

Social Enterprise to Mobiles – The Curious Case of a Propped up ICTD Theory

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Appropriating the tremendous potential of new ICTs for meeting development challenges requires a sound theoretical basis – drawing from the social theories of ICTs and connecting them to the experience and values of development thought and practice. However, the dominant ICTD discourse has, in its steadfast loyalty to techno-determinism and neo-liberalism, largely adopted an atheoretical stance. It has unabashedly glossed over empirical evidence in not interrogating the failure of the social enterprise model both in ensuring sustainability and in meeting socio-economic goals in a manner that promotes equity. Instead, in an eternal search for new narratives aligned with market interests, ICTD has now chosen to deploy a watered down empiricism to over valorise the market-led mobile telephony model without critically examining its full implications for development practice and possibilities. By reposing firm faith in 'win-win' partnerships, ICTD practice has depoliticized development, recasting notions of the 'public' and of 'inclusion' in a corporatised rhetoric of the 'user community' and the 'poor at the bottom-of-the-pyramid', respectively.

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, which seeks to promote ICTs for participatory development and for 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. A citizenship framework is essential to realise the human development potential of ICTD. This would imply at one level a communitization of ICTD, and, at another, an ICT governance regime that favours an open, inclusive and participatory sociotechnical architecture. A new theory and practice of ICTD must emerge in these two starting points.

A lot of what I say is from my Indian experience. I am acutely aware that there is a wealth of analysis on the issues I raise here. However, my attempt has been to build a perspective that can add to the debate on ICTD. Given that one third of the world's poor are in India, the debates in the proposed Forum will have deep significance for the Indian context, and conversely, the Indian context, is quite important for the debates of the Forum.

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

?Yes, I agree that the CSCs (Common Services Centers) have failed. The entrepreneurs are incurring losses. Many of the CSCs even sell footwear to make some money..... But we must make them profitable! - Senior Indian IT bureaucrat, commenting on India's national program based on a corporate franchisee model to reach governance and development services to

India's 6 million villages.(IT for Change, forthcoming a)

Undoubtedly, one of the greatest opportunities for development ushered in by ICTs has been the enhanced possibility for collaboration among different actors working towards specific development goals. The Report of the Digital Opportunity Task Force, set up by the G8 in 2000, thus strongly pushed for the deployment of ICTs in development, advocating for collaboration among different actors. However, in simplistically advocating strategic partnerships between government and private sector, the Report underplayed the significant power differences among actors in the development arena. Perhaps, this was only to be expected from its multi-sector authorship comprising Accenture - a management consulting company, Markle Foundation - a private US-based non profit and UNDP. At the project level, the Report endorsed an 'enterprise culture' (Rao 2001), promoting business models as the preferred methodology in ICTD, stating 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 2001:17). Widely adopted by the funding and aid establishment, the Report's emphasis on 'win

In ICTD therefore, development has been posited as an apolitical endeavour, where entrepreneurs can find profits and development subjects can connect to the wider world to seek new opportunities. Other development domains have been under the neo-liberal assault no-doubt, but the confluence of market fundamentalism with the liberalism of technologists, against a backdrop of a general non-engagement by most traditional development actors, generated a unique version of theory and public policy in ICTD. It not only allowed a critical development agenda to be led by private sector interests (some of the world's richest corporates), but also legitimised a neo-liberal governmentality in technology diffusion, which have critical implications for developing countries and marginalised communities.

The naturalisation of neo-liberal ideological content in ICT policy space is noteworthy. Even with a dramatic turnaround in the early 2000s by the World Bank, and its confession about being mistaken in its blind loyalty to market ideologies, its policy shift revealed no radical departure from market fundamentalism. In the next phase, the Bank shifted infrastructural aid into its private sector branches in order to leverage the participation of the private sector in public sector provision. In the pecking order of sectors, telecommunications was at the helm (Fine 2009). Accordingly, in 2005, a World Bank Project Information Document on funding support for India's National eGovernance Plan, 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 provision of innovative service delivery, communication and information technologies. Facilitating this process is the main rationale of this project.' (World Bank 2005:1)

The ICTD experience thus reveals a coming together of an unflinching reverence to market based methodologies for development and the unapologetic techno-utopianism and anti-state libertarian sentiment of Californian ideology, typical of Silicon valley techno-activists. The amalgam has been as potent as organic. ICTD discourse has evolved around a techno-deterministic, neo-liberal ideology within an all encompassing definition of the social as economic. Predicated upon values of individuality, rationality and self-interest that blend with an utopian fervour about new technologies, it is characterised by 'New Public Management'

™ approaches and a shift from 'policy' and 'administration' to 'management', and from role of the 'state' to creativi

Social enterprise in ICTD has been a much bandied about term. Its social content has been ambiguous ?

