs), follows the same social enterprise route, reposing faith in a franchisee-based, corporate-driven model. The vision is to attain social and economic development where "private and social sector organizations" will "align their social and commercial goals for the benefit of the rural population in the remotest corners of the country" (Government of India, 2006a, p. 1). Such an alignment seems to be serving corporate interests, rather than those of the marginalized rural populations. In fact, as a concept, social inclusion seems to acquire completely new meanings, getting recast within a consumerist discourse, as the following excerpt from the Government of India's CSC Project Information Memorandum (Government of India, 2006b) demonstrates: "By reaching the remote rural locations of India on a sustainable basis, and offering a variety of *world-class services,* the CSCs would encourage social inclusion of hereby marginalized communities and underprivileged sections of the rural society" (italics added).

What seems to emerge from the narratives on the ground is that market creation and penetration appear to be the principal motivation with which corporations have come forward to bid for running the CSC infrastructure.[3] The government seems to not only be subsidizing the rural outreach of big corporates, but also lending corporate partners in the program the additional benefit of "co-branding" with government agencies, which can mean a lot in terms of credibility in rural areas. As another policy document of the Government of India (Second Administrative Reforms Commission of India, n.d.) concerned with administrative reforms asserts, "even after implementation of the CSC Scheme, the need for e-Governance structures at the panchayat level[4] would remain as the CSCs are basically business centres." The most damning fact here is that the two initiatives with the longest experience in running franchisee-based telecenters in rural areas, N-Logue and Drishtee, have not made a bid for the CSC scheme; even the incentive of a handsome subsidy to run their businesses does not seem to have

3. Many corporations with a keen interest in rural markets for their own products and services have made negative bids, meaning that they pay the government, rather than take a subsidy. Corporate control of a government co-branded infrastructure for access to rural markets is a major regulatory issue implicating competition policy.
4. Local self-government institution in rural India.

tempted them to revisit their early experience, fraught as it was with the "failure" to mix business models with community development- and governance-related services.

In the "social enterprise" approach to ICTD, therefore, the social content has been ambiguous, referring often to a version of market-based inclusion that may not really favor disadvantaged sections, while its "enterprise" dimension has invariably meant the building of infrastructure for deepening the reach of global markets into rural areas. From a critical development perspective, the corporate-driven social enterprise ecosystem certainly needs deeper interrogation. Its valorization as an exemplar of the convergence between the goals of development and market interests brings back old development questions about "trickle down," as well as those about the image it casts of a kind of Darwinian self-selection along the development path shaped by technology networks, one where the market-unworthy will be bypassed.

2. Tech-Goodies or Tech-Governance—The Case of Mobile Telephony in ICTD

In an eternal search for new narratives aligned with market interests, the dominant policy and practice discourse of ICTD has now chosen to deploy a watered-down empiricism to over-valorize the market-led mobile telephony model without critically examining its full implications for development practice and possibilities. It is obvious that mobile telephony is, indeed, game-changing for marginalized populations, who hardly have good avenues of communication, especially if it is available relatively inexpensively, as it is in India. So, it can easily be agreed that one important element of ICT policy for development is universalizing cheap mobile telephony, which, no doubt, has huge social impact. However, going forward, the real possibilities for human development depend on the nature of applications and services that are actually available through mobile telephony (beyond the basic telephony service), and on whether or not they serve the interests of the marginalized. And this is the key ICTD challenge, something that is much more complex than is commonly understood. From the vantage of development, then, the emergent mobile telephony model of ICTD becomes central, as does whether and how it addresses the poverty and development questions.

