

ICT4D POLICY AND SOCIAL INCLUSION : A FRAMEWORK FOR EVALUATING POLICY OUTCOMES

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Introduction

The goal of national ICT policy in developing countries has until recently focused on access. There is however, a growing movement towards social inclusion as a targeted outcome. This has implications for the way in which ICT policy is measured and evaluated as well as the policy process and actual policy itself.

This series of short articles, explores the link between social inclusion and ICT both in developed and developing countries. The policy in five countries – Sri Lanka, Bolivia, Finland, Korea, and Indigenous Australia will be evaluated against a framework of social inclusion criteria.

In Part 1, the case for social inclusion as an ICT policy goal is examined.

Part 1: The Case for Social Inclusion as an ICT Policy Goal

Social inclusion can be defined as the freedom (Sen 1999) to participate in the social, political, and economic activities of society and to have control over one's destiny (Warschauer 2003, p.8) by virtue of the choices or capabilities available (Sen 1999).

The argument for social inclusion as a policy goal for ICT specifically, is that “the ability to access, adapt, and create new knowledge using new information and communication technology is critical to social inclusion in today's era’ (Warschaure 2003, p.9). The era referred to of course is the era of the network and information society.

The Work Research Centre, Dublin (2004) suggests that participation in the information society is an issue of e-inclusion, a slightly narrower concept than social inclusion. This article takes a broader view however, because the information society is the key domain of development. This results from the role of technology in economic growth both as an enabler of information intensive industries and as a key input to other sectors, including manufacturing and agriculture, for increased productivity and information processing support.

The centrality of the network and information society to development has implications beyond the national and firm levels, to the individual level and the nature of work which determines level of income and potential for advancement. Castells (2004) identifies three categories of labour: “those who are the source of innovation and value; those who merely carry our instructions; and those who are structurally irrelevant, either as workers...or as consumers” (Castells 2004, p.29).

In the spheres of civic and political engagement and development, electronic media play a dominant role in communication, building communities of interest, and mobilizing opinion and action for change. Effective participation in these processes increasingly requires membership in the network society which possesses a “dominance over activities and people who are external to the networks” (Castells 2004, p.23).

Should the goal of social inclusion be applied equally to all segments of society? This is essentially a rights issue, that is, the right to development. Selective inclusion means deliberate exclusion of the more marginalized in society. The Declaration on the Right to Development (UN General Assembly, 1986), Article 8 requires of States that they ensure “equality of opportunity for all in their access to basic resources, education, health services, food, housing, employment and the fair distribution of income”. The implications of the Declaration, even though it does not have the status of a treaty, are that States should apply their limited

resources in a way which gives priority to fulfilling the right to development in an equitable way, adopting “a manner of implementation that is participatory, transparent, non-discriminatory and accountable with a fair and equitable distribution of benefits. All these standards impose specific constraints on policies, in addition to the conditions of efficiency required by the paradigm of economic growth” (Sengupta 2005, p.88). While it is true that not everyone, in the nature of their work or role in society, depends on participation in the information society to the same extent, they must not be put in a position where choice is denied.

In summary, the proposition on which an evaluation framework for national ICT policy is based is that all segments of society have a right to social inclusion and that in the era of the network and information society this cannot be achieved without the capabilities necessary to use ICT for effective participation. These capabilities go way beyond simple access.

Part 2 in this series will develop a set of key indicators for measuring social inclusion in the network and information society era.

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