“ referring often to a version of inclusion that may not be pro-poor, and conflated with making available paid teleco

The Common Services Centers (CSC) Scheme of Government of India's Department of IT, which is the centre-piece of the National eGovernance Plan, employs private sector partnerships to take IT to rural areas ?

“ with guidelines that more or less disqualify small and medium enterprises from being in the fray. Private compan

In the ritualised practices of the present ICTD policy regime, a neo-liberal mindset seems firmly entrenched.

Empiricism can be thrown to the winds, as reflected in the firm conviction of the Indian IT bureaucrat quoted at the start of this paper; if revenues don't arise, the logical next step would be to somehow make them arise!

The unshakeable faith of the policy process in private-public partnerships and entrepreneur-based models in ICTD to actualise social and economic development through a mode 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? appears weak, and without either rational or experiential basis.

The Eleventh Plan document of the Government of India, speaking of the PPP model in general, points to possible pitfalls of the PPP strategy, if applied without due consideration of the interests and relative powers of different actors:

?The approach to PPPs must remain firmly grounded in principles which ensure that PPPs are formulated and executed in public interest with a view to achieving additional capacity and delivery of public services at reasonable cost.. PPPs must aim to bringing private resources into public projects, not public resources into private projects.? (Government of India 2007:256)

In the CSC scheme, however, it often appears that the government may just be subsidising the rural outreach of big corporates, with the considerable additional benefit for the latter of 'co-branding' with government agencies, which can mean a lot in rural areas. With the known failure of models like N-logue and Drishtee to earn sustainable revenues in the e-governance space, much less feed a big corporate's high expected rate of return, market creation and penetration appears to be the principal motivation with which these large companies have bid for running the CSC infrastructure. (IT for Change, forthcoming a).

Widely acclaimed as an ICTD success story, the e-choupal initiative in India typifies the complete corporatisation of the social enterprise model. An initiative of ITC, a transnational corporate entity, seeking to become the Walmart of rural India, e-choupal (e-village square) is a network of 6,200 centres spread across 40,000 villages in India ? a gateway to an expanding spectrum of commodities leaving farms and also selling to rural India fast moving consumer durables, automotives, banking and insurance services (Annamalai and 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: 179), e-choupal exemplifies the win-win problematique.

A study of the model (IT for Change, forthcoming b), from a development perspective, unpacking the sociopolitics of the e-choupal ecosystem, indicates a monopolistic control over an entire local agriculture ecology by a transnational corporation through the use of a captive ICT infrastructure, with no regulation and no competition. The e-choupal hubs serve as sales outlets for agriculture and other products and services.

Cutting off alternative systems, local middlemen and government services, e-choupal locks in a large number of farmers into its network. While the project has resulted in some increase in rural agricultural incomes through privatisation driven efficiency improvements in the procurement chain, e-choupal underscores 'trickle-down' and individual enterprise as development denominators. Normalising corporate-centric dependency for profitable agriculture, it circumvents small land-holders, who are worst off in the agricultural production chain (because their output volumes are too low to justify travel for sales at e-choupal hubs).

From a sustainable development perspective, corporate retail has been analysed for squelching local livelihoods, endangering food security and pauperising local economies (Gopalakrishnan and Srinivasa 2009). In light of this, the long term social and economic costs of e-choupal - an unregulated 'social enterprise' in ICTD, promoting corporatisation of agriculture, monoculturation of agro-production systems and penetration of global markets, need deep interrogation.

A caveat is necessary here. Public finance models promoting social enterprise in ICTD, demonstrated by NGOs and local governments, do exist in the Indian context. But lessons from their efforts to orchestrate and nurture equitable ICT supported local development are not part of the knowledge that does the rounds.

Labournet is an NGO-led initiative in India that supports a techno-social network of urban poor attempting to bring them into the labour economy; the DHAN (NGO) telecentre network supports livelihood and entitlement access of the poorest in remote villages of South India; SEWA, a trade union of women in Western India, provides collectives of poor women artisans an entire set of enabling factors including an ecommerce platform to reach global markets; the Akshaya initiative of the Kerala state government in South India both supports telecentre entrepreneurs as well as provides a techno-social platform for trading small agriculture produce. But these are not the models promoted by the dominant ICTD theory. The contrast between public and corporate driven models represents the classical paradox highlighted by Karl Polanyi about the embeddedness of the social (and political) in the economic as in the case of ITC's e-choupal creating a 'public office' within a corporate ecosystem, rather than of the economic in the social, that alternative public finance models illustrated above have adopted.