At this point, it seems pertinent to explain what appears to be a certain intentionality ascribed in this essay to the dominant policy discourse in ICTD. What explains the apparent tenacity of the dominant ICTD model, even with much evidence of its adverse impacts at hand, is the confluent interests and perspectives of key actors in the ICTD arena. The profit motivation of corporate players is only to be expected. Mega-corporations who are monopolies in the ICT arena do not only market their products, they also seek to influence policy toward their interests. As for civil society actors, the ICTD arena has seen a—perhaps unique—new crop of "NGOs" and social enterprises. These actors see the development endeavor as compatible with commercial objectives. Many such ICTD NGOs provide corporate-sponsored ICTD platforms like conferences, where corporate and government actors can meet and interact in a more respectable setting than would be characteristic of shady, under-the-table lobbying processes. In these new spaces, where contention is looked upon as disruptive, a unique breed of development discourse takes birth and gets reinforced based on common, win-win formulae. Unfortunately, a good amount of ICTD research itself is openly corporation-funded, and it is not likely to stray too much into "disruptive" critiques. The donor community is also increasingly dependent on corporate co-funding, especially in the ICTD area.

As for developing country governments, cramped as they are in their choices owing to shrinking policy spaces and budgets—both effects often being direct impacts of globalization—information technologies (IT) is increasingly seen as a lead growth area, and the state's dependence on, and hence coziness with, corporations is rather high. By default, IT policies are seen as instruments to enable IT businesses. Human development issues are secondary considerations.

Going back to the discussion on mobile telephony, the motivated leanings of the dominant ICTD discourse posit the rise of mobiles as a negation of the Internet-telecenter model, and as an answer to the latter's failures. In its atheoreticism, the discourse studiously avoids any examination of the incumbent mobile telephony architecture—the fact that the mobile phone model is a proprietary network with most applications and services locked in with the

network provider. It avoids entanglements with political issues about technology governance, beyond the question of being connected, neglecting the key question concerning the terms on which such connection to the network happens. (This question is not unlike that of the terms under which a corporatist telecenter model provides connectivity and access, a point that provides a connection to the critique of the enterprise model of telecenters in the earlier part of this essay.) It does not interrogate the fact that network capitalism is embedded within the technological DNA of mobile telephony; in this regard, mobile telephony is unlike the Internet, which was born and grew in a public and academic environment, imbibing values of public-ness and egalitarianism.

Such reductionism, undertaken without due examination of the opportunity cost of market-based and gadget-centric technological models for addressing challenges to development, thus perpetuates a false contradiction between the technological platforms of mobile telephony and the Internet. Today, the convergence of wireless and Internet technologies has radically altered the functionalities of end-user artifacts. The real questions, therefore, are these: How can the Internet, both over mobiles and through telecenters, be made affordable to the poor, and what would the key role of policy be toward this? And even when the poor do have access to mobiles with Internet, what regimes of technology governance and institutional design would catalyze their "social inclusion," or rather, active participation? Beyond providing voice (literally), which is a functionality that everyone needs and wants, how can technology governance aid the democratization of local governance, accountability of public services, access to new livelihood options and new empowering social networks, and development of spaces for forging new solidarities?

When the Internet-telecenter model did not take off, it was an open question whether the enterprise part or the Internet-telecenter part of the model had failed. Mainstream ICTD discourse of course salvaged the enterprise part, petrifying it more solidly in the exclusively commercial model of mobile-based access, categorically negating the potential of the open, participatory paradigm of the Internet for poverty and human development. Unfortunately, the power of global corporations in the digital domain is such that the more commercially attractive mobile telephony model, with its closed proprietary network paradigm, has been idealized as the most "transformational" path for development through ICTs. In propping up this discourse without framing its political economy, mainstream ICTD has not only been grossly cursory, it has also displayed a conceptual lack in its inability to link questions of technology governance to the very meaning of technology for poverty, equity, and development.

At another level, critical social perspectives are also needed to examine the emerging excitement about Internet on mobiles. The convergence of technologies still does not take away from the fact that "individualism (is the) defining social trend of the mobile society" (Castells et al., 2004, p. 242), whereas human development requires that the larger collective be accorded a certain legitimacy. Interestingly, the current excitement around Web 2.0 seems to be oblivious of the fact that most Web 2.0 online spaces represent a "compromised" public. Transnational corporations in the digital arena have enormous control over the emerging "social" spaces. Even as they seem to propel social contact, exchange, collaboration, and even action, the corporate motivation is to build revenue streams, mostly through rent-seeking positions, squatting above key nodes of control over mass social action, and even over individual behavior.

