

How can all forms of cooperation, namely North-South, South-South and Triangular Cooperation, as well as ICT for development, be utilized to achieve effective means of implementation for the post-2015 Development Agenda?

Panel Discussion 2

at the UNPGA 's High Level event on the
“Contributions of North-South, South-South, Triangular Cooperation, and ICT for development to the
implementation of the Post-2015 Development Agenda”

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Among the key challenges for the post 2015 agenda is the necessary task of bringing to centre stage the frameworks and approaches guiding implementation. ICTs, including the Internet, are not only 'here and now' tools – gadgets and apps that women and men use and can use, towards particular ends. In the globalised, techno-mediated context, ICTs are a foundational logic underpinning social interaction. The systems, structures and processes in techno-mediated environments are predicated upon the premises and values, the world view and intent, embedded into the technology.

The technical architecture of the Internet, and more generally, the digital phenomenon, constructs (and thus constrains or facilitates) our social interactions at all levels – economic, social, political and cultural. The Internet for instance, recasts the public participation of women and other marginalised groups, bringing hitherto unimagined opportunities for their voice and agency, but equally, poses new questions for their privacy and security. These issues by no means are merely, technical, but eminently, social and developmental.

Today, private interests are getting embedded in the very DNA of the digital ecosystem. The structure and ownership of social data is controlled by corporate interests. Another unfortunate trend is that public agencies with fiduciary responsibilities to hold public data under national legal frameworks, are fading into the background, often engaging corporations to 'make sense' of such data for public policy. The spectre is rather chilling; the possibility of new applications using what is essentially 'public' data are infinite, and the absence of policy or legal frameworks to protect civic rights, starkly absent.

The idea of 'Big Data for Development' is often deployed glibly. We need to understand three paradoxes in the current rhetoric about big data to help move us toward a more complete understanding of the big data picture¹.

- First, while big data pervasively collects all manner of private information, the operations of big data itself are almost entirely shrouded in legal and commercial secrecy. This is the Transparency Paradox. Rather than institutions – private and public – becoming more transparent to people, it is people who are becoming 'transparent' to these powerful institutions. We see extreme civil rights transgressions, based on surveillance of phone and Internet records.

1 <http://www.stanfordlawreview.org/online/privacy-and-big-data/three-paradoxes-big-data>

- Second, big data seeks to identify at the expense of individual and collective identity. This is the Identity Paradox. In the case of particular cultural phenomena implicating women's status and development needs and aspirations, big data may well obscure patterns critical from a transformational perspective if they are too small! 'Big data evidence' technicalises issues that are basically social. The narratives of marginalised people and women who are the voiceless, may therefore not necessarily be able to stand up against big data conclusions naturalised as an extension of reality.
- And third, the rhetoric of big data privileges large government and corporate entities at the expense of ordinary individuals. This is the Power Paradox. The 'thick' issues of power and contestation, invisible on the datascape, may well be suppressed and eliminated from the radar of decision making and agenda setting. Like everything else in the digital space, big data ownership and control tends towards monopolistic tendencies – because of the almost infinite economies of scale. In this changing datascape, it is obvious that the claim to 'truth' is increasingly becoming proprietary.

In reality, representativeness of real time digital data is highly questionable; inputs ignore large sections of the population who do not participate online, and who lack resources, typically, the majority of the world's women. The failed attempt of Google Flu Trends, to provide an accurate picture of the spread of influenza, being a case in point.²

Furthermore, what requires deep introspection is that big data regimes have tended to exacerbate inequality and injustice. Today, “reverse redlining” uses new data collection and mining techniques to revive outlawed discriminatory practices. Financial institutions use metadata purchased from data brokers to split the real estate market into increasingly sophisticated micro-populations that are slapped with labels such as “Rural and Barely Making It,” “X-tra Needy,” and “Ethnic Second-City Strugglers”—categories that are clearly proxies for race and class—and then target these communities with exploitative financial products. Reverse redlining is in fact, often characterized as an inclusionary practice.³

Unless we closely interrogate the foundations of our ICT paradigm, development, built on ICTs, will only end up deepening inequality and injustice.

The ICTs and Development framework

The political economy of development in the information society disadvantages the global South from effectively deploying digital means for generating data. For local agenda setting of development priorities and the autonomy of local communities and marginalised groups, digital capabilities are a precursor. The national and local remain the locus of self determination and political decision making for the world's majority. Control over the factors affecting wellbeing – personal and social – at the local level requires that we rethink the ICT paradigm. ICTs have shown that the big is possible, but there is a need to go back to and reclaim the 'small'. This calls for rethinking global frameworks on Internet governance and data ownership and control.

World over, people are informed and connected as never before, and yet, income and wealth disparities have increased at a rate that ring warning bells about the perils of unregulated capital⁴. The digital phenomenon, with the Internet as its central artefact, has catalysed wealth creation and accumulation at an unprecedented scale. Global IT infrastructure is at the base of the manufacturing outsourcing phenomenon, realigning the axes of economic power globally.

2 <http://ytd2525.wordpress.com/category/big-data/>

3 <http://www.unglobalpulse.org/sites/default/files/BigDataforDevelopment-UNGlobalPulseJune2012.pdf>

4 OECD 2014, www.oecd.org/els/soc/OECD2014-FocusOnTopIncomes.pdf

Today, 13 of the 30 largest publicly traded corporations in the US are Internet-related companies, and most are monopolies. Their power is immense.⁵ These massive market distortions not only hamper public benefit delivery through ICTs, but also inhibit new market players. Global public policy in the digital arena is thus a non-negotiable to keep the playing field level and the 'market' open. Any implementation agenda for development cannot materialise unless this is obtained.

The techno-architectures, and the data-structures/ architectures are the two meta layers that will rearrange social reality – economic, social, cultural and political – in the next few decades. What is therefore relevant to the post 2015 agenda, in relation to the ICTs and Development dialectic are the frameworks to obtain an architecture for the Internet that is decentralised, peer to peer, open and egalitarian. This is key to the opportunities for marginalised people, and women in this world. As all media converge on the Internet, the possibilities for communities to create and disseminate their own content increase. However, community media efforts of women's groups cannot be sustained unless publicness of the techno- and data- architectures is guaranteed.

The framework of global public goods presents a persuasive argument for the post 2015 agenda⁶. It is necessary to ensure sufficient publicness of the Internet, promoting commons based frameworks of the digital architecture, including that of open and public standards, regulation to ensure net neutrality, and principles governing data ownership to address surveillance and mass social control. The disclosures relating to the NSA have far reaching implications for human rights, the right to development and international cooperation. They also signal an urgency, and indeed a crisis of ethics, demanding immediate international public policy action to reclaim the public interest and public goods elements in the digital architecture. Unless the focus of North-South cooperation can shift in this direction, the role of ICTs for development will remain an empty dream.

5 <http://truth-out.org/progressivepicks/item/15516-can-capitalism-tolerate-a-democratic-internet-an-interview-with-media-expert-robert-mcchesney>

6 Inge Kaul, 2013, "Global public goods: a concept for framing the post-2015 agenda?", http://www.ingekaul.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Internetfassung_DiscPaper_2_2013_Kaul.pdf