Therefore, a closer examination of 'social enterprise' in ICTD reveals a clear ideological bias that speaks the language of inclusion, but within the canopy of privatisation. Social enterprise in ICTD coopts the notion of 'community', endorsing an individualised dynamic that belies development wisdom, crowding out concerns of equity and social justice. It thus depoliticizes development, through a circumvention of fundamental structural questions about technology, development and exclusion. The demonstrated failure of the social enterprise model in ICTD both in ensuring sustainability and meeting any significant social objectives seem not to inspire grounded research in a typical ICTD funding ecology, which follows corporate money, and therefore interests. For the corporate led knowledge enterprise, it has been much more convenient therefore to seek out some other strong leitmotif ? and mobile telephony has emerged as an obvious choice.

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

The rapid diffusion of mobile telephony has seen an euphoric and uncritical celebration around its miraculous potential for transformation. The rise of mobile telephony as the most favoured ICTD technique requires to be problematised. It is however unfashionable to say anything less than very complimentary about mobile phones in the context of the developing world. Indeed it is game-changing, especially if available relatively inexpensively, as in India, for marginalised populations who have few good avenues of communication. So, it can easily be agreed that one important element of ICT policy for development is

universalising cheap mobile telephony. However, 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 this is the key ICTD challenge, something that is much more complex than is commonly understood. From the vantage of development then, what is relevant is not the merits and demerits of mobile telephony per se, but the emergent mobile telephony model of ICTD and whether and how it positions the poverty and development question.

In the network society, cyberspace is the tool of global coordination and communication (Fuchs 2008). To sustain dominance and exploitation, network capitalism, characterised by corporate and political domination, requires everyone to be on the network. This overarching structural nature of the technological paradigm and its political and economic architecture are as relevant to ICTD as connectivity and access parameters. The question therefore is not about being connected, but about the terms on which such connection to the network happens. The mobile model, which is largely a proprietary network with most applications and services locked in with the network provider, is very different from the open and egalitarian model of the Internet (See the rich literature on 'network neutrality' to assess the deep significance of this distinction for our societies.)

However, this important technology governance issue is mostly obscured by the 'mobile for the poor' rhetoric. There is an appeal to an 'end of ideology' thesis, an argument that empirical verifiability cannot be tarnished by normative frameworks. So, as mobiles are embraced by the 'bottom of the pyramid', 'rationality' would demand that this 'evidence' be seen as proof of what the poor 'want'. The transformative potential of the information society is thus seen to be indicated in the 'demand' for mobiles (and a perceived rejection of the Internet) whereby a poor household is seen to be exercising 'choice' in buying connectivity (in fact seen in many contexts today as a public good), through privatised provisioning regimes. The literature studiously avoids any examination of the incumbent mobile telephony architecture that embeds network capitalism within its technological DNA, unlike the Internet, which was born and grew in a public and academic environment imbibing egalitarian and public service values.

Such reductionism therefore, without due examination of the opportunity cost of market-based and gadgetcentric technological models for addressing challenges to development, perpetuates a false contradiction between the technological platforms of mobile telephony and the Internet. Today, the convergence of wireless and Internet technologies have radically altered the functionalities of end-user artefacts. The real issues, therefore are ? will the poor ever be able to afford Internet on mobiles (and if so, what conditions will need to be orchestrated by policy?); and even if the poor had access to mobiles (or for that matter, portable gizmos with mobile Internet), what regimes of institutional design and technology governance would catalyse their 'social inclusion', or rather, active participation? Ironically, the failure of the ill-conceived, social enterprise based, telecentre model is now being used as evidence to argue the wisdom of pursuing (once again), a market-led mobile telephony model. The false economies being thrust on the most vulnerable through the mobile telephony hype in the name of digital opportunity are bound to stand exposed sooner than later for the very same failure that afflicted the social enterprise model ? the colossal neglect by the policy regime to create an institutional dynamic for reconfiguring the economy and society, that is pro-poor.