3. Politicizing ICTD—Toward a Citizenship Approach

At around the same time when the social enterprise model was being extolled as the most powerful engine to redefine development through ICTD, a little-noticed document of the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (UNECLAC, 2003) argued for a radically different approach rooted in the realities of the Global South. It challenged the dominant theory originating in the parleys between developed countries, offering a counterpoint to construct a new theory and practice of ICTD in the institutional leapfrogging possibilities offered by ICTs for development. The focus of this alternative approach was institutional transformation, not the individualistic enterprise models of the dominant ICTD practice. There seems to be little traction for such alternative perspectives, both in global policy spaces, and also, at national levels, in development policy and prac-

tice, which attests to the ideological one-sidedness of the dominant ICTD discourse, the subject of analysis here.

The discourse and practice of development is increasingly being polarized between an ascendant market-centered approach and what may be called a more traditional citizenship-based approach, which encompasses rights-based approaches. ICTD has not only almost entirely embraced the market-centered approach, it has also fueled a new wave of triumphalism for the latter. While this has had a strong impact on the general field of development, ICTD itself has lost much by ignoring approaches based on community appropriation, collaboration, rights, and citizenship—all areas in which new ICTs hold exciting possibilities. It is therefore important to articulate an alternative model of ICTD.

Current development theory emphasises the centrality of a rights- and citizenship-based framework, which, in the context of ICTD, would imply seeking deeper structural-institutional changes—at one level, through the communitization of ICTD, and at another, by developing an ICT governance regime that favors an open, inclusive, and participatory sociotechnical architecture. A new theory and practice of ICTD must emerge from these two starting points to comprise a citizenship-based approach to ICTD.

So long as the ICTD potential is not constructed through such an approach, membership in the network society may just be nothing more than owning a gadget or being a "beneficiary" of projects. What is required is a reimagining of "inclusion" and participation, learning from approaches that have tried to address the political economy of institutions, governance, and local livelihoods. And here, the dialectic between technology politics and development discourse, promoting openness (as the key social architectural contribution of the new ICTs paradigm[5]) *with equity,* provides the basis of a new citizenship approach to social relations in the emerging information society. It is within this framework and context that the field of ICTD may need to be re-conceptualized.

Global institutional regimes seem to overemphasize formal and individual rights like privacy and security—which are critical, no doubt—in the emerging technosocial environment, but this has obscured substantive and collective citizen rights, which could provide the transformational context for institutional change and development. Taking cognizance of citizen rights would include a whole gamut of measures, from public provisioning of ICTs and using ICTs for governance reform through institutional reengineering, to policies supporting community media and community computing, needed to create an information society of relevance to the poor. Efforts are also needed to address the democratic deficit in the global ICT governance regimes.

The currently dominant knowledge paradigm in ICTD poses a major obstacle to such a citizenship framework. Like the proverbial emperor's new clothes, the frailties and shortcomings of commercially motivated research in ICTD are well-recognized, but the silence around them has delegitimized alternative and rendered them invisible. What is needed is longer-term, noncommercial, and public research funding for establishing sustained practice-theory conversations in the ICTD field that can promote exclusive focus on public interest in a way that is free from narrow, commercial interests.

The systematic negation in ICTD of fundamental structural questions about technology, development, and exclusion has a huge opportunity cost. It has led to the lack of a much-needed grounded theory that is in a continuous dialectic with an ICTD practice, seeking to promote ICTs for participatory development and deepening democracy. The development question for ICTD is thus not in the realm of the social propensities of new technologies per se, but about their specific meanings for the pursuit of equity and social justice, and hence about the political nature of development itself. ■

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5. The "openness" enabled by new ICTs and determining new modalities of participation in social and political life is an emergent area of relevance to development research and policy. For instance, the International Development Research Centre of Canada has floated the idea of "open development." See http://www.idrc.ca/en/ev-140364-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html

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