At another level, critical social perspectives are 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 2004:242), whereas human development requires that the collective be accorded a certain legitimacy. While, as already discussed, mobile phones have

transformatory and emancipatory potential, it is only when the governance of the mobile architecture is oriented to public interest, citizen participation and social inclusion that they can contribute to the sustainable development of the local economy and society. The development question is thus not in the realm of the social propensities of the technology but about its governance and its meanings in development innovations for the pursuit of equity and social justice.

The rapid spread of connectivity and the rise of the discourse of the 'user' in the techno-social context, especially in these times of social networking and web 2.0 further entrench a libertarian ICTD vision. In the automatism associated with the self-propelled vision of change in the information society, an 'end of politics' ideology takes shape. As if the earlier phase in the ICTD trajectory was not bad enough for the poor, new techno-social systems are posited as a kind of alternative to political institutions in arbitrating collective choices. The discourse and its attendant ideology thus ignore the fact that counter power cannot emerge in the enclosed architecture of the communication commons, argued forcefully by Fuchs (2009):

The typical web 2.0-business strategy ...is ...giving (people) access for free and selling the people as a prosumer (emphasis added) commodity to third parties in order to generate profit.... The power of corporations and other powerful actors on the web is not to a similar extent challenged by actual counter-powers that empower citizens. The dialectic of power is only a potential, but not an automatic actual or necessary dialectic. Political counter-power on the Internet is facing a massive asymmetry that is due to the fact that the ruling powers control more resources such as money, decision-making power, capacities for attention generation, etc.....The problem is that there are also forces of power in contemporary society, such as ideology and coercion, that might forestall such fights, that keep people occupied with struggling for survival so that they have no time, energy, and thoughts for counter-power struggles.

Essentially a 'compromised public' (recall the 'public' in echoupal's private system, whereas a similar logic is also at work in relation to private online spaces and applications), self-propelled autonomous spaces on the Internet have their limits. While they hold the potential for collaboration and community, as they exist today, they are organised to consolidate global capital. As the dominant information society paradigm meets the ICTD discourse, development seems to be trapped in a downward spiral; a loop that reproduces ideologies and practices antithetical to human development, equity and social justice. So long as the ICTD potential is not constructed through appropriate technology and social policies in terms of an ecology comprising new institutional forms, membership in the network society may just be nothing more than owning a gadget or being a 'beneficiary' of projects. The promise of real emancipation can materialise only when ICTs are seen within citizenship frameworks, going beyond exclusive market frameworks, which characterise most ICTD endeavour today.

3. Politicizing ICTD - From a Market to 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, in 2003, argued for a radically different approach rooted in the realities of the South. It challenged the dominant theory originating in the parleys of G8, (and its Digital Opportunity Task Force Report, mentioned at the start of this paper), offering a counterpoint to construct a new theory and practice of ICTD:

?It should be pointed out that the ongoing debate in Latin America and the Caribbean regarding the transition to an information society and to the digital era is often based on ?stylized facts? and theoretical constructs deriving from developed countries. There are various reasons to believe that such facts and constructs are ill-suited to an exploration of the region?s position in this process.... (In) developed countries the provision of public goods by the State and the existence of fairly mature regulatory systems and agencies creates an adequate institutional and market environment in which to examine the transition to the digital era (UN ECLAC 2003:9)

The approach saw ?institutional reorganisation? as the greatest opportunity offered by ICTs for development. ?Immature institutions and inefficient organizations are a serious obstacle to development. The digitization process in the different e-sectors of an information society constitutes a form of institutional reorganization..... In times of normal, incremental technological change, increasing returns to scale tend to strengthen developed countries? leadership positions. However, when a new innovation arises or major structural changes occur, a temporary window of opportunity opens up for less developed countries to catch up. (UN ECLAC 2003:.34).

In its present orientation, however, as argued, ICTD represents a poverty of imagination, an apathy of policy and the coercion of ideology. It has set up a discourse that includes selectively, those worthy of the market. Even though the information society opportunity for addressing poverty and marginality lies in politicizing development, that is, transforming institutional design and the governance architecture, and redefining participation, ICTD seems to be content with techno-centric models that are at the service of global capital. Like the proverbial emperor's new clothes, the unabashedness of commercially motivated research in ICTD is well recognised, but the silence around it has seen the worst of atheoretical 'knowledge', that has delegitimised and invisibilised alternatives.

Beyond facetious hypotheses about how mobiles are useful for SMEs or what are successful (read commercially viable) telecentre models, there exists little that can contribute to a development theory on ICTs. The cultural, institutional and policy context framing the systemic impact of ICTs on development are indeed undermined in the absence of longer term research funding for establishing practice-theory conversations in the domain. Meanwhile, the staying power of discourse disincentivises any enquiry into the failure of corporate market extension models.

What is required is a reimagining of 'inclusion' and participation; moving the focus towards a new political economy of institutions, governance and local livelihoods and, most urgently, away from atheoretical and motivated rhetoric clouding ICTD's ideological superstructure. The dialectic between development discourse and technology politics becomes the significant predictor of membership in the information society, one that social policy, which is committed to citizenship of the marginalised, must engineer contextually.

Network logic in the contemporary context has effects that advance both cooperative, inclusive potentials and the overall competitive and exclusive character of society (Fuchs 2008). Thus it is in the very interplay of technological paradigms, social structures and social practice that the potential for transformative change also resides. In fundamental ways, this change is about a democratic transition wherein

?...computer-based information and communication technologies (ICTs) can be used for empowering cognition, communication, and cooperation processes of humans so that they can jointly construct participatory social systems. Opposed to the rather competitive logic of representative digital democracy and plebiscitary digital democracy is grassroots digital democracy, in which all those who are concerned with certain problems or phenomena participate in the decision-making process and try to find consensus by rational communicative action that is supported, but not substituted by, ICTs.? (Fuchs, 2008: 263)

It is these collaborative and community-centric possibilities of ICTs that have to be captured in their sociopolitical implications for development. As Benkler (2006) observes, the present information society political landscape is strongly characterised by 'the battle over the institutional ecology of the digital environment'. It is important that we recast this battle from a development perspective. A citizenship framework of ICT appropriation and of ICTD may be the best way forward in this regard. Such a framework will focus on building institutions in relation to online and off-line environments that harness the transformatory potential of the Internet for development.

A major challenge to such a citizenship framework is in the fact that the global community and present institutional regimes seem to be putting their weight behind the 'technology-user' discourse all too heavily, and somewhat exclusively. This has meant an overemphasis on privacy, security and individual rights, in the techno-social environment, which are critical no doubt, but also an eclipsing of the transformatory context for development and institutional transformation. The latter includes citizen rights vis-a-vis public provisioning and access to ICTs, institutional transparency, access to public data systems etc., which are needed to create an information society of relevance to the poor. In India we do see an attempt in this direction. For instance, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS), a nation-wide social protection program, in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh, has developed an open data system about wage payments and public works accessible in the local language that facilitate social audits by the communities to monitor the program's efficacy. Accountability is sought to be further enhanced by continuous changes to the social design of the program and functionality of the program's public data system incorporating learnings from program implementation, through a participatory process. The state has been identified as the lead performer in the whole country for NREGS, largely due to its ICT-based system. The implications of this are staggering. With an annual budget of nearly 8 billion USD (391 billion INR) for the current year, a national social protection program designed with ICT-enabled institutional transparency can have a very significant impact on the levels of poverty.

Many more examples do exist in the global South of such experiments using ICTs for participatory development processes and for deepening democracy. But building on these experiments would require, at the very minimum, computing facilities and connectivity to be universally available, using public funding where required. It would also require public investments in supporting local communities to develop contextual content and applications, addressing human development issues. This begs the question, with the failure of the social enterprise model and ICTD's present penchant for the mobile telephony model, where is the theoretical or practical space for community computing models? It is necessary therefore to recast ICTD, building upon the corner-stone concepts in development theory and practice ? citizenship, participation, empowerment, voice, agency, solidarity and collective action. Such ICTD theory needs to in turn inform appropriate technology governance principles that will help build a new socio-technical architecture that is

open, inclusive and participatory. ICT governance however, is almost entirely a global phenomenon with little, if any, policy leeway at national levels. The present regimes of privatised ICT governance and the reluctance of the powerful countries to engage in discussions for a global governance framework is a clear threat to the promise of citizenship for the poor and marginalised in the emerging information society. Fraser's (2005) musings on public sphere theory and present context are very relevant to contemporary discourses on development and governance.

She submits that there is no substitute for 'institutional renovation' to realise the promise of emancipator democracy in the transnational context. The realisation of the human development potential of ICTD thus requires at one level a communitization of ICTs, going beyond the social enterprise and mobile telephony models (in which sequence, the web 2.0 model of ICTD could well be next!) At another level, it calls for a democratization of global technology governance regimes to cater centrally to the interests of developing countries and marginalised groups. A new theory and practice of ICTD must emerge in these two starting points.

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